



Teak Isle's total manufacturing and warehouse space, including sister company Boat Outfitters, exceeds 200,000 square feet.

100,000 SKUs and Counting

Teak Isle supports more than 350 boatbuilders with custom components, while sister company Boat Outfitters keeps DIYers and dealers busy

By Gary Reich

If you've been on a new boat in the past decade, chances are good that you've seen or touched an accessory or component made by central Florida manufacturer Teak Isle. Supplying more than 350 OEM boatbuilders — from small to major producers — the company has a portfolio of more than 100,000 parts it pro-

duces from acrylics, King StarBoard, marine plywood, extruded aluminum and other marine-grade materials.

The family-run outfit is a critical supplier to its boatbuilder customers, manufacturing everything from console doors, bait well lids, tackle drawers, stowage compartments and rod holders to extruded aluminum trim, interior cabinetry components and Corian countertops — all on tight manufac-

turing schedules that can make or break a builder's deliveries.

Overseeing the operation are co-owners Pat and David Brown and their sons Andrew and Parker. They not only support boatbuilders but also innovate in the retail marine components and accessories space through the online Boat Outfitters business. Teak Isle and Boat Outfitters occupy four buildings in Ocoee, which is about 25 minutes by car from Orlando. Total manufacturing and warehouse space exceeds 200,000 square feet with the recent addition of an adjacent warehouse at the Boat Outfitters location.

"My father, Sandy, who owned a Wellcraft

dealership, started the business with Sonny Jones in 1979 selling teak swim platforms," Pat Brown says. "Dealers were having trouble sourcing the teak to build them, so he started making and selling them around the state. He also milled and sold teak trim. I worked at the dealership from a young age washing and maintaining boats."

Brown says he would load up as many as 20 platforms and multiple lengths of teak trim, then drive them to dealerships up and down the Florida coast. "Before we knew it, we were building displays and doing trade shows," he says. "Everything just grew from there."

Teak has been used on boats for centuries, but it was a new marine-grade polymer called King StarBoard, manufactured by King Plastic Corp., that supercharged Teak Isle's business in the early '80s. "We started working with the material because we could get it in large sheet sizes, and it was easy to fabricate and required little to no maintenance in the marine environment," Brown says. "It's durable and workable, which means we can craft just about anything with it, from console-entry doors to rod holders to slide-out cooler racks and more."

Today, Teak Isle is among King Plastic's highest-volume customers. Walking around the primary facility, Brown points out stacks of the material that are warehoused outside,

arranged by color and size in large racks. "We get about two truckloads a week," he says. "Some of it we use so quickly that we can just pull it directly from the shipping pallets. Since it's UV-stable, there's no problem keeping it outside, which means we don't need a ton of inside space to store it."

Part of the secret sauce that allows the company to offer such a wide range of parts, components and accessories is a set of 12 computer-numeric-control machines at its four manufacturing buildings. The machines run continuously throughout the day and can cut just about any size and shape part from sheets of King StarBoard, acrylic, marine-grade plywood and Corian. "They're the bread and butter of our business," Brown says. "We couldn't do the volume we do without them."

Additionally, the machines help reduce scrap by utilizing as much of each sheet as possible. "Some scrap is large enough that we can catalog and inventory it," Brown says, "but you can't have an operation like ours without scrap. We turn over about 1.1 million pounds of scrap per year to a recycling company, so there's ultimately very little waste."

To keep the machines fed with the data they need, Teak Isle employs a staff of 20 engineers who help invent products and turn the ideas of boatbuilders into sellable components. "We have a collaborative

relationship with our in-house designers and our customers," Brown says. "There are plenty of products that we came up with on our own, but quite often we're asked to create a product that serves a need. Sometimes it's as simple as a glove box for a center console overhead or as complex as a large tackle drawer system."

You'd be right to think that managing the engineering files for Teak Isle's more than 100,000 parts and products is a challenge. To keep track of the drawings and their associated orders, customers and manufacturing, the company employs a system called Mavis.

"Anything to do with a product or part is tracked here," Brown says, pointing to a computer monitor in his office. "The system is used to track prototypes, develop new products, monitor inventory, maintain engineering files and push parts through the manufacturing process from one end to the other. When a work order is created, the system starts a chain reaction that triggers the gathering of the raw materials and then tracks them through the facility to final shipment."

Inside the company's four buildings, forklifts move sheets of material to the CNC machines, where individual components are cut before being sent to workstations for processing and eventual final assembly. The King StarBoard, acrylic and Corian pieces come from the cutters with unfinished edges that workers sand and polish. "Once we get those edges finished, they can start putting the items together," Brown says. "Each item travels through the process with an engineering drawing showing how it should be assembled and the parts needed from inventory to put it together."

Other items go to work cells where craftspeople heat and bend parts into custom shapes. On deck during my visit is a large sheet of acrylic that is being shaped on a mold to create a sliding companionway door for a walkaround.

