Tartan Yachts

With a foundation in the 1940s, this company continues to produce fine yachts to this day

by Dan Spurr

THE COMPANY WE KNOW TODAY AS Tartan Yachts has undergone numerous changes over the years, transforming itself through mergers, bankruptcies, and new owners into a still-vibrant builder that remains surprisingly true to its origins. Where most builders of larger sailboats are situated on the East and West Coasts, Tartan is the offspring of two small builders of one-designs in northern Ohio. Through thick and thin, the company has stayed in the Midwest on the shore of the Grand River, though circumstances have pushed it around the county a few times.

Douglass & McLeod

Ray McLeod Sr. was born in 1908 in Wickliffe, Ohio, a small town east of Cleveland on the shores of Lake Erie. At the age of 33, while working as a painting contractor, he succumbed to what one must presume was the call of the sea and bought a small company named the Grand River Boat Works. It was located in nearby Richmond, though the town's name was later changed to Grand River because there were two Richmonds in Ohio. (For whatever reasons, this didn't seem to present the same problem for the two Wickliffes in the state.) Apparently it wasn't a full-time income because Ray continued to manage his painting business. Nevertheless, he found time to build several 35- to 40-foot wooden boats for commercial fishing — back when the Great Lakes had a commercial fishing business. But his bread and butter was the usual marina fare of hauling and storing boats, maintenance, upgrades, and repair work.

At the same time, Gordon K. (Sandy) Douglass, formerly a portrait painter, was building small wooden boats at his shop in Vermilion, another small town on the lake, about 30 miles west of Cleveland. The boat models the Scotsman was building included the International 14, which he raced, and the 17-foot Thistle, introduced in 1946, which he had designed himself. But he wasn't having an easy time financially, in part because he lacked the space to increase production.

Ray McLeod and well-known Cleveland yachtsman C. Richard Newpher both belonged to the Mentor Harbor Yacht Club. Richard knew Sandy Douglass as well and that he was struggling. One day he suggested to Ray that he and Sandy consider joining forces. Ultimately, they did, forming Douglass & McLeod, Inc. In addition to the Thistle and International 14, they began building the Great Lakes 21 (now called the International 21 after a group of local sailors modified the design). Douglass & McLeod contracted U.S. Molded Shapes of Grand Rapids, Michigan, to build the hulls out of molded plywood. These were shipped to Grand River for completion. Sandy continued to race, and in 1951

The Tartan 27, above left, was the first fiberglass boat designed by Sparkman & Stephens. More than 700 were sold. Above, Ray McLeod Sr. (left) and Ray McLeod Jr., in 1961.

he won the Thistle national championship.

Ray's son, Ray Jr., says, "There was a great deal of interest in the Thistle from the beginning. The first one was built from stripped planking to keep the weight to a minimum and later was destroyed once the plug was finished and the first molded mahogany plywood hulls were built. No. 1 Thistle of the molded plywood construction is still active, but it wasn't actually among the first batch of plywood boats. That is because the number was reserved until there were a few boats built and sold to get the company going." (This was in dramatic contrast to the more common practice in later years of giving the first boat a much higher number, like 201, to make buyers believe that 200 had already been sold.)

Sandy and Ray both took to the road to try selling the boats, particularly the Thistle, demonstrating how easily it could be trailered behind the family automobile. The mahogany parts were prefabricated in Douglass & McLeod's woodworking shop, as were the Sitka spruce masts, booms, and spinnaker poles. The boats were assembled in a Quonset hut set up to handle the increased production.

In 1951, Sandy designed a second boat, the 20-foot Highlander, which he saw as a logical sequel to the Thistle. She was larger and more comfortable and had a deck. She was also more expensive but, the partners hoped, still affordable when compared to larger cabin boats.

By 1959 the partners employed 15 workmen and were producing about 125 boats annually, delivering them throughout the U.S. and to Brazil, Mexico, the Bahamas, and the Philippines.

Bill Seifert

Rod Stephens, on left, expert rigger and brother of designer Olin Stephens, and Charlie Britton, on right, head of Tartan Marine, discuss details of hull No. 1 of the Tartan 37, introduced in 1968.

