

PROFILE



MY OTHER CAR'S A SLIPPER LAUNCH

*Former MINI, Ferrari and McLaren designer Frank Stephenson shares
his passion for a very special Thames slipper launch*

Words Hugo Andrae

RIGHT: Some of the many successful cars which Stephenson has designed

BELOW: Stephenson casts a beady eye over the build of his new slipper launch

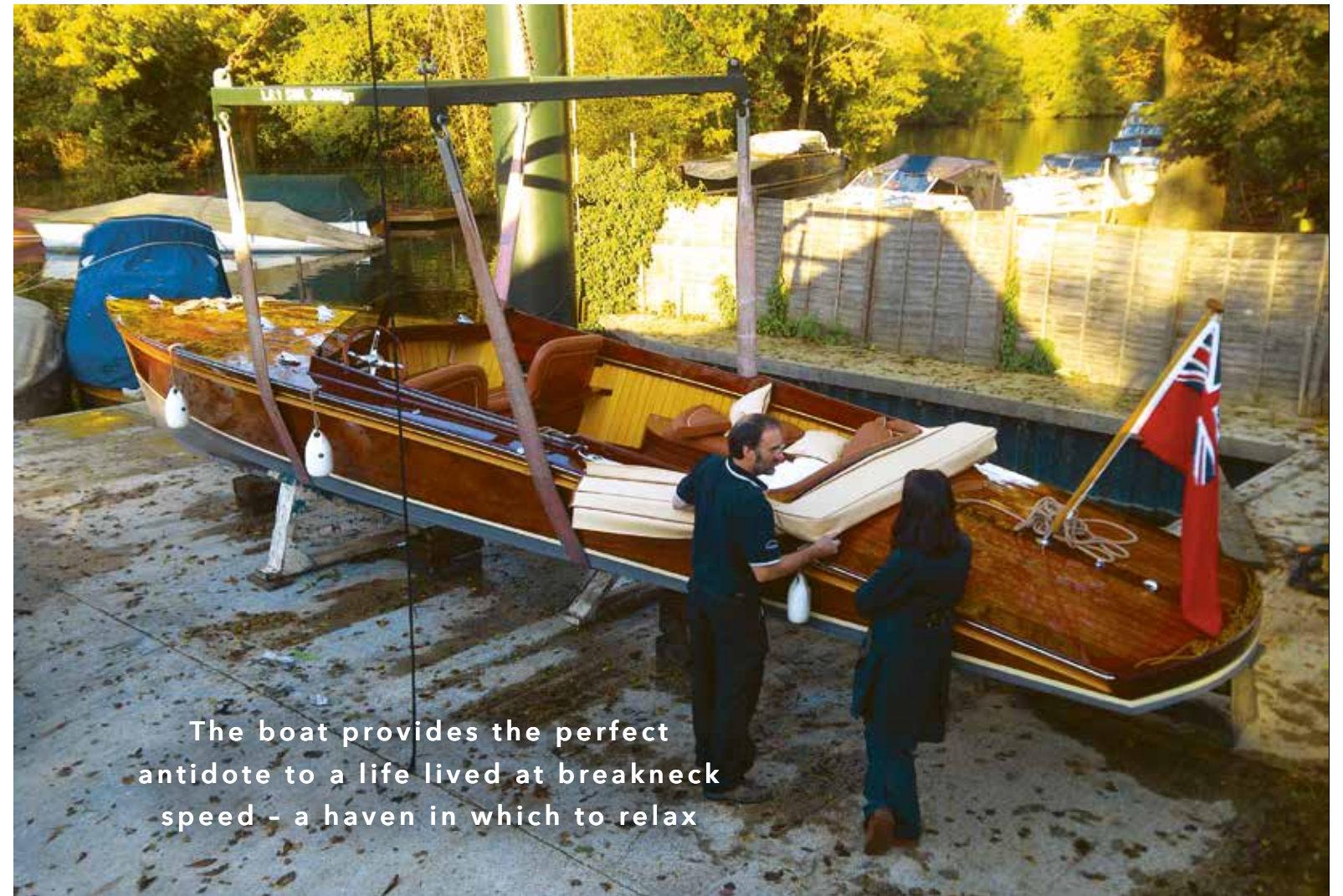


Frank Stephenson is not your average boat owner. He designs cars for a living. Rather special ones. His CV reads like a roll call of *Top Gear's* greatest hits. He designed the infamous wing for the original Ford Escort Cosworth, styled the first X5 for BMW, reinvented the Mini as a 21st century style icon, was poached by Ferrari to oversee the F430, was seconded to Fiat to pen the new 500, moved to McLaren to fashion its latest range of hypercars... the list goes on but you get the gist. In short, he's arguably the world's most successful car designer. And yet, what does he choose to drive at the weekend?

