

**Gerd Wessels on the impact of European emission control areas (ECAs): "This is a nightmare. It's like a heart attack for all of us. Our competitors are also the lorries but a lot of people don't understand that."**



**WESSELS:** Head office (above) and (top) Gerd Wessels, who took over the reins of the company from his father in 2004 on its 25th anniversary. Gerd has a background as a naval architect, surveyor for Germanischer Lloyd (GL) and newbuilding supervisor. Photos: Wessels and Geoff Garfield

# Wessels retains creative mindset

**Gerd Wessels has clearly inherited his family's appetite to innovate.**

Geoff Garfield Leer and Haren

Gerd Wessels's enthusiasm for technology is infectious.

It is no accident that two potentially leading-edge methods of saving fuel and minimising emissions involve ships in the fleet of his Haren-based Wessels Reederei.

The multipurpose (MPP)-tonnage specialist is the architect of neither but its history and engineering skills help to explain its involvement.

On two of its ships, the company is several years into testing and helping to refine the SkySails kite system.

More recently, it has been providing third-party technical and crewing management for the innovative *E-Ship 1*, featuring Flettner rotors.

It is a natural progression from the 1970s, when Dr Gerhard Wessels, father of the current managing owner Gerd Wessels, found-

ed Cargo Liner Ship Management Co in Berlin and designed so-called cargo liners that are claimed to have been the blueprint for all modern bulk cargo and container-carrying coasters.

Gerhard Wessels marked the company's 25th anniversary in 2004 by handing the shares in the company to son Gerd, who maintains the same appetite to innovate.

He is pilot testing SkySails on the company's 3,560-dwt MPP ship *Michael A* (built 1993) and 3,700-dwt *Theseus*, the latter benefitting from upgraded third-generation kite technology.

Gerd Wessels' background is as a naval architect, surveyor for Germanischer Lloyd (GL) and newbuilding supervisor.

Today, Wessels Reederei sits on the top table of Haren shipowners with a fleet of around 47 almost exclusively MPP ships.

Those MPPs range between 3,000 dwt and 4,500 dwt but the latest development has been delivery of the company's first containership, the 1,100-teu *Wes Carina*, named after the daughter of the company's financial director. Three more of the Chinese-built, 13,600-dwt newbuildings, includ-



**BUILT IN CHINA:** The 13,000-dwt "Wes Carina" (built 2011), one of four 55W-1000 type newbuildings. Photo: Wessels

ing the *Amelie* this month, follow. Unifeeder has taken the *Wes Carina* initially on a six-month time charter, a company Wessels Reederei has been associated with on the coastal side for many years.

The rate is around EUR 8,100 (\$11,500) per day, which considering one year ago it could have been closer to EUR 3,100 per day, has left Gerd Wessels reasonably happy.

He had fortuitously, as events turned out, postponed delivery of all four newbuildings. Wessels says it probably suited Jiangdong Shipyard, which had a hefty orderbook and avoided potential penalty payments had there been delays.

Interestingly, Wessels Reederei has nine supervisors on site, including five from Haren, an expensive luxury some may think but one the company reckons pays dividends.

Wessels Reederei's Haren neighbour Reederei Jungerhans acted as lead contractor for a total of eight ships at Jiangdong, with Wessels Reederei taking responsibility for supervising vessels three and four.

"It is a good story," declared Wessels. "It's a joint venture, a co-operation."

Father Gerhard Wessels and his contemporary at Jungerhans go to the pub together, they are "good friends", says the son.

"I have been to school with one of the Jungerhans's boys," said Wessels, also highlighting the fact that each company is a one-third shareholder in Haren-based chartering outfit Arkon Shipping.

Wessels' philosophy is that it is better for companies to co-operate when it is mutually beneficial, drawing on individuals' separate skills in areas such as naval architecture and financing.

Similarly, Wessels welcomes the efforts of shipowner Bernd Sibum (see *Reederei Bernd Sibum* page 29) for pioneering the Haren Shipowners' Association (IHR) to unite the town's owners in speaking to politicians with one voice.