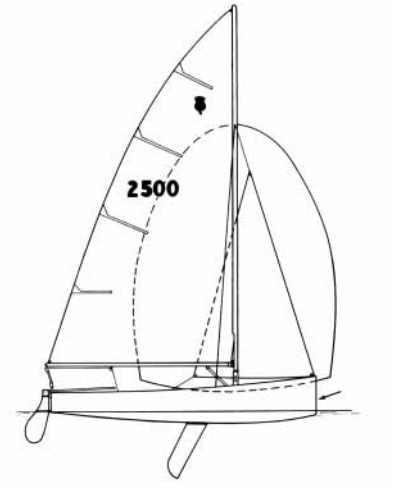
Ray Jr. began working for his father from the git-go. He says, "My service to the company started with sweeping floors in 1941 and continues to date. I came on full-time in 1953 after a couple of years of college and service. In 1957 we purchased the minor interest of Gordon Douglass and continued onward." Sandy Douglass went on to design and build the popular 19-foot Flying Scot one-design racer.

Enter Charlie Britton

While not at the leading edge of the movement from wood to fiberglass, Douglass & McLeod saw the change coming and readied itself. "In 1960 and 1961," Ray Jr. says, "we were experimenting with the use of fiberglass and started another company known as Douglass & McLeod Plastic Corporation in a partnership with Charles Britton, which led us to our first larger auxiliary, the Sparkman & Stephens-designed Tartan 27."

Charlie Britton was born in Bratenahl, Ohio, and attended Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut, graduating in 1955. Between 1956 and 1958 he served as an operations officer and navigator aboard a destroyer in the U.S. Navy. He was stationed in Japan and wrote many letters home to his parents who, according to former Tartan employee Bill Seifert, published 150 of the letters in book form.

Bill says the family was wealthy. This probably explains why Charlie was able to commission the building of a 42-foot Phil Rhodes-designed yawl to sail home to the States from Japan upon discharge. His plans went awry when he was instead discharged in San Diego. Determined to get his boat, he flew back a year later, in 1959. Bill says the shipyard had since gone out of business, and Charlie was forced to "steal" his partially completed boat. In any case, he and some friends sailed across the Indian and Atlantic oceans to New York, traveling 22,000 miles in 204 days, with stops at Okinawa,



Thistle

Highlander

Tartan 27

Manila, Zamboanga, Borneo, Bali, Christmas Island, Cocos Island, Mauritius, Angola, Ascension Island, and the West Indies.

Charlie was a first-rate sailor, winning Class D of the SORC (Southern Ocean Racing Conference) in 1968, Class B of the Bermuda Race in 1976, and Class C of the Super Mac.

The shift to auxiliaries

Douglass & McLeod's first auxiliary, as noted, was the Tartan 27. It was designed in 1960 by the prestigious New York City firm of Sparkman & Stephens and was their first design for fiberglass. Bill Shaw, who later became chief designer and chief operating officer of Pearson Yachts in Portsmouth, Rhode Island, worked for Sparkman & Stephens at the time and was responsible for the Tartan 27 project. Bill Seifert says the boat was originally supposed to be 32 feet long, but that Charlie Britton "shortened the boat on the loft floor to eliminate the overhangs." (Bill Shaw says he has no recollection of this.)

In any case, the handsome centerboarder was an instant hit. Available as a sloop or yawl, she had teak cockpit coamings, hatch trim, and handrails. Built of fiberglass woven roving and mat, the hull was ¾-inch thick at the keel, ⅝ inch at the turn of the bilge, and 5/16 inch at the sheer. Ray and Charlie thought they would build just a dozen, but by the time the production run ended, more than 700 had been built. Base price in 1975 was $11,750.

The Tartan 27 was followed in 1966 by the Black Watch, a 37-footer also

Black Watch

Tartan 34

Tartan 4100

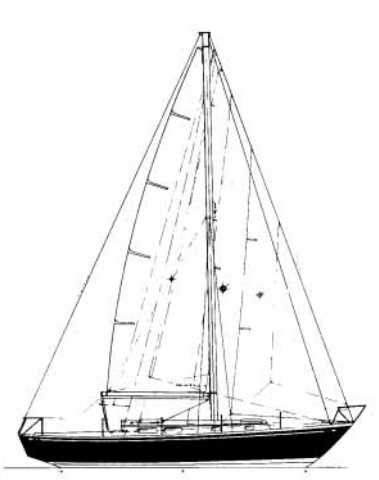
available as a sloop (618 square feet) or yawl (683 square feet). She has a 25-foot 6-inch waterline with a 10-foot 6-inch beam and draws just 3 feet 10 inches with the centerboard up. Displacement is 15,700 pounds. The hull is fiberglass, but the deck and cabin are teak. In the 1970s Mimi and Ken Dyer circumnavigated in a Black Watch and wrote about their experiences in a series of articles for *Sail* magazine.