A classic Thames slipper launch built for him by the legendary Peter Freebody yard, which he keeps on the river just yards from his home near Henley, Oxfordshire.

For a boy who grew up in Morocco, raced motorcycles as a teenager and spent most of his adult life roaming the world penning 200mph supercars, it seems an oddly sedate choice. And yet for Stephenson the boat provides the perfect antidote to a life lived at breakneck speed, a haven where he can relax with his wife Linda and enjoy the quieter side of life.

Like many boat owners, he grew up with boating in his blood. His father worked for Boeing and when he and his young family



The boat provides the perfect antidote to a life lived at breakneck speed - a haven in which to relax



were posted to Casablanca, on the Atlantic coast of Morocco, he set about building a boat for them all. Stephenson remembers it only too well.

"It was my first memory of physical pain," he recalls. "I was 4-5 years old and was sitting under the boat in my father's workshop. I was looking up at the light through the hole he had made for the shaft to go through when he

inadvertently blew the sawdust straight into my eye. I had to go to the hospital for an eye wash!"

Not that the experience put him off boating. Far from it. He still credits his father's eye for detail and his hands-on approach to craftsmanship for sowing the seeds that led to his own career success.

"I loved watching him build that boat. Everything had to be perfect, right down to the grain of the

TOP: Ready for launch at the Peter Freebody Yard
LEFT AND INSET: Stephenson's eye for perfection found an ideal match in Freebody's obsessive craftsmanship



ABOVE: Stephenson draws inspiration from the natural world to design supercars for the likes of McLaren

wood and alignment of the screws, even in places you couldn't see because he'd still know if it wasn't right. That same philosophy must have rubbed off on me. I can never let go of a design until every last detail is correct."

The boat in question was a home-built sportsboat called a Missile. It was powered by an ex-military Chevrolet V8 engine and still tugs at Stephenson's heartstrings when he reminisces about it. "I have so many fabulous memories of that boat – the smell of the wood, the glow of the varnish, the sound of the engine. It has never left me."

After a spell in Turkey the family moved to Spain where his father set up a car dealership with the help of his Spanish brother-in-law. After leaving school, Stephenson joined the business running the body repair side of the company while his brother focused on the mechanics. "I guess that's where my love of cars really started," he explains.

It wasn't to last though, as a chance meeting with a Spanish friend and motorcycle racer introduced him to the high-adrenaline world of motocross racing. Stephenson proved a natural and at the age of 17 won the national junior title, rapidly moving through the ranks to compete in the senior world championship.



A LIFE LESS ORDINARY

"It was a heady time for me, I was getting paid to race bikes, travel around the world and lead the most amazing lifestyle. But after four years of competing my father sat me down and told me it was time to stop. I was regularly finishing in the top

10 but that wasn't good enough for him. He said you have to win or it's not worth it. Nobody remembers second place."

It was a harsh lesson but one which Stephenson took on board and still lives by to this day. He'd always enjoyed drawing cars in his spare time and when he read about a design college in Pasadena, California that specialised in car design he sent in a portfolio of 12 drawings and applied for a place.

"I arrived in the summer of 1983 to find 29 other students on the same course. On our first day we were told that we were the top 1% of more than 3,000 students who had applied but that the course was so challenging only 10 of us would make it through. In the end only six of our intake lasted the full four years."

Ford approached Stephenson halfway through the course and sponsored his tuition fees on the understanding he would join the company on graduating. He was sent to Germany to work for Ford of Europe and was immediately put to work designing the rear wing for the first Ford Escort Cosworth. He took inspiration from the Red Baron's Fokker DR1 triplane to create the massive rear wing that helped make the 'Cossie' an instant hit with fast Ford fans and secured it the dubious title of the UK's most stolen car.

