



Clive Curtis driving Humming Bird, the boat that bought Curtis, James Beard and Chris Hodges together.

suppose, because it was all trial and error, but this time we got it right'.

However, fate took another twist, C and B were liquidated and our hero finished up in the Royal Albert Hall as a maintenance carpenter. 'I loved it there. Very satisfying work. There's still plenty of things in there that I made'.

Meanwhile, circuit racing was rearing its pretty head and Hodges became involved with Clive Curtis and a lad called James Beard in the design and construction of the Humming Bird rig, which finished seventh in Paris with Beard and Curtis as co-drivers.

By this time the trio were having a marvellous time developing and racing, and when James inherited £1,000 naturally it was to be spent on a new boat.

'Clive said buy a new Avenger, but James said no, let's design one ourselves, and we finished up with Volare, built in Guernsey and so successful that we decided to go into it full-time. And Cougars was born.

'Basically Clive was the engineer, James the driver/designer and I was the builder, but in reality we all chipped in wherever help was needed. Clive also acted as stabiliser when James and I got carried away with weird and wonderful designs on the drawing board'.

A succession of winning boats followed, culminating in the stature of Cougars today. The difference is that Hodges is no longer there.

In 1975 he decided to break out on his

NOT JUST A CHIPPY!

Chris Hodges, the Staines boat builder, is something of an oddball. He hates blowing his own trumpet (highly unusual for someone in his profession), needs the money but will not build a boat for someone he doesn't like, and was most embarrassed at the thought of having an article written about him in the first place.

He is one of those eccentrics who doesn't realise it, an endearing, mild-mannered character who describes himself as a 'chippy' but who designs and builds boats some drivers race about. Peter Inward, for instance, won last year's Paris Six-hour in a Hodges boat.

But Hodges, 39, has had a long, frustrating struggle to survive in his chosen career and has suffered more than his fair share of wounding setbacks, some the result of a cruel world and some self-inflicted due to a combination of pride and stubbornness.

His parents had a boat on the Thames, and as a young boy Master Hodges would trail his own boat behind that, not simply watching the thing bob about but studying the wake pattern. In the art class at school he was banned from painting any more pictures of boats.

'I wasn't exactly Einstein at school,

he recalls, 'but I was even worse when I went to a furniture design college. My parents didn't want me to be a boat builder and furniture seemed the next best thing at the time, but that was a disaster.

'So then I became a printer, of all things — and pretty good at it actually — but building boats was still there nagging away in my head and I finally made the breakthrough via the char lady.

'We were chatting away one day and I told her about my ambition and the next thing I knew she had fixed an appointment for me with Kenneth Gibbs of Shepperton — and I got the job.

'Nothing glamorous about it. I was only helping out where I could, but it was boats'.

FIRST INVOLVEMENT

From there Hodges moved to C and B Marine run by Clive Curtis and Bo Claire and with it came his first involvement in offshore powerboat racing.

'We only did it as a hobby, but worked on and rigged Wildcat, the first outboard ever to complete the Cowes-Torquay-Cowes. We were very lucky, I

by Christopher Wright

own, and Cees van der Velden made it possible. Velden was tired of running around in Molinari rigs and wanted to build his own.

He therefore asked Hodges to come



over to Holland to show them how. 'It was the chance for a stake as a freelance,' said Hodges, 'and after a lot of thought I took it.'

'I left Cougars and went to Cees' for a month. They didn't speak much English there, which made a day's work highly entertaining, but they got the message and the mistakes were ironed out.

'Back I came to Britain, in business for myself for the first time in my life. It was a bit scary and a hell of a gamble in this business, but I loved it. My first customer was Jackie Wilson and we had some great times'.

Still the mortgage had to be paid and Hodges had a wife and two children to support. Life was hard and money was short.

Matters came to a head when John Nicholson in a Hodges hooked on a bend in that terrible accident at Bristol in 1980 and another competitor ran right over the top of him. Hodges took it as a

design fault and blamed himself.

By this time he actually had some money in the bank after selling a house in Southampton and moving to Teddington, and now he made the biggest gamble of all.