Long before the day of the in-house designer, Douglass & McLeod and others commissioned the best names in naval architecture they could afford. "There is always a certain risk to investing in an original boat design," Ray Jr. told his local newspaper in 1967. "We minimize this by hiring top-notch marine architects. Although we may have an idea of what we want, if they disagree, we always take their advice."

The Black Watch designed by Ted Hood would be the last time the company worked with a designer other than Sparkman & Stephens for many years. The Tartan 34 began a long string of Sparkman & Stephens designs. The waterline of the 34 is nearly as long as the Black Watch, at 25 feet 0 inches. She displaces 11,700 pounds, has a 10-foot 2-inch beam, and draws 8 feet 4 inches with the centerboard down. So all three auxiliaries from Douglass & McLeod were centerboarders, which besides being great for gunkholing, were popular during the era of the CCA (Cruising Club of America) rating rule. The yawl rig, which was offered on two of these three designs, was also popu-

Tartan 30

Tartan 31 Piper



Tartan 34

lar at the time. The Tartan 34 came along just as the IOR (International Offshore Rule) was gaining popularity.

Exit Douglass & McLeod

An unfortunate chain of events left the joint boatbuilding operation firmly in the hands of Charlie Britton.

"In January 1971," Ray McLeod Jr. says, "while displaying at the New York Boat Show (our 26th consecutive year), we had the misfortune of the Douglass & McLeod Plastic Corporation being totally destroyed by fire. The following year, Ray McLeod Sr. died of cancer."

At this juncture, Douglass & McLeod Plastic Corporation was sold to Charlie Britton, though Ray Jr. retained ownership of Douglass & McLeod, Inc., a separate company. Under this name he continued to build the Thistle (which at that time numbered more than 3,000), the Highlander, and a new Sparkman & Stephens design called the Douglass & McLeod 22, with a bubble or blister cabin, similar to those drawn by Bill Tripp in his 33-foot Medalist and many Columbia designs.

"With the start of the small boat decline," Ray Jr. says, "and after a 15-year battle with a local union, it was time for a major change. The repair business, winter storage, retail store, and my surveying business were enough to make a viable small operation. We also added a marina." The change was to cease building boats, though one detects a considerable degree of regret on Ray Jr.'s part. Indeed, during the decades following Douglass & McLeod's departure from

Bill Seifert

A worker installs an engine in a Tartan Ten, around 1979. The Tartan Ten helped to popularize one-design keelboats.

"In 1951, Sandy designed a second boat, the 20-foot Highlander, which he saw as a logical sequel to the Thistle."

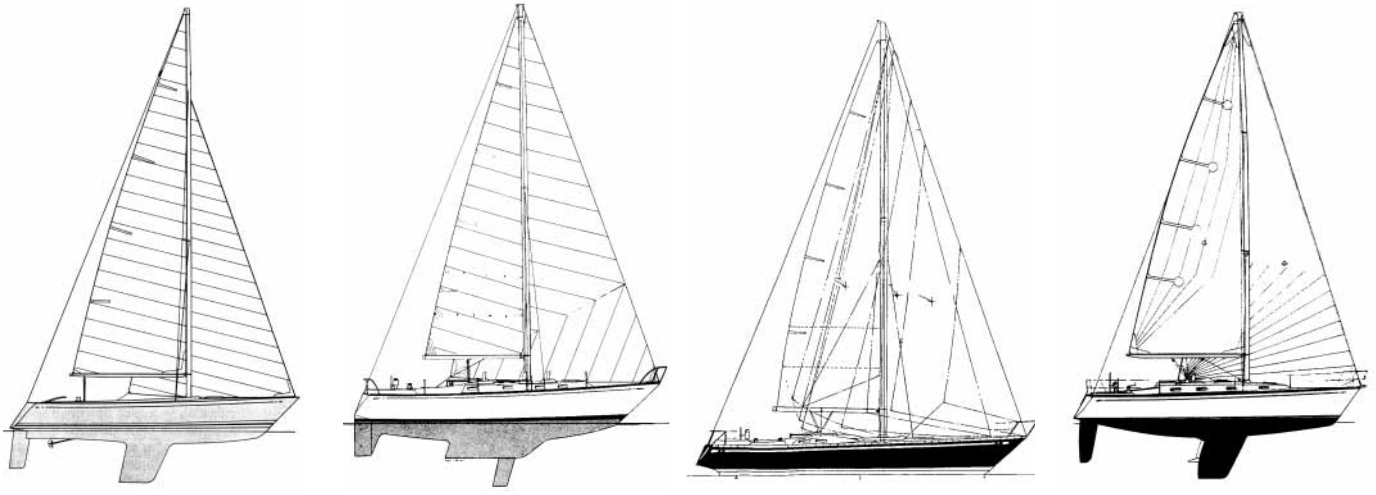
boatbuilding, its letterhead still reads: "Originators of Thistle and Highlander Class Sail Boats and D&M Auxiliary."

