

Hunter Boats evolves

By 1949 Minett was gone, but a number of other 1930's shops had come back to life. Gidley Boat Works changed its name to Grew, but shed the original Grew shop at Jackson's Point on Lake Simcoe and concentrated exclusively on building runabouts. Myles Jeffrey was now turning out two boats a year out of his tiny double decker back yard shed, a new low-cost plywood builder named Ayling and Ramage had set up in Arnprior and was making a selling 20 to 30 units a year. Hunter Boats, under the former Ditchburn mechanical foreman, Aleister Hunter had been formed in 1932, but build contracts were slow in coming. In 1934 Hunter, a motorboat man to the core (he had built his first motor skiff in 1908, at the age of 16), suddenly found his company with contracts to build two 24-foot gaff-rigged sailing sloops. The term gaff rigged needs a brief (revisited) explanation for the non-sailboat crowd. Each sailboat has a mainmast, which extends vertically, and a boom, which extends horizontally, if you just attach a sail to the outer ends of the mast and boom you have a triangle; this set up is usually used on a small single mast single sailboat known as a catboat (Aykroyd's bestselling product). The gaff rig is where a third mast is set up on the upper part of the mainmast, this allows for more sail area, basically set your hand on a table extend your thumb, forefinger and little finger and imagine a sail between the latter two.

Inboard projects were painfully few. A total of six inboards were built in the 1930's; five utilities, two 20 footers, two 26 footers and one 23 footers, one of which was ordered by Catholic priest to make visits to a classroom on an island in Lake Simcoe. There are two islands in Lake Simcoe, Thorah, which is mostly settled on the northeast side by cottagers, and Georgina, which is home to a Chippewa First Nation, so I assume that the "classrooms" the priest was visiting was most likely a residential school. The smaller utilities used a 45 Buchanan, the larger ones (built in 1935-36, including the priest's used an 85 hp). There was also an 18 foot all mahogany runabout, but that was it.



The former Ditchburn, now Hunter Boat Works in Orillia, Photo taken in 1943, Fairmile in progress. Writing on building roof identifies the town for military aircraft.

Hunter also built canoes and outboard boats until the war, small craft inside the former big and still mostly empty Ditchburn yacht plant. During the war Hunter made Fairmiles, as did Midland Boat Works, J. J. Taylor, and Minett-Shields. The wood hull made them impervious to magnetic (not contact or acoustic) mines as well as magnetic torpedo's, although the chances of a U-Boat hitting this fast, tiny craft were pretty much zero, also a waste of ammunition. It was, I believe, the last wood hull surface combat vessel built. They were all declared surplus after the war, like many such items, they could be had very cheaply. Several were made into private yachts, or in the case of the Penetang 88 a tour boat. After the war Hunter returned to building pleasure boats, and developed the Hunter look, a beamy runabout with a square stern and rounded covering boards. There was a 30-foot cruiser, a 20 foot and 27-foot runabout. The 20-foot runabout was fairly successful, the 27-footer is rare, there is one recently advertised for sale (I don't say currently, as the boat ads on the web are often out of date, the boat gets sold, the ad stays up forever). Even in it's rough condition and set on a boat trailer it has a commanding physical presence and if I had the choice of boat to drive on the water during a storm, I would definitely choose a Hunter.



Hunter runabout. Not afraid of anything Manotick Classic Boat Club photo

Assistants' Top Prize

First Workout;
or Sucking Berth

HUNTER BOATS ARE MAKING BOATING NEWS

ORILLIA, Nov. 1—Skilled craftsmen are now busy designing and building new Hunter "A-Quality" craft at the large Orillia plant of Hunter Boat Limited. The 1948 boating season, now Hunter be one in which many proud Hunter models will be launched for the first time — a row of many more proud Hunter boat owners. Here a quality boat build — speed with comfort and grace — and

