

It's OK, It's All Right



A respectful refit that went well

An old adage among shipbuilders is that they would rather build a new yacht than rebuild an old one. Because you never know what you're letting yourself in for until you get down to bare metal. The logistical challenge of a major refit, with all the interdependent skills it involves, can easily turn into a nightmare for both the owner and the shipyard. Ensuring delivery on time and on budget relies on expert project and financial management, which in turn requires planning of realistic deadlines and effective communication with reliable suppliers and owners' reps.

For the Pendennis Shipyard in Falmouth juggling such multifaceted disciplines

is all in a day's work. The yard's refit experience began back in 1991 with *Adix* and since then it has completed over 80 refit projects, including many high-profile yachts such as *Fair Lady*, *Elisabeth F*, *Ranger*, *Shamrock V* and – last but not least – *Va Bene*. This 47.8-metre motor yacht is not as well known as some of the names in the Pendennis resumé, but it has an intriguing background and a very famous owner. For those of you who were not already aware of it, the man in question is Eric Clapton. But instead of focusing on the guitar legend like some articles in the yachting press have to date, Justin Ratcliffe's report gets down to the nuts and bolts (pun intended) of the refit.



FIRST LET'S LOOK AT *VA BENE*'S UNUSUAL PEDIGREE. THE YACHT was designed by Richard Hein and built at the Kees Cornelissen shipyard in The Netherlands in 1992 for a Greek ship owner. Unfortunately, the build went way over budget and bankrupted the yard, which Hein promptly took over (after his management buy-out of Oceanco in South Africa) to fit out the SA built hulls before the company relocated to Alblasterdam. As such, it is arguable that *Va Bene* represents the inception of the modern Oceanco brand, especially as her exterior lines distinctly resemble those of the early *Applause* and *Acclaim*. The Greek owner kept the yacht for five years before selling it to Bernie Ecclestone, the F1 motor racing mogul, before he in turn sold it to an American owner.

Nick Lane, Eric Clapton's representative during the Pendennis refit, had put the yacht through an (LY1) MCA compliance refit with Proteksan in Tuzla in late 2002 just after Ecclestone sold it. Part of the deal had been that Proteksan would heavily discount the cost of the refit if Ecclestone commissioned a new yacht with the Turkish shipyard. Lane was captain of *Va Bene* under the new American owner when Eric Clapton chartered the yacht in 2005, but when he tried to book the boat again for the Caribbean season he discovered it was up for sale. "Eric started asking a lot of questions", Lane recalled. "He said he wasn't interested in another boat and wanted to know how much it was selling for. In the end he decided to buy the yacht together with its existing charter commitments."

Considering much of the yacht's interior was actually wallpapered and tea trays were stuck onto marble countertops in the cabins, it is somewhat surprising that Clapton and his family lived happily with *Va Bene* for a

couple of years before deciding that it was time for a facelift. A number of yards were considered, including Amico & Co in Italy and Proteksan, where Nick Lane was managing the build of Ecclestone's new yacht (as he became more involved in this project, much of the work on *Va Bene* was overseen by his son James, who had also worked as the yacht's captain). In the end, Clapton decided to go with Pendennis because he was eager to "Buy British" and could easily visit the yard to check on progress (it might also have had something to do with the fact that fellow musicians Roger Taylor and Pete Townsend are Pendennis clients). A shipyard representative first inspected the yacht at the end of 2006 during the charter show in Antigua, where Clapton owns a home, and drew up a work proposal.

The initial idea was to start the refit immediately following Clapton's 2007 summer holiday and complete it over three months during the winter. But following a more extensive survey in August of that year the work list grew – and so did the schedule. The refit coincided with the yacht's 15-year Lloyd's survey and it quickly became obvious that more than just an engineering overhaul was involved. "We set an arrival date for mid-September with re-delivery for June 6th as the owner wanted to be back on board to begin his month-long holiday at the beginning of July", said Harvey Tryone, the Pendennis Project Manager on *Va Bene*. In the event, the yard delivered the yacht on June 10th, a modest four days overdue after a hectic nine-month work schedule.

"Having spent five years aboard the yacht before the refit I could see its shortcomings", admitted Nick Lane. "Eric never used the master cabin and preferred the VIP suite on the lower deck to be closer to his children. I told him the only solution was to gut the master and come up with



a whole new interior.” One of the main issues was that the bed was positioned up against the forward bulkhead, the worst place to be in terms of comfort. “I wanted his head as far aft as possible to make the sleeping position more comfortable and turn the his and hers bathrooms into a single unit and move it forward”, continued Lane. “The old office enclave would then become a full-beam studio that doubles as an extra berth for the owner’s young daughters. Besides improving the sleeping position and the bathroom, this would make the cabin more family-oriented and charter-friendly.” When the studio is in use as a children’s cabin, a Pullman bunk folds down over the sofa and the adjoining LCD glass door can be dimmed at a flick of a switch.