The next Tartan was the extremely successful 30, launched in July 1970. Second only to the Tartan 27 in terms of numbers built, it totaled 602 by the time production ended in 1979. By now, Douglass & McLeod Plastic Corporation also had a plant in Hamlet, North Carolina. Combined with the Grand River, Ohio, facility, the company was finishing a Tartan 27 every 3.5 days, two Tartan 30s a week, and one Black Watch every month.

"To create boats of the same length and design in the old method, out of wood and using handwork," president Charlie Britton told an interviewer in 1970, "would make the cost prohibitive for many people. We'd be back to the old $1,000-per-foot formula. Thus, a 30-footer like our new Tartan 30 would run about $30,000 if made the old way, instead of the $17,700 we get for our boat. Fiberglass enables more people to enjoy auxiliary sailing boats for racing or just cruising, people who would otherwise have to limit their choice to a smaller boat."

About the same time as the Tartan 30, Charlie introduced the Tartan 26 and the next year the Tartan 41, 46, and 48. Charlie stretched the 41 by 3 feet and sold approximately seven or eight Tartan 44s. One, called *Twain*, he raced himself in the SORC. One of his loyal customers, James Dawson of Cleveland, testifies to Charlie's seriousness as a racer. "Charlie never carried much to eat or drink aboard his boats," James says, adding, "When asked why, he indicated 'it made the crew want to get there sooner.' "

By 1978, when it introduced the Tartan Ten, the company had been renamed Tartan Marine. The 33-foot Tartan Ten established several trends — the idea of an offshore one-design class and a metric name — both of which spread to other companies in



Tartan Ten **Tartan 37** **Tartan 41** **Tartan 3500**

the years that followed and continue to this day. Base price of the Tartan Ten in 1979 was $21,500. By then 210 had been built. She was fast off the wind and capable of double-digit speeds. Compared to most other Tartans, she was lightly built, however, and a number of problems plagued owners, including the bending of the hollow rudderstock, hull flex, poor mast support, and the molded fiberglass interior pan coming adrift from the hull. Nevertheless, she was elected to the American Sailboat Hall of Fame.

Another very successful boat for the company, the Tartan 37, came along in 1976. Production lasted 12 years. She is a good all-around performer with the classic good looks of a Sparkman & Stephens design. During the 1970s, the company produced 10 different classic models (see sidebar on Page 15).

"By 1978, when it introduced the Tartan Ten, the company had been renamed Tartan Marine."

The next generation

In 1983 Charlie sold Tartan Marine to John Richards and Jim Briggs. These two introduced the Tartan 28, 31, 34-2, 37-2, 40, and 41-2. They then sold the company to an outfit called the Baltic Holding Corp., which changed the name to NavStar Marine. Despite healthy sales figures, however, the company ran up a huge debt, and in 1990 Polk Industries of Winter Haven, Florida, a holding company owned by Mike Monastra, bought Tartan. Dealerships were opened in Holland, Great Britain, and Japan. In 1993, the company reported that 25 percent of its business was in exports. Today, with Polk principal Bill Roth actively involved, it is called Fairport Yachts, builders of Tartan Yachts and C&C Yachts.

