

Grand DESIGNS

Stewart Brown of Churchouse Boats, builders of the well-known Drascombe range of day sailers, introduces the new Drascombe Drifter 22

My story so far... From a non-sailing background, I bought a secondhand Drascombe Lugger and taught myself to sail. I joined the Drascombe Association, attended rallies, organised rallies and joined the Committee. I then quit a senior position in the construction industry to buy and grow Churchouse Boats, with which, after a spell with McNulty Boats, I acquired the licence to be sole producer of the Drascombe range of boats.

My personal Drascombing tends to be long weekends afloat in whichever places one of the members organises a Rally. Therefore, what I want from my own boat is:

- * Safe trailing and trauma-free launch and recovery, without the need for any outside assistance.
- * A simple rig which is quick to raise and lower, so minimal time is wasted on the slip at either end of the pleasure.
- * Easy handling and safe sailing, single-handed if need be, within RCD Category C.
- * Good accommodation when at anchor or moored up.
- * Most importantly, the Drascombe character and ethos.

For some years, I have sailed the Drascombe Coaster. She is a 21'9" (6.6m) centreboarder, drawing only 12" (0.3m) with the plate up and with a sailing weight of some 1,100 lbs (500kg). The small cabin provides two berths, a cooker and a PortaPotti – full life-support systems! She has served me outstandingly well but like many others in the Drascombe Association, I now feel the need for more, easier to use space when the sailing is over.

From 1977 to 1986, the Drascombe fleet included the Drifter. She was 21' 6" (6.55m) long, weighing about 1,984 lbs (900kg), deeper and beamier than the Coaster, offering better accommodation and more powerful sailing. She had a long centre keel with bilge plates – features which were both her biggest benefit and biggest drawback! The lack of centreplate gave a good, clear cabin but the fixed draft of 2' (0.6m) required about 3'6" (1.07m) of water for launch and recovery making her a trailable boat rather than a trailer sailer. Despite these drawbacks, DA members have snapped up any of the 110 built which have come on the market, living with the downsides rather than leaving the Association. The other downsides include either an inboard diesel which took up more cabin space than the absence of centreplate released or an outboard in a well alongside the rudder. Close quarters manoeuvring under power is quirky!

Over a long period, I thought about the improvements I would like to make to the Drifter but while I was wearing the McNulty Boats T shirt, the opportunity arose to turn them into reality. John Watkinson, who designed the Drascombe range, had died in 1997 so, in consultation with his widow, Kate, we commissioned Paul Fisher of Selway-Fisher Design to up-date John's original design and incorporate the features that I required. I found Paul an extremely pleasant person to work with and our collaboration has produced a design with which I am extremely happy. I hope that John would have approved.

The features of our new Drascombe Drifter 22 are:

- * Twin drop keels of galvanised mild steel, each served by its own stainless steel drum winch. They are located within the side-benches of the cockpit and continue, at low level, into the cabin across the face of the galley area and heads compartment. By adopting this layout, we can have good handling under sail without foregoing the clear cabin sole and the ability to float in 15" (0.38m) of water. Incidentally, many will have experienced the annoyance of a centreplate that clonks around in its casing either underway or at rest, so I have designed a solution that should avoid this for the twin bilge-plates – potentially twice as annoying! My first night afloat will reveal the success or failure of this plan.
- * A transom-hung rudder with controllable galvanised mild steel drop plate, so she can be sailed in shallow water and also launched and recovered without unshipping the rudder.
- * The resulting hull shape will allow us to use an evolution of our swinging-cradle trailer design. I am confident that I shall be able to launch and recover my boat single-handed.
- * A self-draining cockpit – a first for a Drascombe.
- * I have retained the loose footed gunter yawl rig for ease of use and speed of rigging – 25 minutes from arrival at the slip to being afloat and underway. The yawl is a wonderfully versatile sail plan allowing a large sail area to be managed single handed and permits easy reduction right down to jib and mizzen in really adverse conditions.
- * The final major design feature is a unique outboard motor installation; so novel that a patent has been applied for. For maximum steering efficiency, the ideal position for the prop is just ahead of the rudder. With very little way on, the prop wash over the rudder can be used to kick the stern round. The drawback of the outboard is that it cannot be fitted with a folding or feathering prop; when sailing it is, quite literally, a drag! My solution is to fit the outboard in a well just forward of the rudder but with the mounting pad at an angle to the boat's centreline. When motoring, it is in the ideal location. When sailing, it can be turned and tilted up with the prop clear of the water just like on the other Drascombes.

The prototype wood-epoxy hull is currently being fitted out in our yard; the objective is to create a GRP production boat. To this end, my wood epoxy boat is being built as a sailing plug. This is not the normal way to create a GRP boat but I'm not a normal boatbuilder; in the construction industry, every project is a one-off. To build a wooden boat but also use it as a mould creates its own disciplines: all surfaces must be sloped to allow release from a mould; all radii must be large as per GRP requirements, not softened as in a traditional wooden boat. All internal corners must be radiussed. The easy option of MDF and filler is not open to us. The grey matter is being taxed!

My plan is to test the prototype myself this summer, listen to feedback at the Beale show in June and the Southampton show in September and have the first production GRP Drascombe Drifter 22 at the London Boat Show 2006.