From there he moved to BMW where he was asked to interpret what a BMW Land Rover would look like. He was given just six weeks to create a full-scale model with the help of a specialist plaster modelling shop in Italy. He designed the basis of the X5 on the two-and-a-half-hour flight down to Milan and spent the rest of the time creating it with his team of Italian craftsmen. However, it was his work on the new MINI that really made his name. Fifteen of the world's



BELOW: The grain of the mahogany planks helped persuade Stephenson to commission a new 30ft Slipper launch

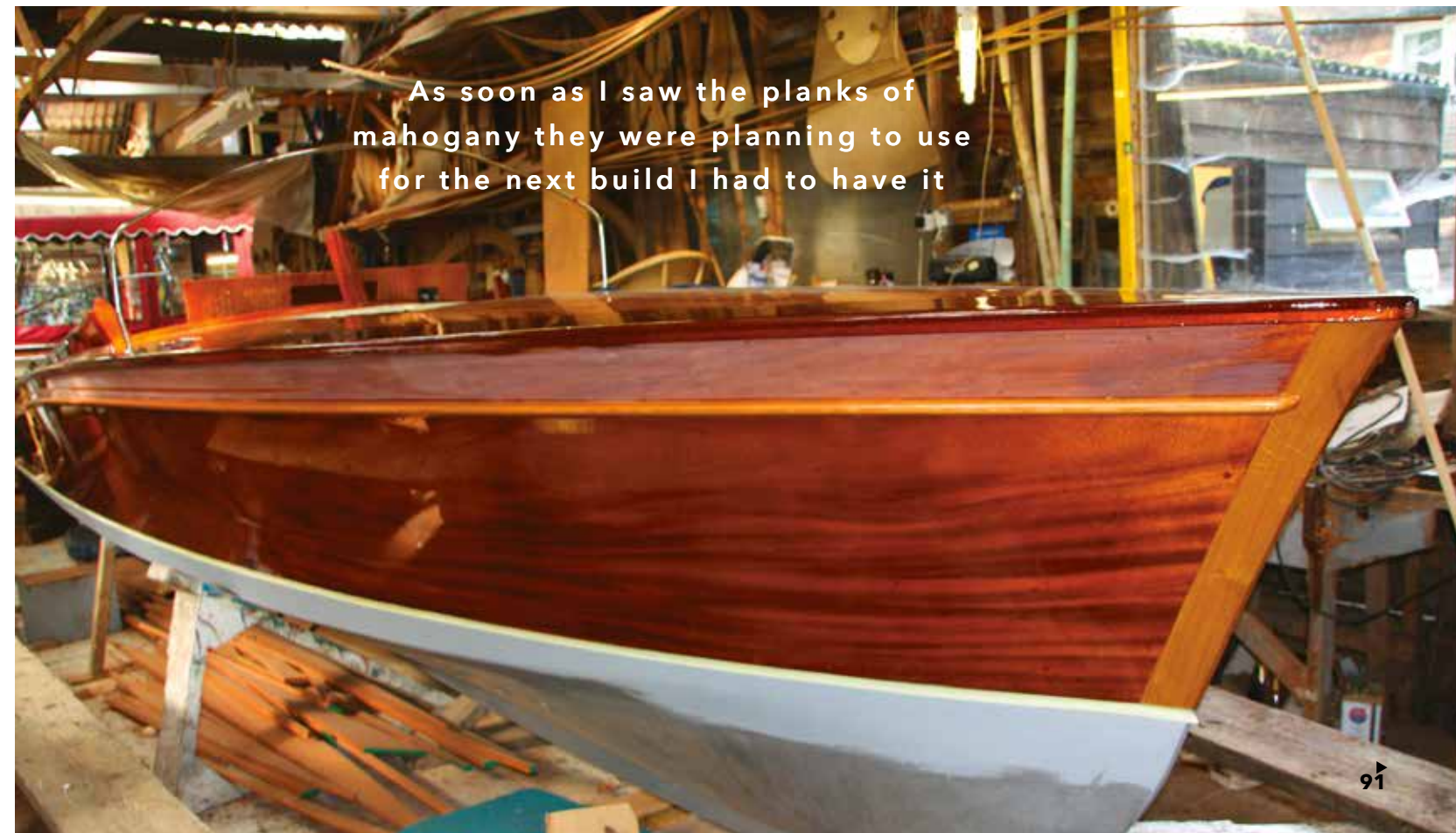
top car designers were invited to submit their ideas to the BMW board in a competition to find the right successor to Sir Alec Issigonis's iconic 1959 people's car.