Designer Tim Jackett, who had

Stories about Charlie

Bill Seifert, author of *Offshore Sailing: 200 Essential Passagemaking Tips*, worked for Tartan Marine for many years. He was a member of the informal "Tartan Racing Team," headed, of course, by Charlie Britton. Here are several anecdotes, in Bill's own words, that paint a picture of Charlie.

Spinnaker takedown

On *Tandem*, Charlie's big boat I used to race on, the spinnaker afterguy led to a coffee grinder winch just aft of the main mast. This position gave the grinders and tailers a good view of the chute. This was the mid-1970s, and Kevlar rope had not been invented. Afterguys were 7 x 19 wire, the only material having low enough stretch for close reaching. Our spinnakers were 71 feet at the luff and 40 feet wide. On a St. Pete-Ft. Lauderdale race we were close reaching with a 2.2-ounce starcut to Rebecca Shoals one afternoon when a line squall closed with us. Our general battle plan for line squalls was to ride them for a few minutes to determine their duration before shortening canvas. (We did not have radar to check the intensity of squalls.)

This one turned out to be especially vicious, and *Tandem* took a major knockdown, putting the upper spreaders in the water. With the spinnaker sheet winch under water, we could not ease the sheet, and the strong spinnaker full of water was holding the boat down. I was close to the afterguy coffee grinder and happened to look at the mast, not up, but horizontally. The middle of the mast had what appeared to be a 4-foot bow. I waved to the crew in the cockpit to keep down and unwound the afterguy from the grinder. The 108-foot-long afterguy zinged through its blocks and spinnaker pole end. *Tandem* came upright rapidly. The flailing wire afterguy cut the chute into three pieces like a sword. After we took down the remains, Charlie questioned my actions. A sanitized version is: "Seif, why did you run the afterguy?"

My reply was: "Charlie, I was looking at the mast and thought it was about to bust. We have five spinnakers, but only one mast." Charlie huffed and told the crew to put any dry portions of the spinnaker in his bunk, as he wanted the world's most expensive bed sheet.

Engine education

Charlie was a superb sailor. I once watched him sail his boat into a very congested harbor with a 12-Meter-sized spinnaker up, drop it, and coast the 30-ton boat into her dock without turning on the engine. Oh, yes, he was alone!

Sails were Charlie's thing. One rainy Saturday, Charlie and I were onboard *Tandem*, which was brand new.

Charlie said, "OK, Seif, I suppose you ought to tell me what I need to know about the engine."

"Sure, Charlie," I answered, opening up the engine hatch so we could see the 4-108 Westerbeke diesel. "What do you want to know?"

"Let's start with where the spark plugs are," Charlie answered. I knew then this was going to be a long day.

