

50 years of Drascombes



The definitive dayboat?

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All too often it takes years or even decades before we come to appreciate the significance of something we experienced as a child. We were perhaps too young at the time, or we simply failed

to make connections whose importance we subsequently came to appreciate. In any event, we had no idea how privileged we were to have been in a particular place with particular people.

By the time I started meeting Ian Proctor on the River Dart, at least I knew who he was and had already owned several of his fine



Longboat Cruisers came with a variety of window patterns but can usually be identified by the square cabin profile



dinghies. Chay Blyth (not Sir Chay at the time) was among the other nautical celebrities to frequent this part of the world. I saw him most recently while following the hunt in the Cotswolds. Mud, wellies and waterproofs still featured this time but all were a different colour.

Had I known I was going to lurch into a precarious career – if you can call it a career – as a nautical hack and snapper I would have taken more notice of some of those early encounters. I have a clear recollection of standing in Honnor Marine's showroom at Seymour Wharf in Totnes, looking at the bright

red and blue decks of a pair of 420s. Vivid though that memory remains – and though I knew that they were indeed 420s – it was not until delving into the history of Honnor Marine for this feature that I learned of the company's origins in the world of performance dinghies. I have always associated Honnor Marine not only with Drascombes – as have many people – but also with the Ocean Bird. This latter association arose because my father bought one of these 30ft (9m) John Westell-designed trimarans in the late '60s and kept it on a mooring at Dittisham, close

to the 40ft (12m) wooden prototype, Matamona, but not quite in view from our

House. When we moved to the Dart from a village on the other side of Dartmoor (coincidentally, just a few miles from John Watkinson's home at Drascombe Barton), I was told that my parents' priorities were harbours, schools and houses – in that order. While they did well with the harbour and the house, the chaotic Bohemian excuse for a school was not a good choice. Some of my contemporaries appeared to escape relatively unscathed. The rest of us weren't so lucky, to the extent that some

ended up as yachting journalists.

Returning to one of the more positive stories Totnes has to tell, every enthusiast of traditional dinghies knows how John Westell came to design the 505. This was the boat that, thanks to Westell's specialist knowledge of production building in the then-relatively-new material of glass fibre, launched Honnor Marine.

All three of the company's original directors had been involved in the development of another performance dinghy, the Scorpion, which was subsequently built by Westerly Boats in Rock (at



BeLoW on board Siesta, Peter tiplady's original Drifter

the yard where you will now find Cornish Crabbers) alongside Ian Proctor's Osprey and Wayfarer. Although the 505 was the boat

that gave Honnor Marine a kick-start, having the licence to build the 420 in the UK added some serious production volumes. It's not often British boatbuilding has had occasion to be grateful to the French (twice over in this instance, given the pedigree of the 505 and the design of the 420).

An unlikely tale

Apart from designing the hugely successful 'Five Oh' and, later, the Ocean Bird, John Westell played a major role in the development and production of the Drascombes. The question, you



All friends together: a Cornish Shrimper flanked by a Drifter 22, a Coaster and a Dabber

might well be asking, is how a builder with its origins in performance dinghies and unconventional trimarans

came to take on a range of traditional-style dayboats, especially given the number of British yards that have fallen

by the wayside because the personal interests of the directors and builders held sway over commercial realism. Thankfully, Honnor Marine's decision-makers never lost sight of the reason why they were in business.

The Drascombe story began when John Watkinson built the prototype Lugger himself in glued ply – Katharine Mary, named after his wife – later part-building a further 18 in conjunction with a local joiner and the Kelly and Hall boatyard at Bridgend on the River Yealm, in which he had invested some years earlier. Kelly and Hall had taken one of the



Katharine Mary, the original Drascombe Lugger from 1966, and right, at the Weymouth rally

boats they finished to the Earls Court Boat Show in 1968, selling it and 10 more.

It was clear that the Lugger – conceived by John Watkinson as a boat for himself and his family – was finding an appreciative market among those who shared their enjoyment of coastal

sailing in a simple, shallow-draught open boat that was roomy, versatile and easy to trail. The Watkinson family had already sampled offshore cruising, having sailed to the Mediterranean in a 13-ton ketch a few years earlier. Appalling weather and lack of comforts were among the factors that led to their coming home and leaving the boat in the Med: day-sailing seemed a much better way to enjoy their time afloat, as many of us have subsequently found even if it might have taken us a few years to get there. Kate made it clear that she disliked being clouted on the head by

the boom, breathing in engine fumes and having to endure bad weather on long passages. She wanted a day-sailer so she could 'go home to my own bed every night'.