MINI MARVEL

"We were given a month to design it and five months to build the model so instead of trying to design the final car straight away I spent the first week designing what a 1969 version of it could look like. The second week I evolved that design

for 1979 and so on until in week four I designed one for 1999. It was the only way I could ensure the new MINI was a true genetic successor to the original."

Stephenson's design won the unanimous support of the BMW board and went into production in 2000, becoming an instant hit around the globe. His career took off from there, attracting the attention of Ferrari in 2002, where he headed up the in-house design team for the F430 and FXX 'Super-Enzo' as well as the Maserati MC12 and new Fiat 500 city car. However, it was his





ABOVE: The horseshoe seating was designed by Stephenson

move to McLaren in 2008 to help Ron Dennis turn the hugely successful Formula 1 team into a manufacturer of road-legal supercars that put him back on the path to boat ownership.

Way back in 1996 he'd met his future wife Linda at a motorsport awards ceremony at the Dorchester hotel in London and now, after years of maintaining a long-distance relationship while he travelled around the world with his job, this was his chance to move to the UK and be with her permanently. She had a house near Henley and with McLaren



being 28 miles down the road in Woking, things couldn't have worked out better. On their regular walks along the river he found himself drawn to the elegant slipper launches that emerged from the shed at Peter Freebody's eponymous yard. "I went down to see Peter every weekend. I'd sit on a bucket

in his workshop with him and talk boats long into the evening. He was the real deal, a true eccentric but a master of his art. I think he knew from my own background that I appreciated what he was doing."

A secondhand 25ft slipper launch came up for sale that had previously been owned by a Swedish cinematographer, which Stephenson couldn't resist.

COMFY SLIPPERS

"I bought it and kept it for a couple of years but after a while I started seeing an even more elegant 30-footer on the river. I couldn't bear the idea that mine was somehow the lesser model. As ever I wanted the full-works version."

Sadly, Peter Freebody passed away in 2010 but by then Stephenson had got the boating bug in a big way. In 2011 he commissioned his own brand new 30ft slipper launch, the first since Peter's son and daughter had taken over the yard.

"As soon as I saw the planks of mahogany they were planning

LEFT: Stephenson at the helm of his personalised slipper launch, *Riverbreeze*



The motor is silent so you can glide along listening to the birds sing and the wind in the trees



to use for the next build I had to have it," recalls Stephenson. "It was the grain of the wood that sold it to me." Stephenson would drop in most mornings before work to check on the build and give his input into the design and layout of the interior. As a technophile he wanted it to have all the latest mod cons including an electric pod drive motor. "There's a speed limit on the river and an electric motor has the advantage of being almost totally silent. You can glide along listening to the birds sing and the wind rustling through the trees."

Instead of the usual Lloyd Loom chairs, Stephenson specified a leather bench for the helm and a sociable horseshoe of seating that wraps around the aft end of the cockpit. He even asked Richard Freebody to match the colour of the leather to the collar of the couple's favourite dog. "After a hard week's work it's the perfect way to relax," adds Stephenson. "We load up a picnic lunch, a couple of my favourite cigars, the two dogs and set off along the river to Marlow taking time to admire the wildlife and beautiful riverside homes en route." Even when the weather isn't

amenable he likes to wander down to the boat and wipe a chammy over it, taking time to admire the 15-20 coats of varnish that keep its decks gleaming – there isn't a specified number, Richard Freebody says they just keep on adding coats until they are happy with it.

CHASING PERFECT

As for Stephenson, he has now moved on from McLaren to set up his own design studio, creating everything from children's car seats to autonomous flying vehicles. He's already led such a full life that Netflix has made a film about him called *Chasing Perfect*, which explores his complicated relationship with his father and his own relentless quest for perfection, including some fascinating insights into car design with the help of US chat show host and avid car collector Jay Leno. As for whether he would ever design a boat from scratch, he just nods knowingly and says, "Watch this space."



ABOVE: The leather was matched to his dog's collar
LEFT: Stephenson talks car design with Jay Leno for the DVD about his life story

