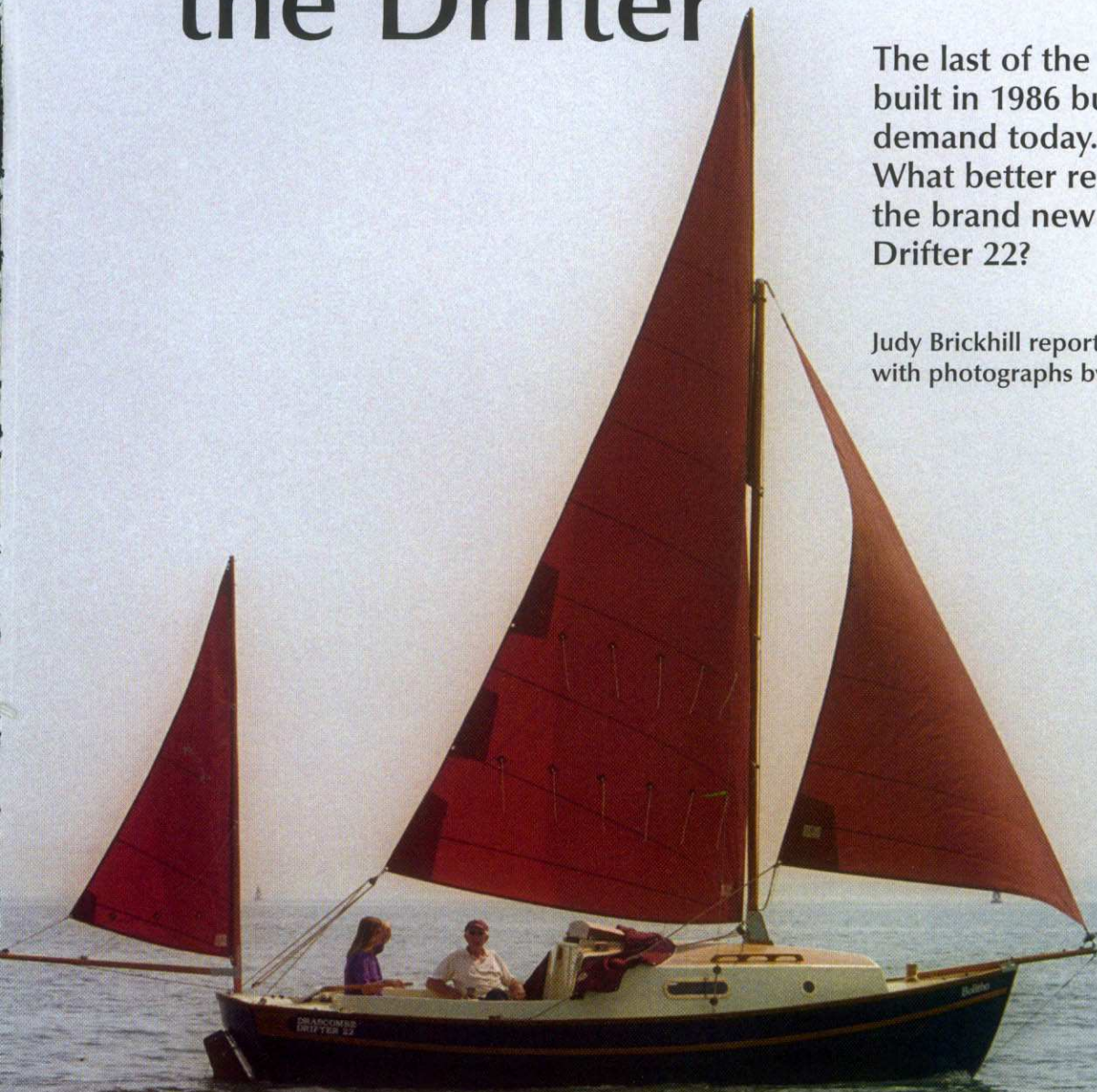


Redefining the Drifter

The last of the old Drifters was built in 1986 but they are still in demand today.

What better reason to create the brand new Drascombe Drifter 22?

Judy Brickhill reports,
with photographs by Peter Chesworth



Stewart Brown of Churchouse Boats is a man on a mission. He is not only shaping, refining and marketing his ideal boat but he is also making long awaited improvements and additions to a popular, well established design range: the ubiquitous Drascombe dayboats.