Clapton also requested a bathtub in his new bathroom because kids are hard to keep under the shower and a handy socket for his beard trimmer. Talking of bathrooms, a potential problem came to light in the forward port guest cabin when it was discovered rust was leaching through the grouting and attacking the marble countertop. When the stone was removed it was discovered that the source of the rust was nothing more than sweating steel filings left by a grinder, probably from when the yacht was in the Proteksan yard in 2002. When a toilet brush was found to be missing from another guest cabin, Pendennis trawled through suppliers’ catalogues to find the original accessory.

Where refits are concerned, however, one thing leads to another. The decision to strip the owner’s suite down to bare metal and move the bathroom impinged heavily on the crew area below. “There were four crew in a forward cabin with no natural light – Black Hole of Calcutta didn’t even describe it!” exclaims Lane with a straight face. MCA imposes proscriptive criteria on new builds with regard to the size and illumination of crew quarters, but these did not apply to *Va Bene* as a refit. However, attempts were made to improve MCA compliance wherever possible. So the single crew cabin was divided into two and the watertight bulkhead and chain locker modified to provide space for two shower cubicles, but the cabins remained without portholes as MCA were not happy about cutting holes in the forward section of the hull. The crew mess was relocated and by reducing the size of the mate’s cabin this was also made larger and more comfortable. Using galvanised pre-fab bulkheads with compressed rock wool the sound insulation was improved and a more utilitarian, minimalist décor introduced for easier maintenance. The opportunity was also taken to improve the escape route in the master suite that used to rely on an emergency power supply to operate one of two electric windows with a worm-drive that had become seized. In fact, MCA frowned on any such windows and they were duly replaced with sealed ones.



Tristan Jones served as Tyrone’s assistant during the refit and was responsible for overseeing the day-to-day work schedule. “A lot of boats come in with everything on them supposedly working, then you look at them and clearly stuff hasn’t worked for many years”, he pointed out. “With *Va Bene* the challenge was to rebuild these parts where possible and go back out with the same feel as when the owner bought the boat. We didn’t want to replace everything, because then it’s not the same boat. The idea was to be as sympathetic to the yacht as possible.” This aim formed the basic premise of the whole project, both for the engineering works and the interior refurbishment. Even so, the owner would end up spending in excess of £5 million, not including the interior designer’s fee.

Having decided to gut the master suite and crew quarters, the owner also wanted to transform the VIP bathroom and refresh the décor of the other cabins and living spaces in line with the refitted areas. Steve Howard of H2 was brought in to work on the interior design and Struik & Hammerslag as outfitters. Steve Howard was presented with a brief that most designers would blanche at: to maintain as much of the original interior as possible and to refurbish rather than replace. This was not due to parsimony on the part of the owner, but because he firmly belongs to the “if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it” school of thought. Hence each cabin was methodically worked through to remove all of the headlining and bulkhead panelling, which the crew then de-stapled to save the cost of having new panels made and fitted (this task turned out to be far more laborious than initially thought as the headlining panels had been reupholstered numerous times). The bulkhead panels were then re-covered in natural silk and the headlining panels in synthetic Majalite.

One aspect of the refurbishment in particular highlights the lengths Pendennis went to in attempting to keep the owner’s outlay to a minimum and also illustrates the importance of working with a trusted network of suppliers. All of the old carpet was removed with the idea of preserving it, but aboard a heavily chartered yacht the carpet may need replacing every three seasons and *Va Bene* was long overdue. Realising that there was a huge budgetary saving to be passed on in this area, the yard carried out extensive investigations into replacing the £205 per m² Asian carpet with an equal or better quality British carpet of the same design. A London supplier came up with four bespoke carpet samples to choose from and with the cost reduced to £74 per m² the owner agreed to replace the carpet throughout the vessel and increased the total carpeted area from 200m² to 306m². He later decided to drop all of the pattern out of the carpet and this led the yard to seek further savings on the plain white





carpet, resulting in a new cost of £66 per m². In total, four companies priced and measured for the contract, with the company offering the best value and reliability receiving it. The new off-white carpet offered the additional advantage of being available in seven-metre widths, so removing any joins in the main saloon or new owner's area. Indeed, the main saloon and dining room were all laid from a single piece of carpet covering over 100m², although the fact it weighed 320kg presented something of a logistical problem!