Innovation is part of a culture that runs deep in the company. To illustrate this, Brown shows me a prototype cell where four workers are assembling new products that are tested before they go into production. Among the items being built is a slide-out platform designed to hold a 12-volt portable refrigerator unit.

"Here, give this a pull," he says. "I think we may have to go with lighter retaining catches." A generous tug on the unit shows Brown that they may need to switch to catches rated at 2 pounds versus 5. "I'm not happy with the fact that it's resisting a bit — we'll try those lighter catches. Everything we produce goes through trials like this until we get it just right."

The company's most popular products are bait well covers, center console doors, sliding companionway doors, rod holders, tackle stowage drawers, stowage compartments, dash insets for multifunction displays and glove boxes. Also popular are the company's powder-coated aluminum trim extrusions, interior cabinetry and Corian countertops.

Corian countertops and interior cabinetry are made at Teak Isle's "North" facility, where carpenters and craftspeople make components for such builders as Boston



A craftsman in the extrusion department prepares a door frame for welding. Entry doors are one of Teak Isle's most popular products.



An interior component for Boston Whaler takes shape in the fabrication facility.



A cooler slider that fits under a leaning post.



This tackle, stowage and rod holder unit is designed to fill underutilized space on pontoon boats.

Whaler and Sea Ray, among others. “Whaler and Sea Ray are large accounts,” Brown says, “but we have hundreds of great customers who like outsourcing these parts to us. It’s just more efficient and cost-effective for the boatbuilder.”

Another component of the business is a fabrication facility that bends, welds and powder coats aluminum extrusions into door and hatch frames. It’s another area where Teak Isle employs technology. Brown shows me a robotic arm that is welding together a piece of hatch trim. “We have world-class welders that we still keep busy, but the robots don’t get tired and are very accurate,” he says. “Plus, we still need people to place the extrusions in the jig and to initiate the different robot movements.”

I watched the first steps in the powder-coating process as racks of extrusions went through a series of chemical baths to prep the metal for final treatment. The metal is then primed before the final coating is applied, and the pieces move into a large oven. Everything from door and hatch trim to door slides is fabricated here.

The last stop on the tour takes us to the company’s Boat Outfitters division, an online retail presence that sells all sorts of replacement boat parts and components, along with a vast inventory of boating accessories. Andrew Brown, Pat’s son, oversees Boat Outfitters.

“We started Boat Outfitters right after the economic downturn, in 2011,” Andrew Brown says. “Our goal is to be the place where people can find hard-to-find replacement parts, outfit their boat, and order custom parts and components.”

Catering to the DIY crowd, as well as to service departments and dealers, Boat Outfitters also has an online tool that allows

customers to order items such as tackle and stowage drawers, glove boxes, replacement bait well acrylics, and EVA foam on a custom basis.

“If a customer has an old teak door and trim that need replacing, they can use our website to specify dimensions and order a replacement made of King StarBoard or acrylic,” Andrew Brown says. “Sometimes a customer wants to add a component like a tackle center. Items like that can also be ordered and produced on a custom basis. We’re also custom-cutting and personalizing EVA foam helm pads and other foam decking components that customers can spec online.”

The company also specializes in hard-to-find replacement parts, such as hinges, locks and keys, drawer pulls, latches and more. Users of the website can track down these parts by using the measurements Boat Outfitters provides on the website.

“We want to make it as easy as possible to find parts,” Andrew says. “Boats aren’t like cars where you can go to a parts counter and pick up or order whatever you need. That’s why we try to provide as much information about our replacement parts online. Customers can also call and talk to one of our experts who can help them track down what they need.”

As Pat Brown and I head back to the main office, he reminds me about one of the company’s more popular products, which doesn’t have marine or boating tie-ins at all. “We are probably the biggest manufacturer of outdoor nativity scenes in the world, save for Far East manufacturers,” he says. “We craft the shapes out of PVC sheet and insert metal rods that allow them to be placed on a lawn. During the holiday season, we convert part of the Boat Outfitter’s space to manufacturing and shipping those nativity packs.”



Teak Isle gets about two shipments of King StarBoard polymer each week, which it uses to produce such items as tackle centers.

Another market that Teak Isle dominates is building custom accessories for pontoon boats. “There’s a lot of underutilized space on pontoon boats, so we make all sorts of components that are easy to add,” Brown says. Among them are table toppers that hold happy-hour ingredients, tackle centers with rod holders, and even a pull-out drawer with cutouts for pet food and water bowls.

Brown says he’s motivated by his customers and the enjoyment he gets from providing innovative products with minimal turnaround time. “We do everything we can to ship rush orders quickly, and that makes a big difference when a boatbuilder suddenly runs out of a part that could hold up deliveries of several boats. Providing that customer service and flexibility is what keeps our customers coming back for more.” ■