

Hatching a great invention

In the 1990s Paul Burns invented a revolutionary lock for boats, the Hatch Latch. When he died in 2010, customer orders were still outstanding. His daughter **Sophie Burns** stepped into the breach and took over the business, which is still thriving today

My Dad's love of water started early. He was born in the Bahamas and swam like a fish before he was two years old. His passion for boats began after the family moved back to Britain at the end of the war. They settled in Berkshire where Dad and his brothers built a canoe when he was 10. Sadly, it did not survive its maiden voyage in the Thames at Maidenhead.

His next foray into boats was building an Enterprise dinghy which was much more successful and he and my mother enjoyed many hours of sailing in her. But, dinghy sailing is not terribly conducive to having small children and it took ten more years to persuade my mother that a new boat was needed. There was no stopping him and the next 20 years were full of sailing our boats *Pasu* and then *Lovely Lady* as a family and with friends.

As an engineer, Dad had a high-powered job as a managing director and had always been good at designing, including a machine to extract ink from newspaper and a seal for the car industry.

Osprey Marine Ltd was set up in 1995 when he designed a revolutionary lock for boats which incorporated a safe way to secure a sliding hatch from below decks in rough seas. He was determined to keep the manufacture of his product in this country and that is still the case today. The main components are cast by a foundry in Lancashire and any tooling is now done locally.

Top, Paul Burns on his much-loved yacht Lovely Lady. Right, a stainless steel Hatch Latch in place without padlock

Obviously, there was no internet back in 1995 so the best way of advertising was in boating magazines, and word of mouth was, and still is, invaluable. By this time Dad had left engineering and taken on Trident Marine, building the Voyager 40 down on the South Coast. Sadly, that was hit by the recession and he retired to carry on running Osprey Marine Ltd with the help of my mother.

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A website was eventually set up as the internet took off but Dad was never inclined to let people buy online as he liked them to phone so he could "have a yarn". He would then process their orders with an old card machine and eventually take the bits of paper to the bank. It wouldn't be seen as an efficient way to do business in today's market but it worked for him and he got to talk about sailing!

By the end of 2009 he was quite ill, my mother had died in 2006 which affected him greatly. I was juggling a 60-hour week and rushing up and down from London to Hampshire while my sister lived in the USA with young children. Dad died in March 2010 and we had not even discussed the fate of Osprey Marine.

Over the next few weeks there were messages on the Osprey answerphone from people wanting to place an order and there were also a few irate messages from people who had ordered and paid for products that had not arrived. I had absolutely no idea how to pack an order or do an invoice, but with the help of a good friend I managed to fulfil the orders which was a huge relief. The biggest mistake I made was going into the bank and telling them my father was dead. They put a block on the company account and in spite of getting all the appropriate paperwork they took nine months to remove it, which was really unhelpful.

As Dad had never specified any course of





Left, Sophie's parents Paul and Suzie Burns; below, her dad in more recent years; and right, Sophie in Honfleur



Osprey Marine www.ospreymarine.co.uk offers the Hatch Latch in stainless steel or phosphor bronze, and for traditional hatches (with a sliding wooden hatch at the companionway entrance) or modern hatches (thin acrylic, Perspex or polycarbonate hatches). They also sell recommended high-security padlocks. Prices for the latches start at £119 but there is a **10% discount for CA members** – see MyCA.

In a recent discussion on the CA forums, a member commented:

“Undoubtedly the Rolls Royce of hatch security is the British made Hatch Latch – expensive but secure. It is also RORC approved... secure when fastened from inside in heavy weather but can be released by rescuers.

“We kept our boat for several years on a mid-harbour pontoon where no alarm would have been audible. The Hatch Latch with its recommended padlock fastened to 1 inch solid teak washboards would have required serious effort to break in. We felt potential burglars would look for an easier target.”



action for Osprey Marine after his death we were in somewhat of a quandary, but I began to enjoy taking orders. I could pack an order, do invoices on my own, and people were incredibly patient and understanding of the situation.

The only payment option was by cheque, as the bank still allowed money to be paid into the account even if it wouldn't let any money out.

So, I decided that I wanted to run the company and I was certain that I could combine it with some of my other commitments. I knew I needed to get to grips with how to fit the product on to a boat. So, I spent hours fiddling around with all the components in the garage until I got the hang of how it all fitted together. It was less fun trying to make sense of the chaotic filing and paperwork for Osprey Marine but I was lucky to have someone to help with that and to show me the delights of a VAT return. It did seem pretty terrifying at times and occasionally I felt I had bitten off more than I could chew. Especially when I realised that one of the components needed some tooling done and I had no idea, nor could find any record of, how to do this. Fortunately, a local company took pity on me and my lack of engineering know-how, and produced some perfectly peened components in record time.

The next thing I needed to organise was a website with online ordering. With the power of the internet I knew that would generate orders more easily and it would be more manageable for me as I still have other work commitments. I was so excited when it went live and the first order came in.

Feedback from customers has been enormously important and I am very grateful to those who have taken the time to email and then allowed me to put their comments on the website. I know our products are great but it has been lovely to have comments on good customer service. In the time I have been at the helm there have only been two returns and I haven't heard of any boats fitted with one of our locks that has been broken into.

I am always fascinated to see where our products are going and which type of boat they will be fitted to. There is a question on the order form asking how you heard of us and I love to see “word of mouth” as the answer. I make sure I personally email every customer once I have tracked their order through to delivery whether that is down on the Hamble, Australia, or anywhere in between.

I will continue to build on the success of Osprey Marine and keep it true to Dad's vision. If I hadn't taken a bold step then the products designed by my Dad to keep sailors, boats and their contents safe would no longer exist. I think he would be amazed, and I hope, proud.

Sophie Burns works as a Norland nanny and teaching assistant when she isn't selling Hatch Latches.

If you know of a boating business with a story to tell, let us know and we'll feature it in *Cruising*.