Most of the original limed oak panelling has been retained, replaced only in the refitted areas with a satin teak finish. Unable to find suitable Art Deco replacements for the garish gold-plated door handles, they were all re-chromed and re-fitted. The original dining table, which had an ornate cable pattern to match the carpet, was faux painted to remarkable effect by artist Michael Manyard to simulate limed oak and Italian marble. The sofas in the main saloon and sky lounge were kept and re-upholstered with comfy taupe corduroy. The high-gloss ceiling panels have been flatted to a satin finish and the fabric blinds replaced with Lutron-controlled wooden ones, while all the chairs were recovered in natural-toned silk, linen, velvet or leather by the Falmouth sailmakers Penrose.

Eric Clapton may be a rock 'n' roll legend, but the interior of *Va Bene* does not reflect the kind of glitzy lifestyle you might expect. The undeniably comfortable and family-friendly ambience is saved from being overly subdued by colourful contemporary canvases from the owner's art collection that punctuate the predominantly earthy tones. Not surprisingly, the A/V system was high on Clapton's list of priorities and some of the equipment was obtained prior to it being available in retail stores. The yacht fairly bristles with integrated Arcam iPod docks with a remote control that replicates the same functions so he can enjoy the same music wherever he goes, while all but one of the old Bang & Olufsen CRT TVs were replaced with Panasonic Viera HD plasma screens. Perfection, they say, is in the details and so the brilliant-white new speakers were repainted to tone with the new décor and extra plug sockets were fitted at strategic points so guests don't have to trail laptop leads across the walkways.

The bridge underwent a thorough refurbishment. The walnut console, for example, was sun-damaged and in need of restoration, as was the upholstery. The owner was presented with a selection of leather swatches, but in the end requested the same black and beige scheme of his Porsche 911 (Tristan Jones never saw Clapton, a big Porsche fan, arrive at the yard in the same model twice!). He also decided to keep the Recaro pilot's chair that

can be moved across the bridge by an intriguing rubber belt and pulley system. A rather weary world map on the bridge bulkhead was replaced with a painting of Falmouth by a local artist as a gift from Pendennis. The yard also presented the owner with a new ship's bell, complete with the *Va Bene* signature, after the original was re-chromed but failed to take properly because of the poor quality casting.

As regards navigation equipment, Nick Lane was keen to change the clunky ship-style radars (remember the yacht was originally built for a Greek shipping owner) with two new Furuno black box radars. This also led to remodelling the radar mast that used to carry no less than five domes, most of them empty. The Plath Gyro was removed and sent to Matrix Marine for servicing but was found to be in a very poor state. After reviewing the costs it was decided to purchase a new Simrad digital Gyro, which was fitted with enough slack in the cables so it could be pulled out for servicing without having to be disconnected. All three wing stations – port, starboard and stern – were disconnected for spraying and all the control switches were replaced, as the old ones were brittle and obsolete. The bowthrustrer control sticks were corroded and beyond economic repair, so were replaced with new tele-mecanique joysticks. The rudder angle indicators were found not to be working and were sent for inspection. The service centre then advised Pendennis that these too were obsolete and so it was decided to purchase two new units and fit them on the port and starboard helm stations, but re-use one of the old ones on the stern station.

More than 60 per cent of the teak decking was taken up and replaced, including all of the sundeck. The original teak had been laid on plywood because the adhesives available at the time bonded better, so the decks had to be faired to bring them up to the correct level and the new teak laid down directly on top. The task was carried out by Gemini Teak Decks who laser-measured the decks and pre-cut the timbers in Holland. Although Pendennis would have preferred a British supplier, it came down to question of timing as they couldn't simultaneously paint, re-deck and take out generators.

On the engineering front, the overhaul was always going to be comprehensive as it coincided with Lloyd's 15-year survey. One of the major jobs involved was servicing the three generators and this meant cutting a 'soft patch' in the main saloon to remove them. Unfortunately, the generator room had a bulkhead that separated the saloon from the dining room straddling the location of the hatch and entering from the side was briefly debated. In the end, the bulkhead had to be removed as well as a sand-filled

structural supporting pillar and the dining table complete with pedestals. Whilst the two 125Kva generators were out and being completely rebuilt from the crank up, a new bolted framework was created to house the soft patch so that in the future it would be easier to remove if necessary. The third night generator was deemed to be surplus to requirements and its foundations adapted to take a mounting for a new Atlas shore power transformer.