Bagging it

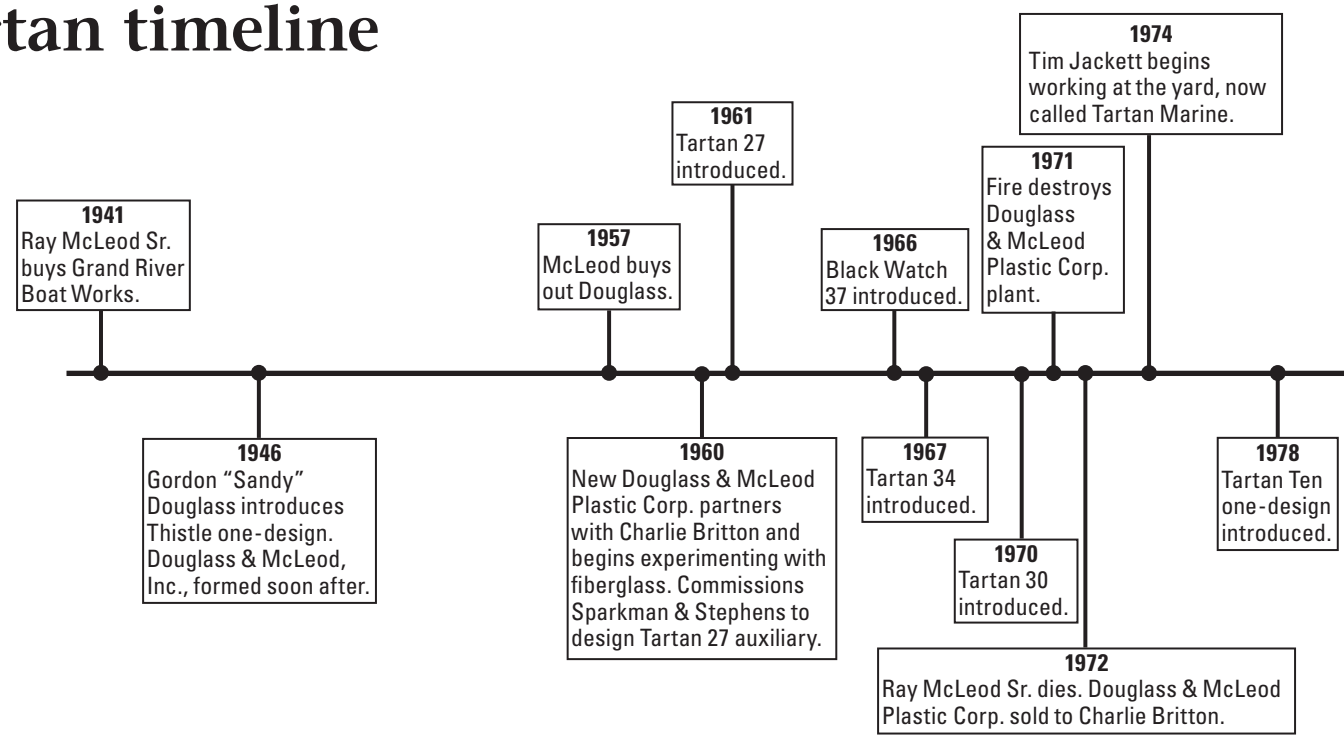
On the Tartan Racing Team's Tartan 44, we were very weight conscious. Dazey came out with the Seal-a-Meal baggers, and I bought one to be able to pre-cook food, then toss it in a closed aluminum pressure cooker filled with sea water to warm. My first cooking experiment was to make an omelet at home. Since the eggs were cooked from the outside in, the omelet was very good, and I found that with careful timing I could make them still a little runny in the middle. I told Charlie about the bagger and he liked the idea of more time on the rail and less time below cooking for my hind end.

Charlie came into my office a few days later and said, "Seif, I'm not so sure about your bagger. I tried it the other night, and I just made a mess."

"What did you do?" I asked.

"Well, I took a bread wrapper, dropped in a couple of eggs, then put it in boiling water. The bag melted and spoiled one of Linda's pans, and now she's mad at me, so I blamed it on you."

Tartan timeline



updated the 28 and 31 with the so-called Piper series, became vice-president and general manager in addition to his duties as chief designer. The Piper models were essentially sailaway versions of the earlier models, though other changes were made, too. In the case of the 31, the old Scheel keel was dropped in favor of Tim Jackett's Beaver Tail fin, and the interior layout was revised. The port pilot berth was eliminated in favor of cabinets and shelves. And the port quarter berth was expanded to a double with the nav station edged forward and angled to provide better berth access.

Tim is essentially a Tartan "lifer," having started out there in 1974 working summers while attending the Cleveland Institute of Art. "I thought I wanted to be a painter," he says, "but then I found myself drawing boats." He'd learned to sail on his parents' old wooden boat, which they kept at Mentor Lagoons on Lake Erie, and later a C&C Shark. Tim soon found himself racing with Charlie Britton and the rest of the so-called "Tartan Racing Team," but it was not to last. Tim says Charlie's interest "just sort of fizzled," owing in part to the demands of family.

In 1977 Tim set up his own small shop to build several small MORC (Midget Ocean Racing Club) boats but then was offered full-time employment at Tartan. His first project was the Tartan Ten, helping in-house designer Art Rand draw the deck, interior, and component parts. At that time, Sparkman & Stephens designed the hulls, rigs, and appendages, and Art Rand did the rest. When Art retired, Tim assumed that role.

After Charlie sold out to John Richards and Jim Briggs, he formed Britton Yachts, building a Doug Peterson design. Tim worked on the project with him, but only three boats were built. Fortunately, Tim never left Tartan.

By 1985 John Richards saw that Tim was ready to draw an entire boat. So beginning with the Tartan 31, all design work moved fully in-house.