NEST EGG

'I had £5,000 as my nest egg and stuck all of it into developing a boat with Mark Wilson. I didn't build another for three months. I spent all my time on the new design, never knowing whether it was the one to follow. My security was gone and if I was a moody character before that you can imagine what I was like then.

'It may sound corny, but I did believe I was doing my bit for Britain. I was tired of hearing about Molinaris, Veldens, and Seebolds. It was time we had an English winner. Much to my relief it was, and as a direct result of that

development I was able to build the boats that helped Peter Inward and Nick Cripps take Paris'.

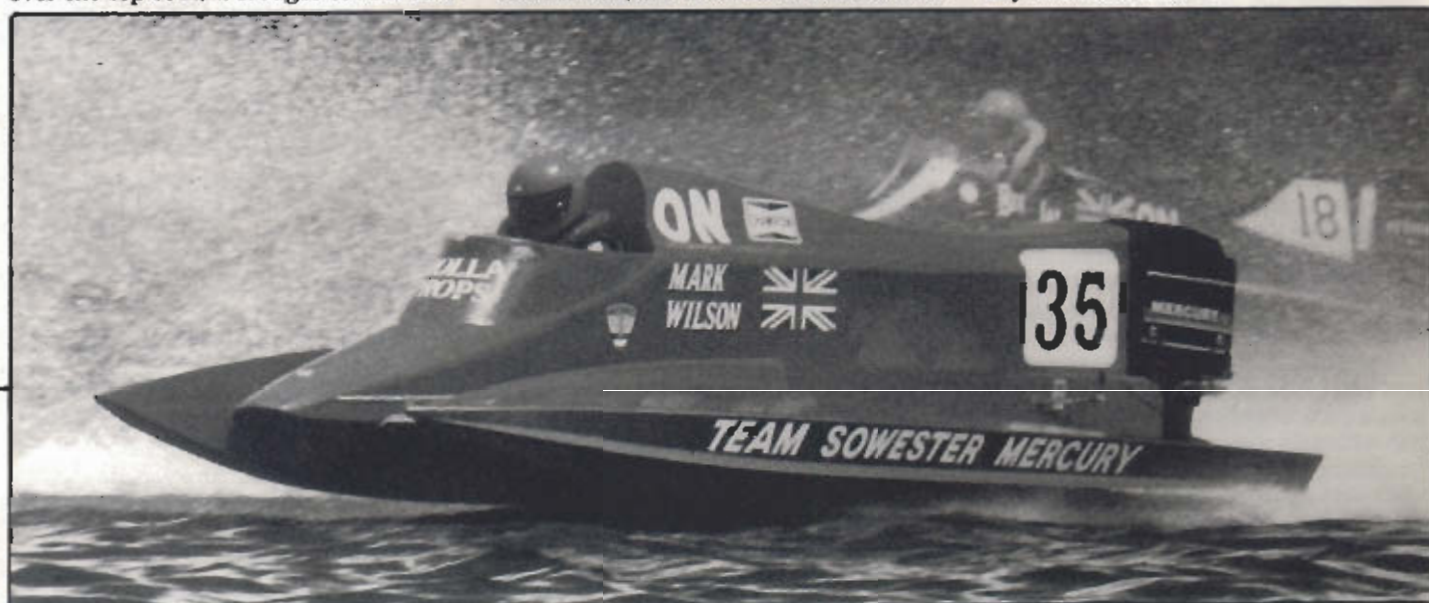
Now Hodges is building for Cripps, Inward, Wilson, Jelf, Bateman, Duggan and others who have to remain secret. He is hardly a millionaire, but he is secure and a success in his chosen profession.

'I've done my best to give value for money, to design and build boats that are not a heap of plywood at the end of the season. I have a pride in my work.

'If I had the money I would develop on and on. I've got so many ideas that I'm sure would work. Meanwhile, I have to earn the bread so for now development will have to wait. Frustrating, though'.

And had it been worth it?

'Oh yes, I've had some rough times and my wife has hated it. But the good far outweighs the bad and anyway it was something I had to do. I didn't have any choice. Did I?'



Above: The development hull designed and built by Chris with Mark Wilson. From this hull came the development of Hodges cats today. Right: The first boat that Chris built for Jackie Wilson which was eventually powered by Cosworth. Below: Chris Hodges working at Cougar Marine

