

# Whittley Marine, One Of Boating's Most Respected Names

**Whittley's heritage stretches back to the days when timber boats were hand-crafted one at a time. Bob Carter takes a look at what's happening now.**



The impressive Whittley production line has boats moving through at a steady rate throughout the year.

It is, perhaps, significant that Whittley Marine is located some distance from Melbourne's Bayswater region "boat building belt" in the outer eastern suburbs.

From the time Jim Whittley built his first boat, the family has been content to leave the mass producing, "look alike" boat builders to do their own thing.

The Whittley approach has always remained somewhat distant, aloof, perhaps, from the pack.

Back in the mid-1950s, Jim Whittley and brother Ossie started out building timber pleasure boats "for their mates", little knowing that through the evolution of materials, from timber to fibreglass, a change or two in factory locations, Whittley Marine Industries would grow into an impressive, even sophisticated business operation.

Times, in fact, have changed so much that today the Whittley name is a more prominent force in the Australian boating industry than ever before.

When a Whittley makes a statement, people take notice; when Whittley releases a new model, heads turn and order books fill.

In 1995, the Whittley-built boat is a force to be reckoned with.

Of course, the change stems as much from the culture of the business changing from parents to children as it does from the change in the consumer attitudes of 40-years ago to the present.

Recognised as a low-volume, high-quality boat manufacturer, the Whittley family practices what it preaches.

In fact, the company's 1995 model range comprises just four boats; the top-of-the-line Cruisemaster Sovereign, the award-winning Monterey, the Impala and the Cherokee.

The boats are sold nationally through a

five-dealer network which combined manages to book out the Whittley production capability many months ahead.

Despite its successes, the company remains very much a family business.

Jim Whittley, supported by wife Aileen, founded the company and remain very much in control, although they have taken a step back from the day to day operations.

Jim concentrates primarily on product development, while Aileen looks after things from an administrative viewpoint.

That Jim knows his craft can be seen in the release in 1993 of the classic runabout, the Whittley Monterey, last year named Boat of the Year in its class.

He was also responsible for the re-vamping and re-launch of the popular Impala and Cherokee models, both exhibiting demand and volume sales.

The Whittley "kids", Neville, Stephen and Angela each head up key areas of Whittley Marine Industries.

Neville is the "jack of all trades", taking the bulk of responsibility for scheduling production, liaising with dealers, handling marketing issues and performing the tasks of factory foreman, quality controller and all-round tradesman.

Younger brother Stephen, while taking an active interest in Neville's areas, tends to spend more time on the factory floor.

A toolmaker by trade, he oversees cabinet work and glazing, all of which is done in-house.

Sister Angela, youngest of the three, heads up the upholstery and trim divisions, another in-house operation at Whittley Marine.

Neville Whittley told MIN the company's objective was to produce as many requirements in-house as possible.

"This way, we maintain greater control of production and delivery dates, but perhaps more importantly, we maintain full control over quality," he explained.

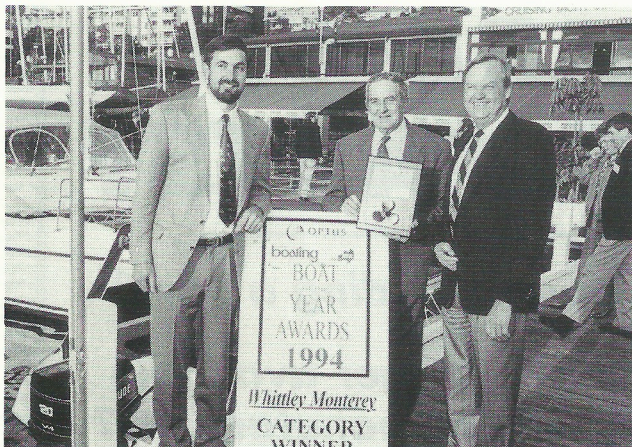
"Quality, after all, is a cornerstone of our business.

"When a customer buys a Whittley boat, we like to think they are investing in the finest boat available in that particular segment of the market.