Between 1991 and 2003, Tim also designed the 3500, 37-2, 3700, 3800, 4100, 4400 LS, and 4600 LS. While the bigger boats are essentially cruising boats, the smaller models retain sprightly performance reminiscent of their Sparkman & Stephens forebears. The old 1970s Tartan 30 was popular with club racers, earning the reputation for Tartan as a builder of dual-purpose boats. It's doubtful anyone would race a Tartan 4100 or 4600 in anything but a cruising boat rendezvous such as one of the transoceanic rallies like the ARC (Atlantic Rally for Cruisers) or Caribbean 1500, but the 3500 and 3700, with the same Beaver Tail fin as the 31 Piper, generous sailplans, spade rud-

Resources for Tartan Sailors

Tartan Yachts/Fairport Marine Corp.
888-330-3484
<http://www.tartanyachts.com>

Chesapeake Bay Tartan Sailing Club
<http://www.cbtsc.com/>

Lake Erie Tartan Sailors (LETS)
<http://lets.tartanowners.org>

Tartan Owners of New England (TONE)
<http://tone.tartanowners.org/home.htm>

Tartan Ten Class Association
<http://www.tten.com>

Tartan 27
<http://www.tartan27owners.com>

Tartan 3800 Owners Group
<http://www.tartan3800.com>

Tartan 30 Page
<http://hometown.aol.com/T30SAILOR/indexold.html>

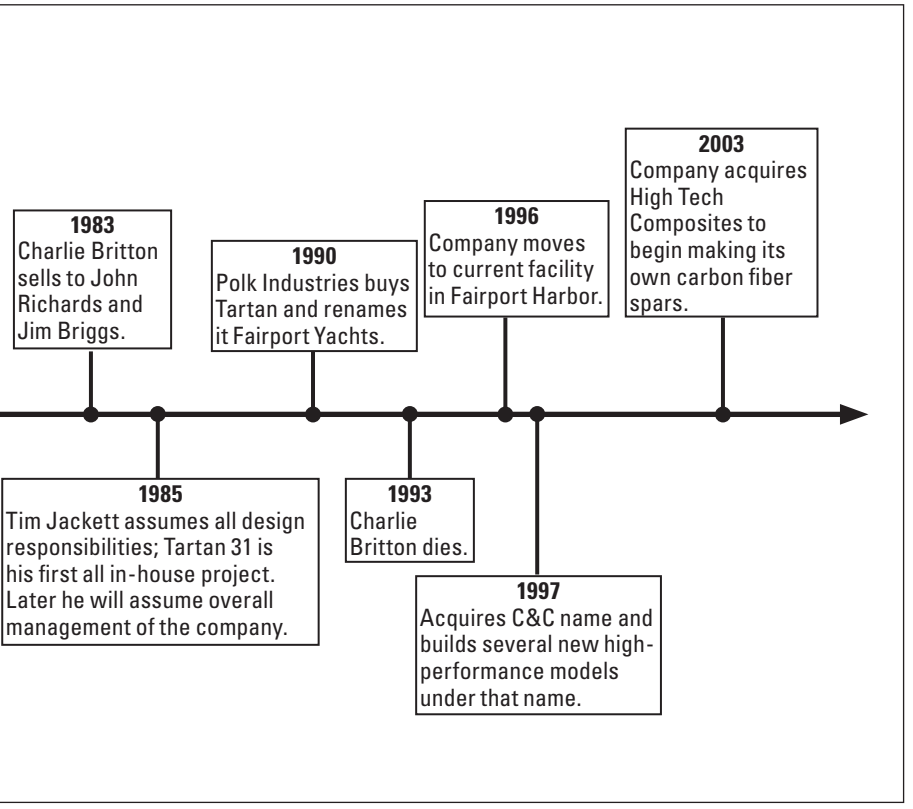
Tartan 34 Owners Association
<http://t34.tartanowners.org/>

Tartan 37 Sailing Association
<http://www.mindspring.com/~sailing_fool/index.html>

Tartan 40
<http://www.tartanowners.org/community.htm>

Tartan Email Discussion Group
<http://members.sailnet.com/resources/links/list/index-new.cfm?id=tartan>

The Tartan Owners Web Site
<http://www.tartanowners.org>



der, and moderate displacement, are successfully club-raced.