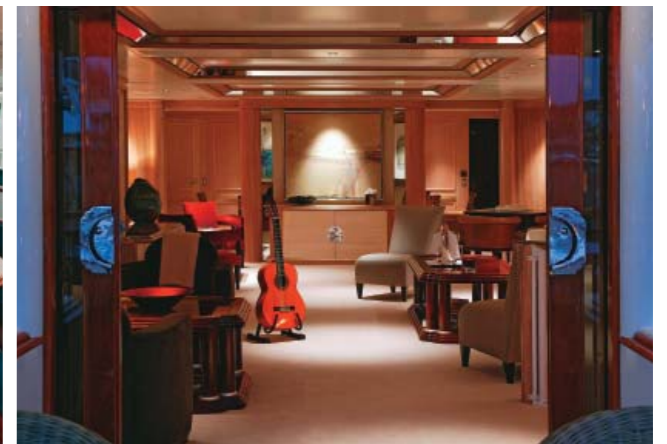
The yacht had done so little mileage under its previous owners that by the time Nick Lane took over as captain in 2002 the two 1,750hp Caterpillar engines had only run up 2,500 hours in ten years. But by the time the *Va Bene* arrived in Falmouth they had 10,000 hours on the clock. Previous engine inspections had really amounted to a five-

year survey because full surveys had been waived in light of the low mileage. Now it was time to take a close look at the crank case, main bearings, big ends, cylinder heads, thrust washers and pull a couple of pistons to check liners and bores. Caterpillar advised that the old valve stems, which had been upgraded on later models, were liable to failure and should be replaced with thicker ones after 10-12,000 hours. Clearly it made no sense to take the heads off again after another 2,000 hours and so, in Nick Lane's words, "We bit the bullet and decided to change them at an extra cost of around £25,000 per engine."

Other engineering jobs highlight how you never really know the extent of the damage until you're up to your armpits in dismantled machinery. The gearboxes when

stripped were found to be in a poor state of repair as the thrust washers were badly corroded, the seals hardened and the gear clusters had at some time sheared the keys and the pinions had been turning on the shafts. These were sent away for specialist repair. Although the main shafts had little wear, both the main shaft bearings in the base plates were badly worn and new ones were made, fitted and bored to size. As the fan coil units – some 37 in all – were removed and checked, many were found to have obvious traces of water around and below the handlers. This was mostly attributed to blocked drip pan drains, but in several cases the actual units were not mounted on a level plain or below the levels of the drains so the pans would overflow before the water could run away.

During trials by Duncan Propellers it was discovered that the old props were rotating inwards instead of outwards and suffering cavitation problems. The yacht received new five-blade aluminium bronze propellers (and a handy credit was rebated off the new props for the scrap value of the old ones) and the direction of the screws was reversed by simply turning the gearboxes round, a solution approved by the ZF engineer. Interestingly, *Va Bene* was one of the very first yachts to be installed with Quantum stabilisers and these were overhauled by LM Hydraulics in Palma de Mallorca. When LM returned to the vessel for the commissioning it was discovered that the PLC in the control box was faulty and the circuit had been disconnected in the control panel.



The above are just some of the more major works in a refit report that stretches to 52 pages, all of which meant that by the time the owner met up with his yacht again in Sardinia in July 2008, it was looking and working better than at any time since its launch 16 years earlier. However, after spending a four-week holiday aboard and digesting the yacht's improvements, Clapton took *Va Bene* back to Pendennis last September to make some final adjustments. These mostly consisted of odd jobs that had not been carried out before because of time restrictions, such as repairing the dead Jacuzzi on the sundeck.

A persistent problem with the engine room ventilation was also resolved, although a former ships' engineer had to be contacted to find out exactly where the engine room venting was because the space was getting so pressurised the doors were difficult to open (it turned out the exhaust mufflers were blocking the air outtakes). Other modifications, notably the decision to completely refurbish the main deck day head, were the result of the owner having had time to gauge and appreciate his use of the yacht during the summer. By the time *Va Bene* left

Falmouth for a second time and headed off for its winter cruising ground in Antigua, Tristan Jones calculates that around 60,000 man hours had been spent on its refitting.

The question arises, why buy a used yacht and spend millions on a refit rather than build a new one? Clapton himself rather fudges the issue by arguing that in her new guise *Va Bene* feels like a brand new yacht. There is, of course, a cost issue, but Harvey Tyrone described it differently. "By refitting you can purchase a boat you like, or that has potential, and what we offer is the opportunity to transform that vessel to give it a new lease of life and all you lose is one Caribbean season", he explained. "Otherwise you may have to wait two years or more for a new build of this size. There are some quite significant transformations aboard *Va Bene* and nearly half the total cost is engineering based and you're destined to spend that anyway on a yacht this age."

Justin Ratcliffe

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