

The famed Drascombe Lugger

Beautifully restored daysailer takes to salt water

by Geoffrey Toye



THE DRIVE FROM MY HOME IN WALES across old Somerset and Dorset had taken me through an England as one imagines it: my trusty roadster with running boards and British Racing Green coachwork entirely in keeping with a picture-postcard countryside of thatched cottages and narrow lanes. The next morning would herald an appointment with a boat, her owner, the man who had restored her, and a very restless sea.

We were to meet for the first time at Hythe, a center for yachting on an inlet off the Solent, which serves the port of Southampton. Arriving early, I took a look around. In the distance was the aging skyline of a history of maritime industry across a roadstead still busy with shipping and glistening harshly when the low sun emerged between fast-scudding clouds. The sky looked as if it might clear but the autumn wind was keen, so I waited in my car near the public boat launch where the keel of the restored Drascombe Lugger, *Guillemot*, was to take her first-ever taste of salt water.

For a small boat, conditions were somewhat daunting. The wind was strong, verging on too strong for sailing, in my opinion, a view evidently shared by several skippers who were working aboard their boats or wrapping fingers around steaming mugs at moorings they had no intention of leaving that day. Two brave souls attempted a sail but found themselves on their beam ends. One soon returned chastened. A magnificent old ketch, all 100 or more feet of her, thundered by under full plain sail, the roar of her passing carrying across the gray and forbidding Southampton water, but even her lee rail was awash.

Current builders

When *Guillemot* arrived, newly painted and jaunty, the wind had scrubbed the clouds from an ice-blue sky. Stewart Brown appeared first. Stewart is director of Churchouse Boats Ltd., the current Drascombe builders. He introduced Joan Swindells as *Guillemot*'s owner. I asked how they felt about the sailing conditions. Stewart lifted his

nose to the near gale, pronounced it a nice breeze and weren't we lucky the sun was shining? He then began to dress the Lugger in her working rig. I was to see that his confidence was entirely justified.

The Drascombe Lugger might be a contender for best known among the traditional open daysailers designed in modern times in the United Kingdom from lines that arrived from the north with the Vikings; she has a reputation for ease of handling and sea-kindliness beyond her modest size. Her provenance also lies in another part of England rich in maritime history and a tradition of seaworthy craft: the fiercely competitive counties of Devon and Cornwall pointing westward to the turbulent Atlantic approaches off Land's End.

The Drascombe Lugger we know today is the evolved product of a team of individuals drawing upon solid practical experience, much of it military. She was designed by John Watkinson, a veteran of naval service in World War II, who completed a distinguished mili-

“The Drascombe Lugger might be a contender for best known among the traditional open daysailers...”

tary career and left the Royal Navy in 1958.

He had married Kate, a Signals Wren, in 1954.

The two set up a boat-building yard, Kelly and Hall, in Devon, but sold the yard in 1964 to sail a 13-ton ketch to the Mediterranean. This was evidently not their most enjoyable adventure; they returned to England with firm thoughts of daysailers.

Seventh-century home

They rented an ancient Devon Long House, so called from days when people and livestock lived in the same building, each warmed by the same fire in the common wall. The place was called Drascombe Barton, a place of habitation with records to the seventh century.

It was here that John designed his famous daysailer. She would be beachable, seaworthy, safe, and pleasant to be aboard with the noise and smell of the auxiliary engine confined to a well. She would be inexpensive to own in a climate of increasing berthing and yard fees. The prototype was built and named *Katherine Mary*, after Kate. Thus began what would expand to form a theme of successful designs, crossing continents and oceans, but ever faithful to the original Drascombe concept.

The demand for Drascombe Luggers, ultimately around 2,000, would not be met by individually built timber boats. Construction in fiberglass became a natural stage of the Drascombe evolution, taken up by Honnor Marine, a respected name in British fiberglass boatbuilding.

Drascombes appeared in the United States after Harold Wilson's government levied a 25-percent tax on boats sold in the United Kingdom. This tax caused the British boatbuilding industry to look to export as an attractive avenue for sales, if not survival. Drascombe Boats Inc. was formed in Camden, Maine, later merging with the Lincoln Canoe Company to form Maine Marine Corporation. They were to build the Drascombe Lugger, Longboat, and the smaller Scaffie.

A large family

Through the 1970s to the present, there have been other interesting Drascombe designs ranging from 16- to mid-20-feet in length. The whole

Drascombe family, of which some 5,000 boats have been built, reflects a steady theme of sensible, practical, seakindly craft of traditional lines and pleasing sheer. That theme has proved to be a consistently marketable concept, which surely reflects on the merits of paying attention to what a relatively modest, but by no means insignificant, number of discerning sailing folk actually want.