for better boating →

"Scores

or Gridders
'est Tonight

Big Four
Grid Schedule

A QUALITY CRAFT
Hunter
BOATS LIMITED
ORILLIA ONTARIO

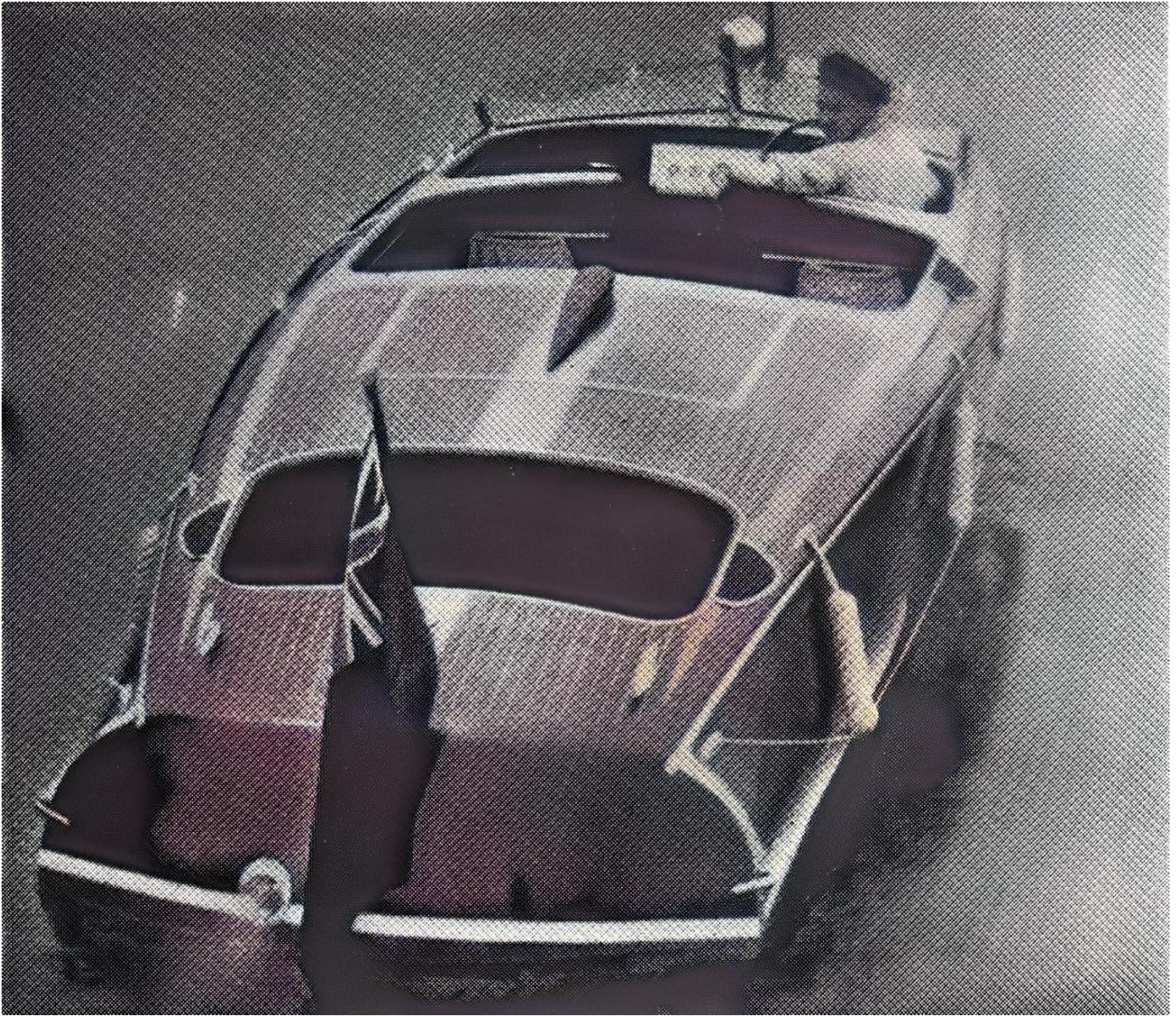
1948 ad for Hunter boats.

