



# AN EYE FOR RIBS

**Paul Stevenson talks to Charles Chivers, principal of Ribeye, on the growth of his business and the RIB market...**

**C**harles Chivers is that relatively rare phenomenon in the world of RIBs, a professional entrepreneur bringing business skills and acumen to an industry that favours enthusiasm and experience. Under his dynamic management, "In seven years, Ribeye has become the fastest growing RIB company in the UK" - no mean accomplishment for a firm that manufactures its craft in its wholly owned factory in South Africa and markets them from Dartmouth, a small Devon town with no motorway connection and no real railway.

His secret is that he runs Ribeye on the model of car sales, "like a BMW-style niche market." A very strong brand identity is stamped on every aspect of the business from the boats and its Ribeye sales centres to life-jackets, clothing, trailers, tuition, insurance and finance – all that is required to get the customer on the water. As with the motor industry, he uses a national dealership to sell a turnkey product rather than a bare vehicle to be rigged independently by distributors. A Ribeye sales centre is equipped to market the entire Ribeye range of products and services. When you order, the sales centre takes a deposit and a delivery date is given. Ribeye often has a turnkey model in stock, ready to go. Optional extras are added to your Ribeye and your choice of Yamaha engine is fitted in-house in Dartmouth.

The Ribeye logo - similar to the ancient Egyptian and Maltese good luck sign for fishermen - is one of the strongest in the industry. The advertising tag line, "Serious Fun", is right up there with MG's famous "Safety



Fast' for graphic simplicity. The Ribeye sales centres set a standard in pristine presentation and professional assistance. Yet Charles Chivers got into the RIB business almost by chance, he told RIB International.

#### **What was your first contact with RIBs?**

'I went to RIBEX to buy a boat in 1998, and met Peter Kidd, the RIB designer and naval architect, purely by accident. He was based in Salcombe, just round the corner from Dartmouth. I bought some moulds from him and then began manufacturing in Dartmouth. Eighteen months later our products were being made by Prestige Inflatables in Cape Town, South Africa. Soon after this Prestige was bought out by a much larger company who got into difficulty, resulting in Ribeye buying the boat factory outright. My life-long

friend, Ian James, joined me as a partner in Ribeye as part of what has turned out to be a multi-million pound investment. Since then the South African factory has relocated into new wholly owned premises. From that moment onwards, Ribeye was in our control. We could now concentrate on getting the quality of the product up to the required standard. We made staff adjustments. Now morale is excellent and we have a highly motivated and loyal workforce of 65 and growing.

#### **How difficult is it to manage a manufacturing company at that distance?**

'It isn't so bad, because South African law is based on British law, so it's an easy to understand country; plus the company structure was already in place. But, yes, it was difficult at first. Trade unions are strong there as a result of their history, and I had never dealt with a trade union, but we have a superb relationship with them now. Two young ladies, Gadija and Zainab, run the office for me; two gentlemen, Koos and Chris run the factory. They are wonderful people, more like friends. Communication isn't much of a problem; there is only a two-hour time difference, and on-screen telephone calls cost nothing, but we do notch up quite a few air miles each year going to and fro, of course.'

#### **Ribeye has a name within the trade as a highly professional, quality operation. How important is that to you?**

'Nothing good happens entirely by accident. It took a lot of work, a lot of tooling, and a lot of work with personnel to raise the quality. Certainly, over



**Ribeye over-seas production: Staff at Prestige Inflatables in Cape Town, South Africa.**

the last three years we've had a complete buyout of the factory, a complete refurbishment of the product, which has meant that we have a success on our hands, something really good to bring to the consumer. Since last year our dealerships have become Ribeye sales centres, something like a BMW niche end of the market. We have put a complete new structure together for our dealerships; we describe it as being like a franchise. The average boat dealer isn't just dealing with Ribeye, he's got a business to run with all its own peripheral problems, and he views us, marketing Ribeye, powered by Yamaha, as the best package out there. I want to make my dealers the best dealers, not just by selling lots of boats, but by giving the best service to the customer, so not only have I got the best boat, we – that is the sales centres and Ribeye - have got the best reputation. What that gets you is word-of-mouth recommendation, and you can't buy that. We like to think that when a customer sees a Ribeye sales centre sign he knows he is in the right place'



