

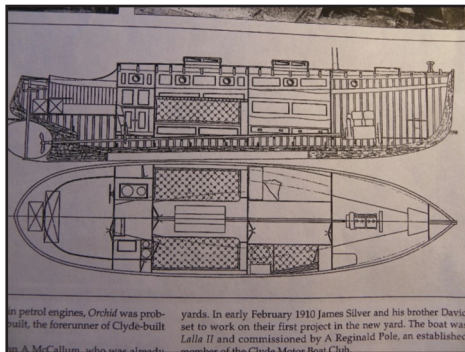
Silvers Boats

Member Ed White writes about the history of Silvers Boatbuilders of Rosneath, Scotland

Silvers boatyard is in Rosneath, a small town on the banks of the Gareloch, which adjoins the Clyde just west of Glasgow, opposite Rhu Marina.

These days, Silvers provide slipping, mooring and maintenance services, but no boat building. Fasslane, the nuclear submarine base and home to the CND peace camp, is further up the loch. There has been a yard in Rosneath since 1867, when Archibald McKellar was running one, and a few years later Peter McLean was running it, when he employed James Silver, son of a local baker and grocer, as an apprentice. James became an expert boatbuilder – mainly sailing and rowing boats. He left the yard to set up his own business, Silver and Co., with his brother and John McCallum, a designer. Meanwhile, McLean sold the yard to a company called William Davidson and Sons, but a tragic fire and consequent suicide by William left the sons to run the yard. However, they weren't interested in boats and James Silver took the yard over together with his partners. By 1910

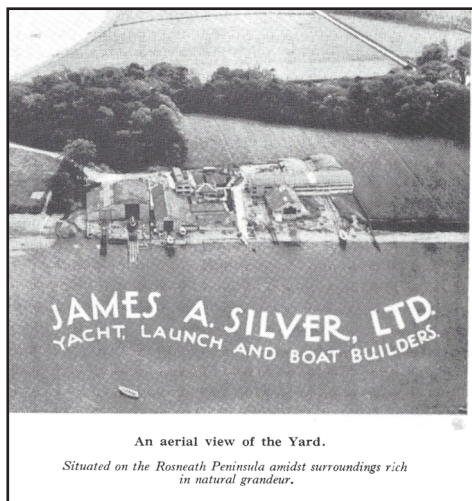
they had completed their first boat, a motor-sailer called *Lalla II*, and



In petrol engines, Orchid was probably the forerunner of Clyde-built yards. In early February 1910 James Silver and his brother David set to work on their first project in the new yard. The boat was *Lalla II* and commissioned by A Reginald Pole, an established member of the Clyde Marine Boat Club.

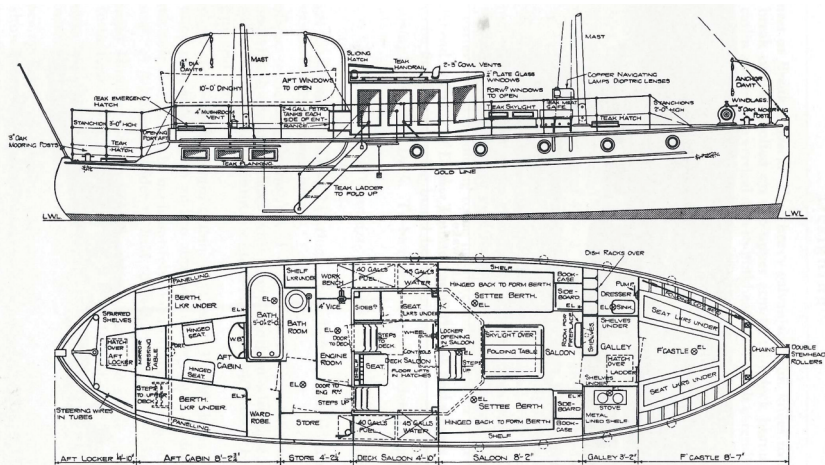
quickly gained a reputation as expert boatbuilders. However, James was not as good at finances as he was at boats, and bankruptcy followed. A firm of engineers and yacht chandlery then took the yard over; they kept James on, and renamed the yard James A Silver and Co. They hired a young designer, John Bain, a very hard-working man, who was not only good at design, but also financial strategy – this was a valuable skill, as WW1 put a stop to pleasure boat building not long after and the yard did what the Admiralty wanted. James left in 1916 and went to work for the Clyde Port Authority, where he stayed until retirement; he never

returned to the yard that continued to bear his name. Maybe he and John had different ideas about management!



John Bain then steered the yard to better and better boats, through great personal application, and the classes that we know today were developed - Maple Leaf was the

first and very successful. Then the great depression hit, and building slowed again, but this time Bain showed his entrepreneurial talent and turned to smaller boats that the average man could afford. Enter Walter Bergius, the designer of Kelvin engines, and founder and managing director of the Bergius Company Ltd of Glasgow, who manufactured his Kelvin engines. Walter designed and commissioned *Vailima II*, a 78' '50/50' motor-sailer. This development bolstered the yard's reputation, and then came *Brown Owl*, in 1918, which was highly successful and set the topsides design which typifies most Silvers - a broken sheer line with a rubbing strake running forward from the break to the bow, white below and varnish above. Bain's ingenuity and leadership led to improved premises and a pro-



duction-line approach to building, very far-sighted developments. Several commissions followed as the decade turned and the depression went away, but then the yard's major shareholder died. His son wasn't interested in the yard and sold the shares to Bain, who now became director as well as manager. He expanded the sales side of the business, partly by taking two Brown Owls to London to show off in Chelsea and secure agents in London.