In designing a boat that would keep the family sailing together, John gave the Drascombe a loose-footed mainsail and an outboard in a well at the stern. The design kept the off-putting elements of boating to a minimum while providing plenty of appeal.

The rate at which orders were soon flooding in made it apparent that building in wood was not going to be fast enough. That's why, in

1968, Watkinson approached Honnor Marine to ask if they would be interested in producing the Drascombe Lugger in GRP. It was refreshing – and perhaps a little surprising – when his proposal was greeted positively. After the switch to GRP construction, further changes were inevitably made to the Lugger over the years including, perhaps most obviously, the switch from lug rig to gunter, though the lug more than served its purpose in nomenclatic terms. The story is that it took a long and convivial evening with friends and several bottles of cerebral lubricant at

Drascombe Barton before it was decided that ‘Drascombe’ was the obvious choice for what would these days be called the ‘brand name’. Had the boat not had a lug rig, one wonders what the ‘model name’ might have been and whether anything else would have done half as well.

Tons and Luggers

Once Honnor Marine started building in GRP, numbers took off: they averaged 100 Luggers a year for the first 10 years. However, it took barely a year for Watkinson and Westell to



Brad Bradshaw's wooden Longboat Cruiser, built by Doug Elliott with an experimental larger cabin

Brad Bradshaw's wooden Longboat Cruiser, built by Doug Elliott with an experimental larger cabin

see the potential for a bigger version: stretching the Lugger by just over 3ft produced

the Longboat (21ft 9in/6.63m), which Honnor Marine started building in



1970 either as an open boat or in Cruiser form with a small cabin. Like the Lugger, the Longboat was also built in wood by Norman Whyte, John Kerr and, principally, the Elliot brothers. Despite the extra length, she was a mere 4in beamier than the Lugger and, at 880lb (400kg), only marginally heavier.

Next among the better-known models in the range came the 15ft 6in (4.7m) Dabber, then the Drifter. With her long shallow keel and twin bilge plates, plus a small but fully-enclosed two-berth cabin and the option of an inboard engine, the Drifter was more small cruiser than

big dayboat. More than 20 years after the last one was built came the Drifter 22 (tested in PBO July 2009) which remains part of Churchouse Boats' Drascombe range today.

The introduction of new models further up and down the size range continued when the Scaffie came along in 1979 as a baby Drascombe for single-handed sailing.

Then it was time to replace the Cruiser Longboat with the Coaster, leaving the hull and rig virtually the same but making the cockpit smaller, adding a bridgedeck and changing the cabin.

Ready to explore a new

market was the Gig, 25ft (7.62m) long and intended to take over where the Royal Navy's Montagu Whaler had left off. Watkinson was familiar with the Whaler from his time in the Navy, as was David Thomas (the Merchant Navy in his case), who drew upon it for inspiration in his design of the Liberty and Minstrel for Hunter Boats.

Other Drascombe models over the years have included the Peterboat (double-ended and built in three sizes in wood only) and the Launch, based on the hull of the Dabber but with just a steadying sail, propulsion coming from a small inboard. Introduced

a year later was the Driver, longer than the Launch and designed to sail – unlike two other river boats, the Henley and Marlowe.

That the success of the Drascombes had a massive part to play in the history of Honnor Marine is undeniable. Like every boatbuilder, however, the company went through rough patches as well as smooth and also moved premises a time or two. From Totnes, it was just a few miles down the road to a new home in Staverton. Later, Luke Churchouse, one of the original directors, set up on his own in Wales before Stewart Brown took

over in 1998 from Luke's son, Jeremy, and moved Churchouse Boats to Hampshire. Drascombes were also built for a while by McNulty in Newcastle.

Rallying calls

The nature of the Drascombe boats – and their owners – makes them ideally suited to getting together on sociable rallies: they're easy to trail and, with their shallow draught, can explore creeks and rivers that others simply cannot reach. Beaching for picnics, barbecues, fun and frolics or simply enjoying the tranquillity is, for



many, a large part of what owning a Drascombe is all about.

