

# Q-West Boat Builders

The leading New Zealand aluminium builder, walking the talk

BY IAIN MACINTYRE



Q-West-built 'Arataki', reviewed in Ausmarine, November 2010



'Clipper III'



'Lady Elizabeth IV' was reviewed in Ausmarine, October 2010

Producing high quality at a fair price and never delivering late are among the core principles that continue to drive leading New Zealand aluminium vessel crafting firm, Q-West Boat Builders.

Established in 1994 and currently employing 32 people in facilities on the banks of the Whanganui River, the company quickly grasped that winning the business of leading industry operators meant matching and exceeding their standards, explains Q-West general manager Colin Mitchell:

"World-class companies like Whale Watch Kaikoura, which have ordered four boats from Q-West over the past 11 years, are a very good example for this type of high-achieving business," he says.

"It is quite common to hear other boat builders being two to four months or more late. For any commercial operator involved in fishing, tourism and passenger transport, this is totally unacceptable. They need the confidence you, as the boat builder, are going to be able to deliver on time."

Implementing the competitive manufacturing process – albeit from a "restrained" approach – has been one of the contributors to the company's "proven system", says Colin.

"Some may say that's not how it's done, but over the past few years we have made significant gains in production, staff communication and stock reduction. There is a long way to go, but to date we feel good about what we have achieved."

Q-West is also a leader on the technological front, being one of only a handful of yards in New Zealand and Australia to build large vessels to mill-finish.

"Removing the cost of painting aluminium boats and reducing the maintenance costs are what some commercial operators are looking for. Doing this well with complicated shapes and reducing plate deformation is tricky."

"Being a newbuild builder means you inevitably end up installing the latest engine or electronic system that has hit the market. As you would expect, this can present problems if not handled well. We work very closely with our suppliers to bring these items to market and provide feedback for future installations. We also

are challenged to find and develop new methods to build our vessels – ever striving to improve."

While professionalism is at the company's core, Colin says Q-West as a group also prides itself on being "easy going and approachable".

"It's no secret that without the people here, we would not be successful. Myles [Fothergill, Q-West managing director] and I work hard at providing an enjoyable and supportive working environment and I think we are doing a good job, given the staff retention figures."

"Training is another major focus and we are involved in new initiatives to train school leavers for industry."

The company's achievements were markedly acknowledged at last year's Massey University Wanganui Business Awards, where it was named the Supreme Winner 2010 as well as taking out the Management Excellence, Primary Industry Manufacturing and Export Excellence and ACC Workplace Safety awards.

Located off the lower west coast of New Zealand's North Island, Q-West's yard includes three construction halls capable of housing up to 35-metre vessels, a modern machine shop including brake press, test equipment for hydraulics and electronic welding and computer aided design capabilities. It also has mig welding (including pulse technology) and tig welding facilities, four five-tonne overhead gantry cranes and a 150-tonne slipway facility which can slip vessels directly into the main construction hall.

From an initial focus predominantly on fishing boats, passenger ferries and tourist craft, the company has progressively evolved into a "truly diverse" boat building company, which Colin Mitchell says was imperative to surviving in the small local market.

A relationship developed with Teknikraft Design, for example, has seen Q-West to date construct over 40 foil-assisted catamarans, mainly for the tourism and passenger boat sector. The company has also built vessels for many different applications and countries such as Australia, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, Samoa, Fiji and the United States.

Asked if there has been one particular "crème de la crème" project, Colin says that "nearly every vessel has something special".

"There are many vessels that I would say we consider outstanding – Whale Watch Kaikoura's four vessels, Pine Harbour Ferries' four boats, the Police patrol vessels, the gas platform access vessel for Taranaki and Meridian Energy's crew transfer vessel. Being custom-built dictates that the vessels have some additional feature that is not standard."

"The Port of Tauranga pilot vessel was another such craft. Q-West and the design team worked closely with the port to identify what was important to them in relation to performance, the cabin environment and how the vessel will be operated and maintained. We have built a vessel that meets our clients' needs – in many cases exceeds them – and in doing so I believe set the standard for future New Zealand pilot boats."

Colin Mitchell says Q-West also ensures it participates in a "greater number" of tenders and at the time of writing the firm was working on four vessels.

"... a cray fishing boat being constructed for a past client, a 17.5-metre passenger vessel for an Auckland ferry company, again a past client, a 24-metre tourist vessel for Lake Manapouri designed by Incat Crowther Design and a 16.5-metre pollution control vessel for Darling Harbour in Sydney designed by One2three Marine Design."

"This year will be our busiest year ever, in terms of man hours."

"Our refit business is an area we are going to develop further. Q-West can slip vessels directly into a 35-metre shed. We can therefore do refits without any weather delays – painting can be done in a controlled environment and we have extensive support from local suppliers and contractors."

"I also see our staff numbers increasing to cope with the upcoming work. We've hired some very good engineers and recently a new operations manager who is a former NASA propulsion engineer."

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