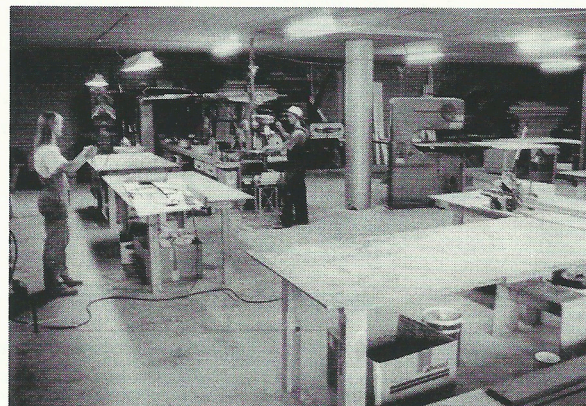
"Quality is something we feel quite passionate about - it underscores virtually every aspect through design, production and management".

Located in the Melbourne suburb of Briar Hill, the Whittley manufacturing plant is a model example of a boat building facility.

Within the purpose-built plant each manufacturing function is isolated from the remainder, with a state-of-the-art extraction



The boss, Jim Whittley (centre) with son Neville (left) and NSW Whittley dealer Peter Hunt (Hunts Marine), at last year's Boat of the Year awards where the Whittley Monterey took top honour in its class.



The timber shop is extensive and turns out all timber components required as well as fine teak cabinetry.



system in the laminating area, cabinets, joinery, upholstery and trim on a separate, lower level.

Boats are fitted out in a semi-production line arrangement with two purpose-built fit up bays set aside exclusively for the "flag-ship", the Cruisemaster Sovereign.

One of the cleanest, best laid-out fibreglass plants in the boating business ensures that only high-quality products emerge from the pristine environment.

The highly-efficient, organised production techniques give rise to high levels of production schedules previously unheard of.

A member of the Boating Industry Association and an ardent supporter of the Boat Manufacturers Association of Australia (BMAA), Whittley Marine Industries fully backs the BMAA's objectives of maintaining the highest possible standards of construction.

The company is also a participant in pre-rigging programs offered by the outboard engine companies.

Initially, there was

**Upholstery, padded bulkheads, trim and canopies are all produced in-house at Whittley Marine.**

some reluctance by dealers in accepting pre-rigged boats, but as Neville Whittley pointed out, prerigging did give the company an extra edge on quality control to the final product.

As it has grown, Whittley Marine Industries has also brought in outside assistance, particularly in the areas of business management.

A financial consultant provides the expertise with overall management and accurate pricing strategy and a specialist marketing/advertising/public relations company has been appointed.

Building on the family style of conducting business, the Whittley clan looks upon its dealers almost as an extended arm of the family.

Their collective futures are, after all, closely linked.

Dealers meet with the family regularly where planning, product development and marketing issues are always high on the agenda.

"Of course, dealers always claim our boats are too expensive and we reckon their margins are too fat," Neville Whittley joked, "but in the end we take a lot of notice of what dealers say...we have plenty of respect for them, but at the same time we like to keep them on their toes".

A recent example of dealer input came when Melbourne retailer J.V. Marine joined the Whittley dealer team.

They asked for a re-vamp of the Impala and Cherokee models, believing they would sell well.

Other dealers expressed indifference, but John and Steve Stav, head honchos of J.V.,



**The award-winning Whittley Monterey.**

were insistent.

The two boats were re-launched at the time exclusively for J.V. Marine, but the national advertising took effect and Whittley Marine suddenly found previously indifferent dealers placing orders, in many instances urgent orders, for Impalas and Cherokees.

Despite a solid order book and no apparent sign of demand lessening, it's worth noting that the Whittley family shows no sign of resting on past successes.

A vacant block of land next door to the factory has been purchased and there are plans to erect additional manufacturing space either this year or next.

New models are also planned, but no one is yet dropping hints as to what shape or size they may take.

If past experience is a guide, however, any planned new release will take time to evolve and will result in a stunning boat of high quality which will be in high demand.

That's the Whittley way. 