

A policy we can all enjoy



Geoff Holt

The former professional yachtsman who was paralysed in a swimming accident and inspired sailors when he became the first quadriplegic to sail the Atlantic.

WITH the Tullet Prebon London Boat Show launching us, as is tradition now, into the New Year, and with a performance by "yours truly" on the stage on Sunday 16 January, I noticed with much interest the disability access policy statement on the official Boat Show website.

It states: "ExCeL requires disabled visitors to be afforded the same opportunities as able-bodied visitors enjoy, and to this extent organisers must ensure that exhibition stands are easily accessible to visitors using wheelchairs".

It goes on to say: "National Boat Shows ask Exhibitors to actively comply with the DDA and not discriminate against any form of disability with people who have difficulty walking, seeing or hearing who wish to access their stand.

"Where there is no space available for a ramp nor budget for a lift, we ask our Exhibitors to set out exactly

how they are going to comply with the DDA so far as reasonably practicable".

And quite right too you may think.

Of course, anyone with a disability who visits boat shows knows that the London Boat Show is far more accessible than its Southampton counterpart. The complex outdoor layout of Southampton spread over three sites only further complicates matters.

But, to be honest, even making allowances for the venue, access on to exhibitor stands at Southampton for elderly or disabled visitors is woeful to say the least, even on to those at ground level.

I'll stop short of naming the main offenders but I might not be so charitable next year. Perhaps if the site owners, Southampton City Council, were to have an access policy statement like that of ExCeL it would force exhibitors to do something.

If exhibitors can comply with the regulations for London, why not Southampton?

I suggest organisers of the Liverpool show in April and May take note because I will be taking an interest.

And for those still unconvinced, you might like to know that in October 2010, using the Americans

with Disabilities Act, the Norwegian Cruise Line was fined \$1,000,000 for failing to provide interpreters for its deaf passengers.

In the UK we have the Disability Discrimination Act that affords the UK's eight million disabled citizens similar rights. It's a big stick that I would hope our industry can avoid by using common sense.

And if you want to be accessible but are uncertain what you need to do, then by all means email me via my website. The cost of a mini access audit can not only potentially increase visitors to your stand and make their experience more inclusive, it could prevent a letter from the DDA landing on your mat.

Topping off an eventful year

IT'S been a busy year for me. December 10 2009 saw me embark on my voyage from Lanzarote across the Atlantic in my wheelchair aboard the 60-foot catamaran Impossible Dream. I arrived in the British Virgin Islands on January 7 having sailed the 3,000 miles in 28 days.

Within a week, the BVI government had bestowed upon me the accolade of "Honorary Belongship", an



Geoff and 8-year-old son Tim at Windsor Castle after receiving his MBE

honour previously only awarded to Lawrence Rockerfelle. It's about all I share in common with the multi-billionaire.

In June 2010 I was notified that I had been awarded an MBE in the Queen's Birthday Honours List for "Services to Sailing for the Disabled" and in November 2010 I had the pleasure of collecting it from the Queen herself at Windsor Castle. It was a day that my family and I will remember for a long time.

Adding to the accolades, a couple of Honorary Doctorates, one from Solent University for Sport, the other from Winchester University for Science, meant that November was a busy month with my posh suit and tie visiting the dri-cleaners more times in a month than they

have in their entire life.

And to crown a truly memorable year, in the same week that I was "gonged" by Her Majesty, I learned that I am one of three who have been shortlisted for the prestigious YJA Yachtsman of the Year Award.

Voting is restricted to members of the Yachting Journalist Association (no, I'm not a member so unable to vote for myself), and the winner will be announced at a luncheon at Trinity House on Tuesday 11 January.

Whatever the outcome, it's a tremendous honour to be nominated and my thanks to everyone who has supported me in my various escapades in recent years. Things are shaping up nicely for a constructive 2011.

Date for your diary: 16 January 2011, Tullet Prebon Boat Show, 12.00 to 12.20 in the Knowledge Box. Geoff Holt: A disabled yachtsman's guide to sailing the Atlantic.

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