

## Desmond Thomas Townson

1934-2008

Desmond Thomas Townson, yacht designer, boat builder and model maker passed away peacefully Wednesday afternoon after a long battle with cancer. Des Townson has, through his work as a yacht designer, made a considerable contribution to the yachting fraternity of New Zealand. He created a significant body of design work, resulting in boats that have given enjoyment to thousands of yachtsmen. This process was started in 1951 when he designed his first boat and to this day several thousand of his creations remain in active use throughout New Zealand.

Townson was born in Auckland in 1934 and from his father developed a passion for sailing. He won the Tanner Cup, the premier teenage yachting championship in 1950 and at the age of 17 designed his first boat, a small dinghy. Over the following fifty-seven years he designed eighty-two different boats ranging from an 8ft rowing dinghy to a 72ft keel boat. His influence on New Zealand yacht design during the 1950s to 80s was as significant as that of the famous Logan family during the colonial yachting era.

During the later part of the 1950s Townson was at the forefront of the post war sailing expansion where he created a range of small dinghies, racing yachts and powerboats. Fifty years later the Zephyr and Mistral classes remain as popular as in their formative years.

During the 1960s and 70s Townson designed racing and cruising keelboats. The 32 ft yacht *Moonlight* created a sensation in 1971 when mountaineer and explorer Peter Mulgrew campaigned the undersized boat to the upper level of One Ton Cup selection contest in Auckland, beating larger creations from the world's best designers.

Des Townson's most important creation was the 2.9 metre Starling yacht for teenagers, designed in 1969. Over 1300 have been built and for almost four decades thousands of youngsters have raced or recreationally sailed Starlings throughout the country. The class national championship has for many years, been the largest national yachting contest for any indigenous boat in the country and regularly attracts between 100-150 entrants. Competition is intense and winners read like a who's who of New Zealand yachting. It would be safe to claim the majority of the hundreds of New Zealanders involved in Americas Cup, Volvo Around the Globe Race or world sailing championships have sailed a Starling yacht at some stage of their career.

In 1987 Townson designed the radio controlled Electron model yacht. Over 1000 were built in his workshop and sold throughout the world.

The 2008 Queens Birthday Honours saw Townson recognized for his contribution to yachting with the award of a New Zealand Order of Merit.

Des Townson is survived by his wife Sue and daughter Claire.