As the war work wound down, peacetime building returned, and Hunter began offering a new line of mahogany runabouts. I can't say for sure who the designer was, but curving sterns many bear the unmistakably work of Earl Barnes, who was now designing full-time. Barnes did designs for Shepherd and most likely Matlo and Hunter. A pair of 26-foot customer runabouts with a rather wild stern were built in 1946, this helped put Hunter on the boatbuilding map.



Spectacularly curved stern was a custom order only on this 26 foot Hunter. The test driver I believe is Aleister Hunter's son Don Hunter. One of these, named "Hurricane" was owned by a member of the Manotick Classic Boat Club back in the 1980's, I don't know where it went since then.

Hunter Boats adopted the rather clunky advertising moniker "Hunter's Aqual-ity Craft" and it appeared on all of their print ads and promotional material. Whether or not it worked in terms of drawing attention, it stuck. Compare it with the sly brag of Minett-Shields Limited, "Built for those not satisfied with ordinary standards", clearly taking a shot at their smug and much larger rival Ditchburn.



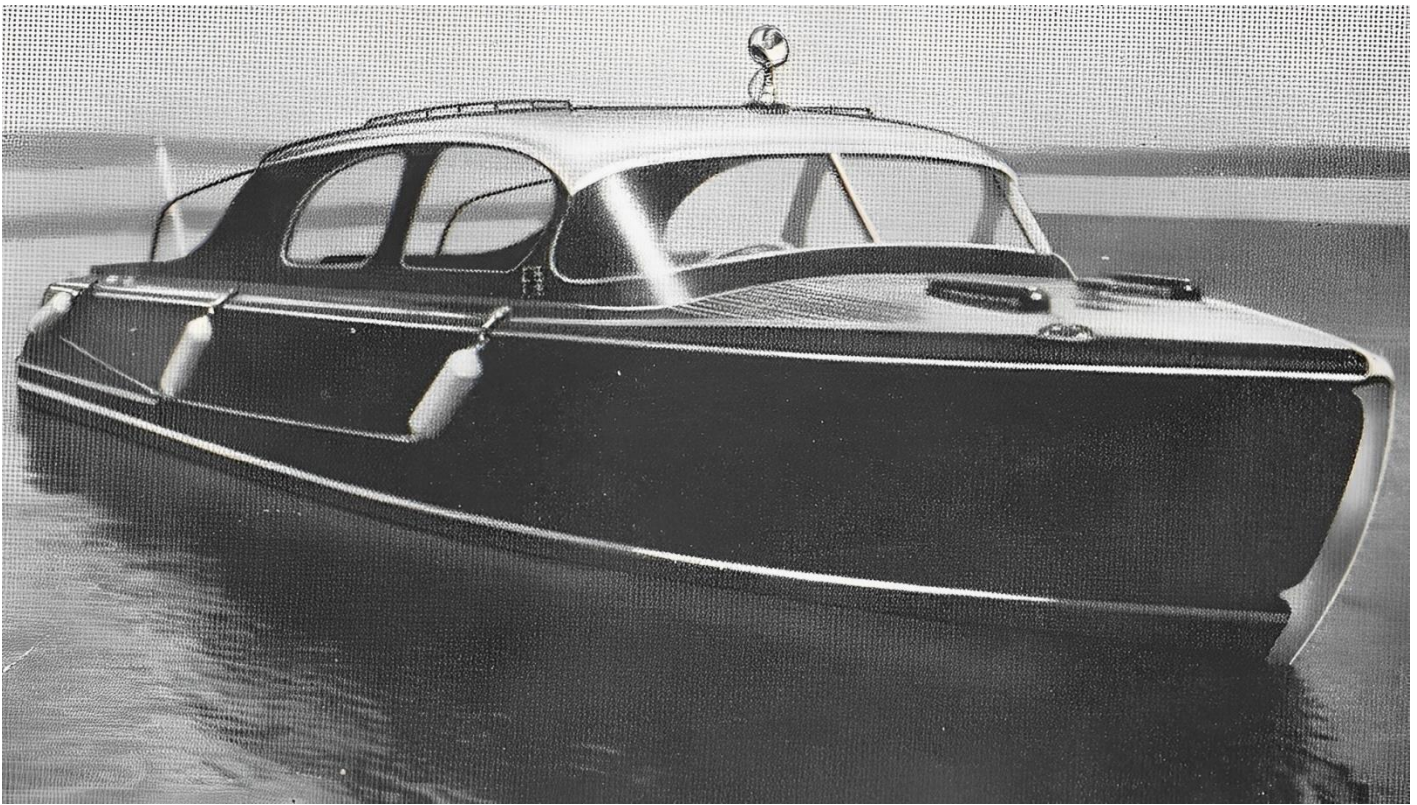
It looks like a straight up copy of a mid 1930's Barnes, most likely it is.

