

Best Handmade Canoe Company - UK



Valkyrie Craft Canoes and Classic Boats

Valkyrie Craft is a small family operated business with a focus on making handmade traditional style canoes, kayaks and other paddled boats. We spoke to Founder John Wilkinson to find out more about the business and to hear his thoughts on winning this award.



Here at Valkyrie Craft our focus is on retaining very personal customer relations, allowing us build to order and thereby producing high quality individualised end products. Following recent sales abroad we aim to develop our export potential though a strong commitment to the above philosophy. This approach revolves around respect for the customer, the product and the environment within which we operate.

Therefore we employ time honoured processes and build boats only to order. Our clients are predominantly private individuals with an enthusiasm for paddle sport, but we have built boats for the National Trust, the Games of Thrones television drama, and other organisations and private companies. Our boats have been exported to Denmark, Norway and Cyprus.

Whenever we undertake a new client or project we treat this as a new opportunity to create a perfect boat. We follow up initial enquires with a broad discussion of the merits of our products with reference to alternatives. We then leave the customer to consider this input. When they re-engage with us we go through the process of determining their specific needs and desires, making recommendations and eventually taking a firm order; there have been occasions when the first contact to the first saw cut is over two years. We believe that the customer should have as much time as they wish to consider the details of their order, including the model, the choice of wood and the type and colour of the final finishes. This potentially long time span might seem arduous, but it offers us the ultimate opportunity to produce a truly unique product crafted to meet our client's needs.

In addition to our work creating bespoke boats, we also work with schools and community groups where we focus on introducing young people and families to practical traditional skills, as we believe it is vital to support both our clients and the wider industry in which we operate. As the skills shortage continues, it is of vital importance that we encourage the continuation of our skills down to future generations.



Canoeing and boat building has always been an interest of mine, and I am an active canoeist and canoe coach and work with the Canoe Association of Northern Ireland as a member of their coach development committee and also in developing recreational canoe racing. I have been involved in the building, study and use of traditional boats for over fifteen years. Prior to establishing Valkyrie Craft I had a background in teaching, where I originally taught history before moving into senior management.

When I created Valkyrie Craft in 2005 there was no commercially viable wooden canoe building company in the UK, and this has not changed significantly in 2016. This is both a challenge and an opportunity since it means that we remain a very small niche product which can be seen as anachronistic, and we must continually rise to the challenge of justifying our product, yet is a significant opportunity since we therefore work within a sector with few competitors allowing us the luxury of focusing on quality.

Small scale specialist canoe building is currently undergoing a period of gentle growth with the development and expansion of paddle sports in the UK. However, specialist craft have an ongoing challenge to compete with mass produced cheaper products. The significant task within the industry is to effectively question the belief that specialist wooden and 'skin-on-frame' boats are less fit for purpose than plastic boats, and to take this further by expounding both their longevity and superiority in handling.

In order to fight against the trend towards mass produced products, Valkyrie Craft is set apart by our focus on quality and the individual customer, not on to mass production for a faceless consumer market.

Ultimately specialist wooden boats are a small part of the growing array of paddle sport craft. Moving forward I would like the industry to shift its focus from ever changing models of plastic craft competing to win the public's attention, to one in which the producers focus on developing and then retention of designs that are fit for specific paddling situations, and then focus on meeting needs. Less hype and more education are what is needed to bring the industry forward.

With regards to Valkyrie Craft, our future company aspirations are simply to continue to develop our markets, educating the paddling public as to the timeless excellence of wooden boats. This will help us to expand our customer base both at home and abroad, as will increasing our public exposure at events and festivals within the water sport calendar.

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