It was a difficult task, says Wessels, given the size of Haren owners, ranging from some with just four ships to others, like Jungerhans, Intersee and Wessels Reederei, with close to 50 each.

"There is not a single AG [publicly-owned] company in Haren," he said. "They all sit in the same chair, family owned, family-driven, all working hard, so why not join together?"

**Gerd Wessels: "There is not a single AG [publicly owned] company in Haren. [All are] family owned, family-driven, all working hard, so why not join together?"**

## Nothing 'average' acceptable when it comes to technical edge

Wessels Reederei's debut in the container market typically involves tonnage that its managing owner claims has a technical edge over the competition.

The four Finnish/Swedish ice-class 1A newbuildings (SSW 1000-type) are built in China but to German yard Schichau Seebeckwerft (SSW) drawings and are said to have a higher intake for their 151.72-metre length than many comparable feeder boxships in the market.

Nothing "average" is acceptable to Wessels Reederei, says Gerd Wessels. He says a two or three-year lead on the competition is the standard he strives for.

Certainly, it is something of a coup to be providing technical management for Enercon's *E-Ship 1*, which is claimed to achieve up to 18 knots using its four wind rotors and diesel-electric propulsion system.

Arkon Shipping has been chosen for third-party cargo chartering when the innovative vessel is not fully loaded, carrying Enercon's wind-energy products, mainly to Brazil.

The German-built ship's name with the suffix "1" is a strong indication that Enercon has plans for more, which no doubt Wessels hopes to be involved in, particularly at the building stage given its engineering and supervision credentials.

Wessels Reederei regularly docks its ships at Cassens Werft in Emden from where the *E-Ship 1* was delivered.

As regards pioneering the pilot testing of SkySails, the company is more conservative than fellow trialist Beluga by estimating fuel savings as averaging 8% to 9%, which at today's oil prices still adds up to quite an efficiency.

Equipment has been purchased

for two more vessels in the fleet but its installation has been delayed by the shipping crisis. Fore-castle reinforcement, hydraulics and winches are in place but not so far the masts and kites.

To date, Wessels Reederei has 300 sailing days with the two existing ships.

The company has until now operated its MPP fleet around 90% on the spot market, its competition being, says Wessels, the 5,000 and 6,000-tonners owners have been building especially in China.

His concern is the impact of European Emission Control Areas (ECAs) on shipping, which could drive 15% to 20% of trade back onto trucks, according to some estimates. "This is a nightmare," he said. "It's like a heart attack for all of us. Our competitors are also the lorries but a lot of people don't understand that."

His father, Gerhard Wessels,

only stepped aside six years ago, apparently when the banks raised the obvious question of who would be paying off the next 15-year loan. Last month, he celebrated his 84th birthday.

It means that son Gerd represents the fourth generation of the family to run the business. His responsibility lies in charting the correct course for the future and this, he says, means hopefully less dependence on the coastal fleet.

Although the company turned to China for its boxship quartet, it has not built a coastal vessel for four years.

Inevitably this raises issues. Arguably, such ships do not face the same rigorous conditions as deep-sea tonnage, including fatigue, but cargo owners often still demand ships no more than 16 years old, says Wessels.

"We are in a trap the oil industry started," he said, a reference to

the strict vetting requirements of the oil majors.

When he started at the company, Wessels' first major project was renewing the coastal fleet with 12 MPPs ordered at Slovenske Lodenice Komarno in Slovakia.

And at least for the time being, Wessels Reederei has plenty of contracts with industry, in particular for carrying semi-finished products such as steel coil and plate, that will always require it to have 30 to 40 vessels in the European market, says Wessels.

Meanwhile, the shipowning boss says he would also like to get into bulkers, which its coastal fleet largely is anyway.

He would prefer to start with third-party management as this would solve the issue of sourcing financing in the current economic climate. The target would be smaller bulkers so as to work with the same cargo owners.