Hunter boats included some innovative features, the notable was the electric blower fan, which sucked up air from the bilge area and engine hatch and vented it out decorative vents on the stern. As engines began to be covered over (at least for the larger boats) by 1910, it was common safe practice to open the engine hatches to let out any gas vapor that accumulated around the engine (although this did not always include the bilge). Sometimes the carburetor would leak, even just a little bit, and fumes would accumulate in the enclosed space. It did not take much to set it off, generally the starter motor brushed would generate a few sparks when the ignition key was turned and that did the job. Boat hulls were often shattered beyond repair,

the passengers and driver could be seriously injured or killed. In this case rather than lift hatches you could simply turn on the blower switch and wait a couple of minutes and then get going, or you forgot or had other things on your mind and up you would go. In fairness almost all inboards began to instal this feature, you can usually tell with what looks like an oblong chrome grille on both sides of the stern. Hunter also used splash rails, a triangular piece of wood set along the waterline to keep the splash from curling up the side of the hull and into the passenger's face. This worked at low speeds or in relatively calm waters, not so much one it got rough.



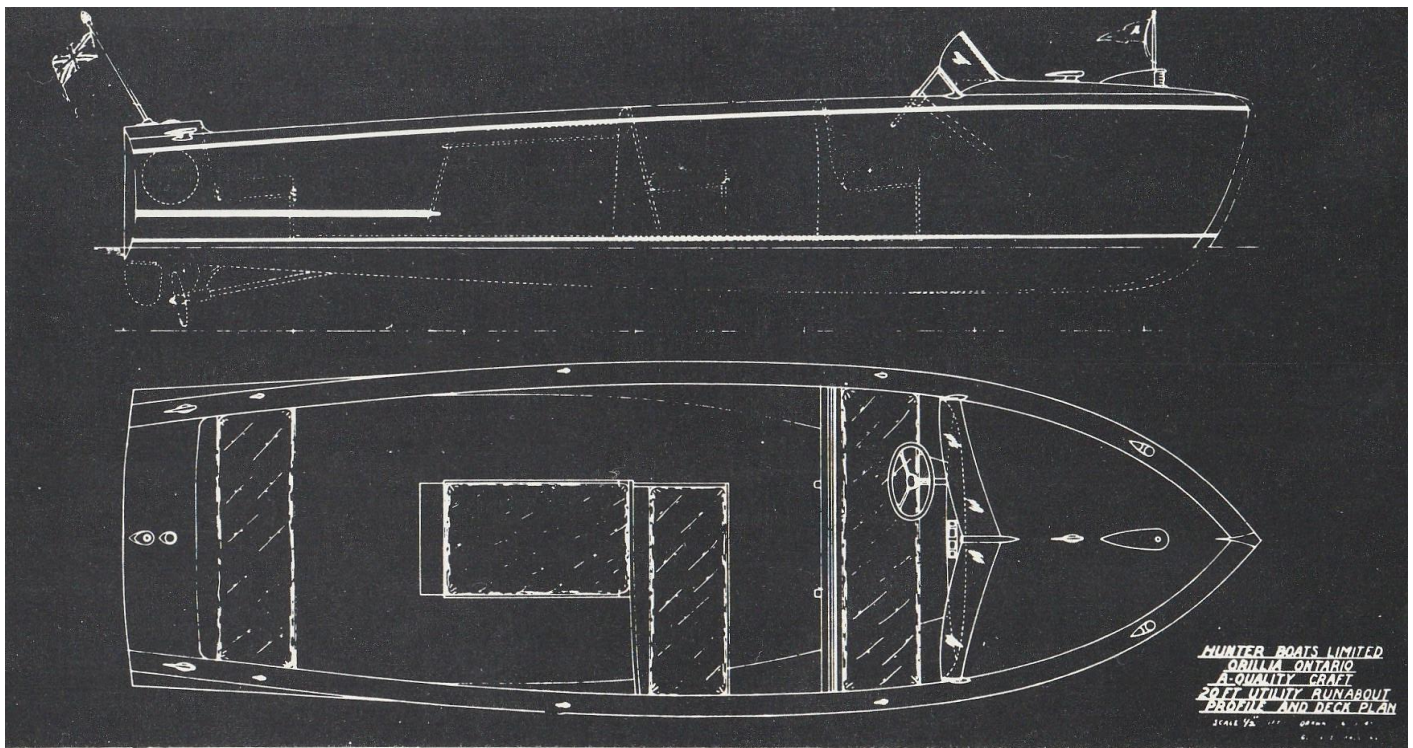
But for the less adventurous and more average runabout customer, here was the 22-foot utility.