An active association – founded and, for many

years, run, by Luke Churchouse – organises up to 30 rallies a year in locations ranging from Cornwall, the Solent, the Norfolk Broads and the Lake District to country canals, Wales and Scotland. In 1997, the rally at Calshot to mark the 10th anniversary of the association and 30 years of Drascombe attracted 90 boats. An active contingent in Holland organises its own events. Dutch owners are often welcomed at British rallies too, but want to make sure anyone travelling to Holland is under no illusions about what to expect. While we all know that sailing in Holland can be



A Dabber at the double, showing that surfing is not the exclusive preserve of the Coaster

wonderful, the people are friendly and the sun can shine, one Dutch rally for later this year promotes itself thus: 'grey, wet, cold, often foggy, sometimes frosty...'

To experience a Dras-



combe gathering and get to know the boats a little better, I accepted an invitation to attend the major rally of the year at the WPNSA in Weymouth to mark 50 years of Drascombes. After a dinner on the Thursday evening to kick off the event, which was supported by Churchouse Boats, everyone reconvened the following morning for the hop of eight miles or so to Lulworth Cove. On a beautifully sunny morning in early July, a stream of tan sails made its way out of Portland Harbour and downwind towards the chalk cliffs of Lulworth. The fleet included half-a-dozen Long-

boats and Longboat Cruisers, lots of Luggers, a Gig, 17 Coasters, five Dabbers, and four Drifters and Drifter 22s (one of the latter being Stewart Brown's, which I tested in 2009).

Drifting with purpose

My ride for the day was with Peter Tiplady in his original Drifter, Siesta, and I couldn't have wished for a more knowledgeable host when it came to matters Drascombe. Peter has been an active member of the association for many years, having started with a Dabber and moving on via a Coaster

to the Drifter. Before buying the Coaster he tried a Longboat Cruiser on a rally but decided he preferred the Coaster because the combination of the

Bridgedeck and the smaller cockpit offers more resistance to flooding. As for the Drifter, its performance surprised me, especially on the beat back to Weymouth. Once you have accepted that you will inevitably make some leeway, you can enjoy sailing a boat that's nicely balanced and both faster and more responsive to tweaking than you might expect.

When Drascombe owners change boats, like Peter they

tend to move to another Drascombe. Some switch allegiance but so enjoy the Drascombe way of life that they still join in the rallies. At Weymouth, two 'honorary Drascombes' included a Cornish Shrimper and a Winkle Brig.

Many owners trail their boats to rallies. Others think nothing of hopping along the coast and making a few overnight stops. Peter was among several to sail from Ashlett Creek in Southampton Water.

Not having a cabin doesn't stop Drascombes from venturing further afield either. Many PBO



Left Some of the 50-odd Drascombes at the Weymouth rally setting off for Lulworth

readers will remember Webb Chiles and his near-complete global circumnavigation in his Lugger, Chidlock Tichborne (he actually sailed two Luggers on the

trip). Another intrepid Lugger owner sailed from England to Australia, and further Atlantic crossings have been made.

Reassuring though it is to know that you have such a capable vessel, most Drascombe owners enjoy their boats for what they were conceived to be: simple, civilised and sociable day-sailers-cumweekenders that allow you to nudge into the shallows and sleep under the stars without all the hassles and discomforts that Kate Watkinson so disliked. Stewart Brown conveys the delights of this sort of boating on his 'Drascombe Quirky

Page', which he has run since handing over Churchouse Boats to new owners in 2013.

Reasons to be cheerful

The Weymouth rally was quite an eye-opener for me. I have been aware of Drascombes for ever: after all, I grew up with them on their home patch. But, apart from testing the Drifter 22 a few years ago, I must admit to never having taken much notice of them. While these greeny-hulled dayboats with their short rigs, tan sails and sedate performance were part of the scenery wherever

I went in the South West, they didn't really capture the attention of someone who was more into crossing oceans and racing dinghies. They weren't even seriously considered when the family decided to buy something to sail on the Dart: a Devon Yawl was our choice. Now, however, I'm beginning to see their appeal. For a start, they have more performance potential than I had appreciated. The long, light hulls don't need a lot of persuasion to slip along surprisingly well. If you were to give a Longboat a little tweaking in the rig and centreplate departments, for ex-

ample, I'm sure it would surprise a few people. At the same time, to do too much of that would be to miss the point. The boats and the association between them offer you the opportunity to go to places you probably wouldn't otherwise go and to sail with people you might not otherwise meet. Those unfamiliar with the rally areas can learn from others who have been there before which tree to tie up to, where to anchor or dry out and where you can step ashore without sinking in the mud.

Offshore cruising (or just cruising in an offshore yacht) might be seen as more aspi-

rational but it involves a lot more time, cost, hassle and discomfort. Thank goodness Kate Watkinson said exactly what she thought of it and that John not only listened but also did something about it.

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