Though he came from a non-sailing background, 30 years ago Stewart bought himself a secondhand Drascombe Lugger and immersed himself first in the pleasure and then in the business of Drascombe sailing. Over the years, he attended rallies as a member of the Drascombe Association, organised rallies as a member of the Committee and eventually gave up his job in the construction industry to join the boatbuilding industry.

After a stint at McNulty Boats selling Drascombes and running Churchouse Boats in Andover and took over the licence to be sole producer of the Drascombe range. Now he could put into practice all the modifications and improvements that had occurred to him during his years of Drascombe sailing.

From the 18'9" (5.7m) open Lugger, Stewart had upsized to the Coaster, a 21'9" (6.6m) centreboarder with a small cabin, in which he spent long weekends afloat wherever a rally was held but although she had served him extremely well, his priorities were changing – he felt the need for more space to relax in when the sailing was over for the day. So he looked again at the plans of the 21'6" (6.55m) Drifter.



The original Drascombe Drifter was part of the Drascombe range designed by John Watkinson, a development of the Coaster which, amongst other refinements, incorporated a long centre keel with bilge plates to avoid the invasion of cabin space by a centreboard housing. A total of 110 Drifters had been built between 1977 to 1986 and although production stopped, any Drifters that come onto the secondhand market are still snapped up eagerly by members of the Drascombe fraternity despite a few drawbacks which have been identified over the years.

There was obviously a place in the Drascombe range for a new version of the Drifter and this is exactly what Stewart has been developing. A couple of years ago, in consultation with John Watkinson's widow, Kate, he commissioned a design from Paul Fisher of Selway-Fisher Design – see *Grand Designs*, W51 – which would incorporate all the amendments he had pinpointed over years of personal experience of sailing Drascombes and of talking to other Drascombe owners. The result is the Drascombe Drifter 22, with which Stewart is, as they say, well pleased.

The new leader of the Drascombe pack has a waterline length of 19'3" (5.9m), only a little longer than the Coaster but with a 7'3" (2.2m) beam, 9" (225mm) wider, she is significantly more spacious. Even so, Paul's design is very much in keeping with the style and character for which Drascombes are so well known. The prototype hull, from which Stewart intends to create the GRP production boats, is constructed of epoxy-sheathed plywood, with wide clinker planks and the characteristic Drascombe

The new Drifter can sail in shoal waters or onto a beach... obviating the need to unship the rudder on launch and recovery.

sheer. Instead of the fixed keel of the earlier Drifter, she has twin drop keels – bilge plates – of galvanised mild steel which increase her draft from 1'3" to a purposeful 3'5" (0.38/1.07m). She weighs in at 1,985 lbs (900kg), carrying her ballast in the form of two batteries stored under the cabin sole by the mast, as well as some movable lead weights for trimming.

One of the most noticeable design changes, the self-draining cockpit, is a first for any Drascombe. This has a skin fitting in the hull with a non-return valve and to keep feet safe from any water which does get into the cockpit, there is a channel around the sides of the sole to direct the flow. The sole has an inset panel, hinged at the forward edge, which can be raised to form a washboard below the cabin doors.

The cockpit itself is a good 6' (1.8m) long, with deep lockers under the seats and a substantial coaming curving round aft to the outboard well. This cunning design positions the engine immediately ahead of the rudder for maximum steering efficiency, as the wash from the prop over it helps to turn the boat. But this is not its only feature. The motor mounting pad is set at an angle to the boat's centreline so that when sailing, the engine can be turned and tilted up into the well, avoiding the drag of the prop in the water without encroaching on the cockpit space. Stewart feels this design is so innovative, it's bound to be copied!

Even further aft, there is another item from Stewart's list of improvements: a transom-hung rudder with a galvanised mild steel drop blade. This means that the new Drifter can make full use of her retractable keels, having the ability to sail in shoal



Above: Using Stewart Brown's special 'Drifter Lifter' it's possible to have her rigged and ready to go in a matter of minutes.

waters or onto a beach, as well as obviating the need to unship the rudder on launch and recovery. The tiller has a stainless steel section through the transom with a bronze elbow connecting to the wooden handle. Another interesting feature of the cockpit area is the control pillar which is set in the centre of the footwell and combines the function of a compass binnacle with the winch and cleats for the jib sheets.