Tartan is one of but a few production sailboat builders left (Sabre is the other notable one) building mostly wooden interiors with bulkheads and furniture tabbed to the hull and deck (the others, like Morris Yachts and Hinckley, build semi-custom boats). Fiberglass pans are used judiciously and, where employed, they are fully tabbed to the hull. In certain applications, structural adhesives are used. For a few years, Tartan used vinylester resins to help minimize the risk of osmotic blistering. Now it uses SP Systems epoxy exclusively, which is stronger than polyester, does not release dangerous and costly-to-capture VOCs (volatile organic compounds), and helps block moisture intrusion as well. Hull-deck joints are still through-bolted, with 3M 5200 as a sealant. Balsa coring is used in the decks, but most hulls are solid fiberglass. Fabrics include unidirectional E glass, Kevlar, and carbon fiber. Gelcoats are NPG/isophthalic. The hulls are vacuum bagged and post cured, which means the ambient temperature is elevated to more than 100˚F for optimal curing of the resin.

In 1996 the company moved to its present facility in Fairport Harbor, Ohio, and in 1997 Tartan showed its health by acquiring the name and rights to C&C, the once famous Canadian line of racing sailboats. Tartan did not get any molds, however. Tim Jackett drew the lines to three new C&C models: the 32-foot C&C 99, 36-foot C&C Express 110, and the 40-foot C&C 121 (see "The History of C&C Yachts," *Good Old Boat*, September 2002). Hulls and decks are cored with Core-Cell foam. With fiberglass pan interiors, little wood, and a stronger emphasis on light weight — and hence performance — the C&C line is a nice counterpoint to the more cruiser-oriented Tartan designs.

Today Tartan Yachts employs about 100 persons, building something less than 100 boats a year. A dealer network covering both coasts was a critical component in the company's rebound. In 2003 the company acquired High Tech Composites, an Ohio-based manufacturer of carbon fiber masts, now renamed Novis. Beginning in 2004, all Tartans will come standard with carbon rigs.

Ray McLeod Jr. continued for many years to run his Douglass & McLeod yard and marina business in Grand River. Charlie Britton died of cancer in May 1993. He spent the last years of his life on a dairy farm in Ohio. He was active in charitable organizations around Cleveland. A man who truly loved to sail, one of his last projects was building a wooden Snipe. And these days Tim Jackett is spending less time designing and more time managing. He still draws the "big lines," but he has several designer/engineers to work out the details. Tartan is a survivor thanks to these three.

Some of the information in this article, as well as photos, first appeared in Dan Spurr's book, *Heart of Glass: Fiberglass Boats and the Men Who Made Them*, published by International Marine in 2000. A soft cover edition will be released in spring 2004. ***–Ed.***

Further reading

Heart of Glass: Fiberglass Boats and the Men Who Made Them, by Dan Spurr (2000, International Marine).
<http://www.goodoldboat.com/bookshelf.html>
or call 763-420-8923

Classic Tartan models

Model	Years	No. Built	Designer
26	1971-73	73	Tom Norton
27	1961-76	648	S&S
27-2	1976-79	64	S&S
28	1984-90	136	S&S
28 Piper	1990-94	[1]	S&S
30	1972-79	602	S&S
3000	1981-88	97	S&S
31	1987-91	146	Tim Jackett
3100	1991-96	[2]	Tim Jackett
Ten	1978-89	379	S&S
33	1979-84	215[3]	S&S
34C	1967-78	525	S&S
34-2	1984-89	110	S&S
Black Watch 37	1967-71	32[4]	Ted Hood
37C	1976-89	486	S&S
37-2	1988-93	60	Tim Jackett
38	1976-89	[5]	S&S
3800	1994-99	44	Tim Jackett
40	1984-89	72	S&S
TOCK[6]	1976-77	30	S&S
41/43/44	1972-76	84	S&S
41-2	1989-90	8	S&S
42	1980-84	34	S&S
46/48	1972-74	8	S&S

[1] Combined Tartan 28/Piper production run noted.
[2] Combined Tartan 31/3100 production run noted.
[3] Tartan 33R Masthead Racing Version — 14 produced.
[4] Black Watch model category includes both Black Watch (hulls 1-15) with stepped mahogany coach and D&M Classic 37 (hulls 16-32) with straight fiberglass coach.
[5] The 38 was simply a deep keel 37 racing by Charlie Britton.
[6] TOCK is shorthand for the little-known 40-foot Tartan Offshore Cruising Ketch.
S&S = Sparkman & Stephens.

Table courtesy of www.tartanowners.org website