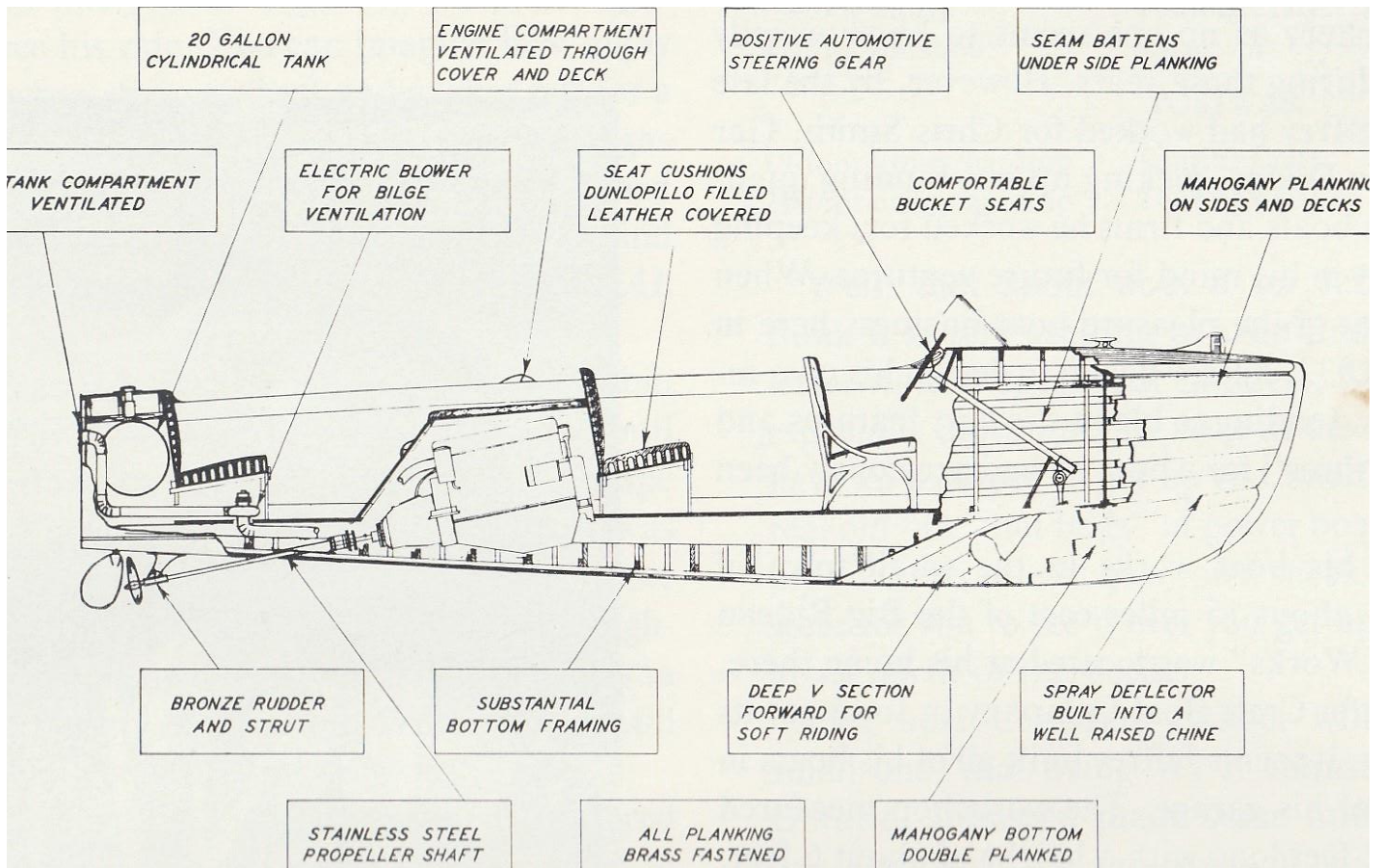


The 22-footer also came with a hardtop as an option

Another important improvement was the use of latex foam in seat upholstery. Prior to the war, seats were made of wire springs, tied together with twine and overlaid with horsehair, or as in the case with Jeffrey, what I would best describe as dried peat moss, pulled up from the ground and left in the sun and was certainly cheaper. Latex or foam rubber had been developed by Dunlop Tire in 1929, by stirring up and bubbling liquid rubber and then getting it to set in a mould. This understandably did not see much boating application in the desperate thirties, when

it was easier to find roots from the back yard to do the job. Genuine foam rubber is extremely expensive, but thick and dense and holds a person's weight a lot more comfortably than the cheaper polyurethane foam we use today. The trade name at the time was and still is Dunlopillo; you can still buy it, as long as you are ok with departing with a lot of cash. A single sleeping pillow with Dunlopillo filling will run you a whacking 100 pounds in the U.K. The seat coverings up the 1960's were all leather, another expensive product until displaced by Naugahyde, a vinyl rubber substitute sprayed onto a cheesecloth backing, and for marine purposes, treated with an anti-mold agent.





The 22-footer, design and feature specs.

Power for the Hunter fleet came from a mix of locally made Buchanan engines for 45-110 hp and the Gray Fireball at 150-175 hp for the larger boats, or those customers who wanted a hot rod, a big engine in a small boat. This program paid off and Hunter built almost 100 runabouts over 1946-50 and continued successfully putting out runabouts into the early 1960's. It did experiment briefly with jet propulsion