

But for a tragic sailing accident, Jonathan Beckett, the man currently at the helm of top brokerage firm Burgess, might have had a very different role to play in today's world of superyachts. It was in 1992 that Beckett's then boss, yacht broker Nigel Burgess, was lost at sea while competing in the Vendee Globe single-handed race. At the time the firm comprised just three people, and the loss of its owner could well have spelled the end of what is today one of the industry's leading companies.

"Nigel was a great teacher and had been my mentor, showing me all that I had learned about the business to that point, and I seriously wondered if the company could survive without him," says Beckett. "I was not quite sure what to do, but ultimately with the blessing of the Burgess family I purchased the majority of the company from them. I decided to carry on the firm, following the well established guidelines Nigel had instilled into me."

At the time of the accident Beckett was running the fledgling company from a tiny office in London, in the city's fashionable but expensive Piccadilly area. Today the London headquarters is an elegant affair fronting onto Pall Mall, and the firm also has offices in Monaco, Moscow, Mumbai, Miami, Palma, Athens, Seattle, New York and Santa Monica. Sydney could well have been the city for the firm's first southern hemisphere location, but with the downturn in global business experienced during 2008, plans to open it were understandably postponed.

MR. SUPER YACHT

WITH JONATHAN BECKETT AT THE HELM, BURGESS YACHTS HAS GROWN FROM A TINY LONDON OFFICE TO A GLOBAL BRAND ENCOMPASSING EVERYTHING FROM CHARTER AND BROKERAGE TO CREW SERVICES AND NEW BUILDS. FRANCES AND MICHAEL HOWORTH MET THE MAN BEHIND THE BRAND.

From these 10 offices Burgess and its staff of around 120 people runs a comprehensive yachting service that now encompasses not only brokerage but also charter, yacht management, new build project management and crew services. Under Beckett's guidance the company has developed from a very small business into the multi-faceted superyacht company it is today.

Beckett gained a BA degree at Durham University; (where he represented England Universities at rugby football) and after graduating spent a year in Egypt running a sailing school at the Arab Maritime Naval Academy. A year working as a yacht broker in Athens for Halsey & Tzalas Marine followed, and in 1981 he joined Burgess at the age of 23, working first in Monaco then returning to London to establish the office there in 1983.

Today Beckett's primary involvement is in brokerage and new construction, along with taking overall responsibility for the firm. Since the opening of a US office in April 2004 he now divides his time between Monaco, London and New York, but visits Australia at least twice every year, spending several weeks at a time looking after his extensive client base in this area.

On top of his busy working life Beckett also works hard for the industry. A board member of the Mediterranean Yacht Brokers Association (MYBA) since 1996 (he was President from 2000 to 2002) as well as Chairman of the MYBA Sales Committee, he has also served as a judge for the International Superyacht Society Design Awards. Add to that his involvement as a member of the Yacht Club of Monaco and the New York Yacht Club, and Beckett has a very full diary.

"I am very hands on, very conscious of how the company projects itself," he says. "My day-to-day job is selling boats and new construction projects, so you could say I'm the traveler in the firm. I can spend a week every month in London, a week in Monaco, a week in the US or somewhere else in the world, and a week actually travelling."

BURGESS



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“I have worked hard over the past 15 years building up our client base here in Australia and can now count on 100 very solid contacts who are potentially buyers and between 35 and 40 who are already owners of significant yachts. In fact last year, over 25 per cent of our total fee income was generated from clients based here.” He continues, “What I really like about my Australian clients is that they ask for advice and generally take it. They have their feet firmly on the ground and they look, learn and listen. As a result, deals involving the buying, building and managing of a superyacht progress a lot faster here than elsewhere in the world and are concluded with a lot less fuss.”

Beckett is at ease as we sit chatting at the Monaco Yacht Show. The backdrop to our conversation is the magnificent 90-metre *Nero*, the largest yacht in the show and currently for sale through Burgess. When the conversation turns to chartering, Beckett is realistic about Australia's position in the global market, and the state of the market in general.

“The charter market [in Europe] has been heavily hit with rates coming down substantially but the market will survive. Australia is a great place to charter but there are far too few large boats available there for it to really take off as a global destination. That, and the fact it's a long way from more traditional cruising grounds favoured by those from the Americas and Europe, means it will never become one of the world's busiest charter spots.

“Chartering itself is at a turning point, and can only survive, I think, in a much different form to what we have become used to. The days when central agencies like ours can market a charter package and hand it on a plate to an independent charter broker, who then takes the lion's share of the commission, are passing quickly. I think there are going to be some great opportunities out there for companies like ours to capitalise on this, to provide a better service to yacht owner and charter guest alike.”

Beckett has been in the industry since the early days, and is quick to grasp onto new trends and fashions in the yachting sector. It's this nous for the changing tides and currents of a complex business, combined with a progressive approach to management, which has helped make Burgess such a success.

“The whole superyacht business is undergoing a change and we must learn to embrace it, or be lost,” he says. “At Burgess we do things very differently to many other firms and act more like a team than a group of self employed contractors, each intent on looking after their own interests. Our staff benefit from being part of one organisation that spans the world, and of course so too does our client. We have employed a business development manager whose job is to investigate all avenues of improving our services offered to clients. He is from Australia and learned his trade here. With the help of the board, he's planning a great future for Burgess.”

Acquisitions are another route to expansion that Beckett is keen to investigate. Burgess has had successes acquiring charter operators such as Tom Collins and Crestar, and Beckett says this points the way to what will shape the industry going forward.

“The business will change dramatically over the next five years or so,” he says. “The central agency market will alter; small independent brokers will disappear and I wouldn't be surprised to see one or two of the larger brokerage houses merge to form one new supergroup. When that happens it will be a defining moment in the history of superyachts, and the fee structures as we now know and understand them will definitely change.”

It is easy to talk to this well-informed businessman, who is both open and candid when talking about the company he's grown over the years – even when it means discussing the times when things haven't gone so well.

“As part of our early diversification we created Oceanstyle, a specialist division to handle yachts up to 40 metres. Initially it fared well and quickly established a market share, but with the global downturn it has suffered more than the core business. That doesn't mean we shut it down and abandon it the instant it stops working well for us. It takes time to build a brand, and we are doing so based on honesty and integrity rather than greed. We hope that shows in the way we handle all our affairs.”

Beckett concludes our interview with a note of respect for his late predecessor and mentor, Nigel Burgess, albeit one which hints at a new future for Burgess.

“I think if Nigel were to revisit us now, he would be both proud and flattered. His legacy lives on, many of the standards he put into place remain. But times move on. You cannot afford to stand still in this business. We have changed our name and altered our corporate identity at least once, and in time will no doubt be forced to do it all over again.” ○

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Favourite Book
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Favourite Superyacht
Nero
Favourite Newspaper
The Daily Telegraph
Favourite Pastime
Sailing with my family
Favourite Music
Rock
Favourite Music Artist
Eric Clapton

WORK AND PLAY
Top: the superyacht Slipstream, built for an Aussie owner and available for charter via Burgess. Right: Upwardly mobile - Beckett taking a call from the helm of his sailing yacht.