### What is the role of your dealerships? How are they different?

'They could be selling this boat to a first-time customer. What does the dealer do? Not just give him the keys and wave him good bye. There's demonstration, Club Ribeye, Ribeye service products, insurance, finance, tuition, life jackets, electronics, rigging, trailers, storage, all packaged by Ribeye. All essential for the customer's welfare and enjoyment. With Club Ribeye there are rallies and advice on weekend activities. With Ribeye Preferred Schools, a nation-wide network supporting the sales centres, tuition and demonstrations are provided. We encourage our customers to collect their boats from Dartmouth, where a Ribeye representative will undertake the handover. This can include a trial on the water, advice on launching and loading, and any advice a first-time customer needs. This gives the customer a wonderful opportunity to inspect the Dartmouth facilities. The goal is to have the best possible sales centres in the country, audited each year-end. But there is another aspect of their relationship with us. They are in touch with our end-user customers, and their input helps us solve any problems and improve our products and services. They are so important, because they identify problems, which can then be designed out in the next generation of boats. It's a crucial business relationship.'

### What happens if I want to buy one?

'Visit the website and choose the Ribeye sales centre nearest to where you do your boating. The sales centre follows the Ribeye sales policy, which ensures that all the peripheral needs of the customer are met. All Ribeyes are supplied from Dartmouth via the sales centres, fully equipped with engines and all rigging components as a turnkey product, as specified by you, the customer. A deposit is taken with the order, then the order is processed and assembled to your specifications. The lead-in time is under five weeks; we have our own factory, so we are in control. We insist on a Ribeye trailer, which is specifically designed to protect the hulls for launch and recovery to the highest standard possible, so, with safety being paramount, use of other trailers would invalidate the warranty.'

### How wide is your range of models?

'We have 18 main models at the moment, but that is about to change big-time. Our best sellers are the two Sports models, the 650 and 785, and the three Playtimes, 600, 550 and 500. Then there are four tenders from 290 to 450, four Ribtec Classics, the Ribtec Grand Tourer 920, three Mediterraneans and the Pascoe SR7 and SR9 Ribtecs. We sell mainly deep-vee RIBs rather than Mediterranean sun-bathing boats; all-weather boats that extend your leisure time on the water.'

### Who buys them?

'Most of the time it's the guy who buys the boat, the guy and his son, and the Ribeye is trendy with the

## 'BELIEVE IN YOUR BRAND AND MAKE IT WORLD CLASS!'



youngsters, by the way, cool. Well, Ribeye is about family, kids skiing, towing rings, having fun, or when the lads go out together, jumping the big waves and getting the adrenaline rush - it's all serious fun. But the wife may not want to bounce about like the lads so maybe she's happy in the rear seat, right at the back, and the Ribeye sculpted rear seat is as comfortable as you can get, so that's all right and she lets the husband buy it.'

### Does your customer have a choice of engines?

'Yes, but only from the Yamaha range. We go with the Yamaha engine, because they are Number One in the world, with up to 35% of most markets. Yamaha, whose UK marine sales manager is Dave Pougher, has supported Ribeye since day one. They offer us a first-class product with extensive dealership support. "Ribeye powered by Yamaha" has proved to be a winning combination. We're staying with Yamaha.'

### How's business?

'The brand is on a roll. The public wants it. Our sales are increasing substantially. We had a very good first quarter, and a surge is coming in now, so we expect the increases to continue.'

### What are the export prospects?

'I have surrounded myself with some superb people, and believe we have a winning formula. We are now ready to export the brand to distributors in other countries who will use this formula, again emulating a franchise. We are close to agreement in several countries. Talks are well underway in India where we plan to install sales centres across the country. We plan to start producing boats in India within three

years. This is an exciting prospect. India will replicate what we are doing here - the export of the entire Ribeye policy.'

### What comes next?

'Next year we shall be producing a production line of support boats for super yachts. We are also evolving a brand new range of leisure products for three years ahead, designed for the Mediterranean and northern Europe market - using closed moulding, a highly efficient manufacturing process. We will be working closely with Yamaha designing Ribeyes to be powered by Yamaha.'

### Will Ribeye get into competitive racing?

'We have considered supporting competitions, but it made us face the question: what is Ribeye about? Family or racing? Ribeye is family fun. Ribeye will be supporting fun events based around the family, such as wakeboarding and dinghy sailing competitions.'

### What is the best business advice you have ever received?

'Believe in your brand and make it world class.'

**Paul Stevenson**

**Next Issue:** Paul Stevenson interviews Graham Somers of IBS / Valiant RIBS and finds out his views on the ever growing RIB market.