outdrives in the 1960's, but jet boats, while they sounded cool and powerful, invariably underperformed relative to a plain old propellor. It should be remembered that Thomas Jutten had built a prototype jet-powered launch for a customer in the 1910's, thousands attended the test run in Hamilton Bay, only to leave with a wave of eye-rolling. A saying about this type of engineering is "how do you make a 150 hp engine into a 100 hp engine? Answer: put it in a jet boat." The drag caused by the intake process only slows the thrust from the output. But you might say, look at how fast Sea-Doos go these days. Yes, it's because the engines put out a truly insane amount of power for a very light and small watercraft. The 2022 Sea-Doo GTR-X Rotax puts out 300 hp for a top speed of 67 mph (110 Km/h), so the smallness of the boat and the sheer muscle under the hood does a good job of hiding the fundamental inefficiency of the system.

The mid- 1950's Hunters became beamier and heavier, perhaps not surprising given the tendency of Lake Simcoe (actually a "Great Lake" in it's own right) to get unnervingly rough.

Aleister Hunter passed in 1965 the business was sold in 1976. The wood boats had been phased out in the early 1960's, but Hunter apparently moved to building a 21-foot fibreglass runabout. It was never produced in any quantity, and eventually was discontinued. Some of the old-line wood builders had taken a shot at least once in building a fibreglass hull. Both Peter Ayling and Charlie Cliffe built one each and swore off it for the smell and hassle. Fibreglass was not really a custom boat substance, the very nature of the production, with a very expensive mould and specialized equipment and dedicated work space and specialized workers, meant that it was only suited to mass production.