Moving forward over the sidedecks – designed to accommodate a size 12 Wellington boot, according to Stewart! – is not too tricky

an operation with the two mast shrouds to hold onto but the foredeck does feel a little exposed, so Stewart intends to fasten a wooden handrail to the coachroof which could also be used as a clip-on point for a harness. However, there is little need to go up there while underway; the jib has roller furling gear and all the halyards lead back to the cockpit. To starboard of the bowsprit is a self-draining locker for the anchor and chain, providing a neat solution to the difficulty of accessible storage of ground tackle on a small boat.

Down below, there is an uncluttered, spacious cabin, well lit by large portholes in the sides and front of the coachroof and easily accessed from the cockpit through the double doors. The layout is simple, with the drop keels, which are housed in the side benches of the cockpit, continuing in their bunk-level cases along each side of the cabin sole. The ballast batteries under the forward part of the sole provide plenty of power for creature comforts, so the galley can include a fridge compartment, opposite the cooker to port. Immediately forward of the fridge is the Portaloo in its own compartment and beyond that are two long bunks stretching under the foredeck to the forward bulkhead in the bows. There is plenty of room to stretch your legs and I imagine it would make a very comfortable space to congregate at one of the many Drascombe rallies – I would be a bit shy about using the toilet in company though!

The new Drifter's 234 square feet (21.7m²) of sail is rigged in the customary Drascombe style as a gunter yawl. The mizzen mast is wedged into its step just inside the transom and mizzen sheets to a small bumkin hinged onto the foot of the mast for ease of stowing. The mainmast is stepped on the coachroof in a tabernacle and supported by two side stays. The loose-footed mainsail sheets back to blocks on the two quarters and thence to the cockpit.

The rigging is fairly simple to set up when there are two pairs of hands but Stewart has come up with an ingenious technique for doing it singlehanded. When Ches and I met him at Ashlett Sailing Club on Southampton Water to review the new addition to the Drascombe family, he gave us a demonstration. With the mast lying on the top of the coachroof, the shrouds set up and the halyards and furled jib in position along it, he attached the stem end of the jib to a pole affectionately called the 'Drifter Lifter'. This has a steel pin at its other end which fits into a hole at the base of the mast and a D-ring some way down to which the end of the trailer winch webbing was then shackled. As the webbing was winched in over a temporary roller fitted next to the bowsprit, the mast pivoted up in its tabernacle, bringing the Lifter down to a horizontal position on the foredeck. From here the jib was transferred to its stem fastening, the Lifter unhooked and the boat was ready to go. In fact, it probably took less time to rig her than it has taken me to describe how to do it.

With the boat rigged and ready, launching was a straightforward affair and in no time we were afloat and heading down the winding channel that led out of moorings and into the open water beyond. There wasn't a great deal of wind, just enough to fill the sails and get us moving before one of those enormous car carriers powered past, giving us a good sized wake to jump over. The wind picked up a little as we sailed further out and I was agreeably surprised to find that the extra wetted surface of the second drop plate didn't seem to slow her down at all. She tacked and gybed like a good



DRIFTER 22 SPECIFICATION

LOD: 22' (6.7m)

LWL: 19'3" (5.88m)

Beam: 7'3" (2.25m)

Sail area: 234ft² (21.74m²)

Draft – bilge-plates up: 1'3" (0.38m)

 bilge-plates down: 3'5" (1.05m)

Trailing weight: 2,865 lbs (1,300 kg)

'un, though it seemed a good idea to keep the jib backed until she was through the wind to be sure of the tack. With the tide turning, we just had time to sample some of the contents of the fridge before we had to start making our way back, goose-winging the sails very satisfactorily with booming-out poles which will be able to double as oars. We slalomed in among the moorings like a dinghy until we ran out of water and had to quickly raise the boards and start the engine as the tide sank around us. That transom hung rudder with the lifting blade definitely proved its worth!

Plenty of comfortable space below... all contained within the distinctive Drascombe style. John Watkinson would be well pleased.

The prototype of the new Drifter which I sailed was still very much a Work In Progress. Stewart is enthusiastically considering minor refinements as opportunities arise but the basics of his ideal boat are here, with all the items on his and other Drascombe owners' wish lists. She is extremely quick and simple to rig, launch and recover singlehanded, she manoeuvres well, with a straightforward, easily handled rig for safe sailing within the RCD Category C. There is plenty of comfortable space below and it is all contained within the distinctive Drascombe character and style. I'm sure John Watkinson would be well pleased.



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