Once again, fate took a hand and the Wall Street collapse wrecked the economy, stopping the flow of commissions and sales. This didn't stop Bain, who stockpiled several boats, including the Westwind, destined to become a new class and with a new, faster hull shape. Then Morris Motors brought out the Navigator engine, which the Silverette was designed to make good use of, being marketed at a price aimed at the 'ordinary man', and coming with a dinghy, afloat and ready to go. Silverettes proved very popular, and eventually came in three lengths: 30-, 34- and 36-foot LOA, with either single or twin Navigator engines. Several Brown Owls were also completed at this time, as was a second Westwind. Another class, the Silver Leaf, was designed in 1932, and the Westwind class was

dropped. A year later the Silverpuss class was launched, a 20-foot sailer with 3hp auxiliary engine, and then other small sailing boats followed. Bain knew how to market, and set up evening classes at Rosneath Public School, launched a photographic competition for pictures of Silvers boats, and bought a racehorse in order to mix with wealthy people. He also looked after his workers, building a block of flats for them close to the yard and a bungalow for himself and his wife who helped with the accounts. When WWII was declared, the yard was requisitioned, and building turned to harbour launches, some with steam engines, then Fairmile motor torpedo boats - one being built every nine months; good business! Many Silvers boats served in the war effort, often with the Clyde River Patrol (*Silver Bird* and *Cerveza*), also as minesweepers, rescue craft, and even towing barrage balloons! The Dunkirk evacuation was supported by many Silvers and some still survive, named on the ADLS register - *Brown Owl* is one of them. When the war ended, pleasure boat building continued apace, using timber that Bain had saved secretly from what was usually over-supplied by the Admiralty for wartime building. The next class was the Ormidale, a

very successful design, winner of many races and an excellent sea-keeper. Bain resigned as director in 1957 and became a contracted designer to a syndicate which became owner of the yard. Several Ormidales were built, including one that was 112' long, *Silver Trident*.

Bain eventually parted company with Silvers, seeking design opportunities with other builders, and joined James A Miller and Sons in Monans, Fife. He left them and continued to design, but following a fall, he died, aged 91, in 1980.

So, James Silver's name is known today as the builder of fine yachts of many classes, but that reputation was the creation of John Bain – designer, manager, entrepreneur, marketer and strategist, and a workaholic. We are all indebted to both of them.

Like several of the well-known builders, Silvers attracted a strong following, and Chris Jardine set up the Silver Motor Yacht Association, with the aim of finding every Silver still afloat, as well as those which had met a sticky end. His research added a wonderful additional interest to Silver ownership, which I, for one, found fascinating. He published a small magazine, which included a copy of his register of all known Silvers. If anyone wants to see my collection of them, as well as reading John Bain's book on de-

sign, just get in touch with me via honsec@thamesvintageboatclub.com. That brings me to my Silvers ownership – firstly *Cerveza*, a 30-foot



My Silverette - 'Cerveza', heading out from Crinan harbour into the Sound of Jura

twin screw Silverette. I bought this one whilst she was moored on Loch Sween, in Argyll, intending to bring her south after the approaching winter and some remedial work in Crinan Boats, the local yard. But a couple of short springtime shake-down cruises out into the Sound of Jura and Loch Craignish changed my mind; the scenery and joy of cruising in that area convinced us to stay there permanently, despite the 9 hours' drive each way. As well as the cruising opportunities, we found the locals very friendly and welcoming, an added bonus. We spent the next 15 years exploring the Inner Hebrides – sounds, lochs, islands, canals, eddies, whirlpools, standing waves, racing tides – it was a tremendous experience, and *Cerveza* carried us safely everywhere.

The commuting journey did, though, eventually prove exhausting enough to bring about *Cerveza's* sale, and we settled back onto southern waters with *Harmonie III*, the first of Wilsons' Flying Swan class. She was sold in 2015, and boat ownership for us was deemed a thing of the past. But the bug bit again, and this time it was going to be a bigger Silver - *Lemara*



LEMARA in the Royal Norfolk and Suffolk Yacht Club Marina in Lowestoft

was found in Royal Quays Marina, on the Tyne! She is an Ormidale class, with the lovely upswept bow and gracious flare, very pretty. Structurally the same, traditional oak keel and framing, mahogany planking and transom, mahogany topsides and interior and teak laid decking. She looked after us well on the trip south from the Tyne to the Thames, very enjoyable!

There are several Silvers on the TVBC register - *Aline of Greenock*, a Silverette; *Arthur*, yacht tender; *Brown Owl*, first of that class;

Canowie II, was Hopalong, a Silver Leaf class; *Kalaw*, class unknown; *Lemara*, an Ormidale class; *Mero*, a Silverette; *Serena*, a Silverette; *Silver Bird*, a Silver Leaf class.

Loch Maree is almost certainly a Silverette; although *Fedalma II*, looks very much like a Brown Owl, she was built by an East Coast yard, and greatly influenced by Silver's designs.

This article owes much of its content to the SMYA founder, Chris Jardine, Club member and owner of *Aline*, to whom I am indebted for his enormous amount of research into Silvers boats and their whereabouts and details; his efforts enhanced ownership of Silvers' craft. Also, to the History section of the Silvers Marine website.



John Bain and his wife in the 50s

Ed White