Today there is a healthy market in used Drascombes with the Lugger ever the most popular. Any used boat should be approached with caution, of course. I have examined several older fiberglass boats and noticed stress damage in the members supporting the centerboard case. Hull-centerboard case joints may give seal problems (newer models now have an integral molded centerboard case). Trailer damage is another thing to watch out for. Daysailers gather rainwater if they're not covered well and if their drain plugs are not removed or the drains are blocked. Water is heavy; check trailer chocks or other localized stress points. It freezes in winter and expands; check the hull for fairness or delamination where ice expansion has pushed the hull away from rigid members.

Water, particularly fresh water, in the bilges for long periods can cause penetration to the laminate. Older boats should be thoroughly cleaned, dried, and painted with good quality bilge paint to protect them from internal moisture ingress.

There is a vulnerability with chine forms in fiberglass in that the chine can harbor a problem derived from air trapped in the laminate during original layup. I have seen this on many craft but never yet on a Drascombe. Nonetheless, it makes sense to examine the chines for crazing or cavities.

If there are any areas of visible

Owner Joan Swindells and Stewart Brown of Churchouse Boats, take *Guillemot*, a wooden Drascombe Lugger, for a spin in blustery conditions, facing page. Prior to her restoration, *Guillemot*, at right, shows the normal signs of neglect.

wear, check for excessive stress in surrounding areas that abut non-flexing members. Check for stress at deck fittings, such as cleats. One specific Lugger problem seems to be water damage to the foot of the mizzenmast; the older models were not self-draining.

When Honnor Marine ceased producing these boats, Drascombes were subsequently built by McNulty in northeast England before Stewart Brown, who had joined forces with Churchouse, a company in Wales restoring and modifying Drascombes under warranty, took over from each company the building of new Drascombes and refitting of used boats. His company, called Churchouse Boats, is located at Whitchurch in Hampshire, England.

Fine craftsmanship

The lovely condition of *Guillemot* is a credit to Stewart and Churchouse Boats for her restoration and to her American builders for her original fine craftsmanship. Her gleaming bronze builder's plate shows that she was built in 1981-82, by East/West Boats Inc., Kittery Point, Maine. Now also Echo Rowing, the company still flourishes, building specialized rowing craft.

David and Joan Swindells, a British couple who had moved to America in the 1970s when David worked for



How seaworthy?

An American sailed her almost around the world

On April 28, 1789, the English Captain William Bligh was cast adrift by the mutineers of the armed transport *Bounty* and famously demonstrated that ocean crossings — in his case some 3,600 miles — are feasible in open craft, but hardly to be recommended. The Drascombe Association takes a similar view of the remarkable exploits of American sailor Webb Chiles, who sailed three-quarters of the way around the world in his, a stirring example of what one *can* do with Lugger, but not perhaps what one *should* do with Lugger. Bligh, after all, did not leave the *Bounty* by choice.

Yet an open boat can have advantages. The current Luggers are unlikely to sink completely unless there is major structural damage. The military seem to have great faith in them as tools of survival. Some years ago, when Oman was in a state of unrest, Britain had a small complement of military advisors stationed there. These personnel had a fleet of Drascombe Longboats, intended for recreation, but two were kept rigged and provisioned for a major sea voyage at short notice. Had the occasion demanded, the advisors were prepared to trust those craft to sail to India and safety, some 800 miles across the Arabian Sea.

The British S.B.S., the Special Boat Squadron (whose unofficial motto is that they can do anything the S.A.S. [Special Air Service] can do, but wearing flippers... something along the lines of the U.S. Navy Seals), experimented with two Longboats as a means of covert penetration. All buoyancy was removed so the boats could be hidden by being sunk. A bonus was that if caught the S.B.S. could claim to be civilians, as surely no crack special operations unit of a modern cutting-edge navy would be mad enough to use open sailing boats.

Ultimate conclusion

Ian Brook took one of the first Luggers to Greece and sailed around Rhodes (*A Sea Blue Boat*). David Pyle took the Drascombe concept to an ultimate conclusion and trav-

eled from Great Britain to Australia, sailing where practicable, freighting where not (*Australia the Hard Way*). Ken Duxbury's books, illustrated with his own paintings and drawings, chronicle his adventures in his Lugger *Lugworm* (*Lugworm on the Loose*, *Lugworm Homeward Bound*, and *Lugworm Island Hopping*). Australian Geoff Stewart wrote about his crossing of the Atlantic many years ago in a Drascombe Longboat (*Sail South Till the Butter Melts: Atlantic Adventures in an Open Boat*).

Peter Baxter, an active member of the Dinghy Cruising Association, trailed his wooden Lugger to Stockholm, Sweden, then spent six weeks cruising the Baltic coast to Finland and back to Stockholm. Douglas Hopwood trailed to St. Petersburg and cruised Russian and Finnish waters; and Hans Vandersmissen sailed his new Longboat from Devon, England, home to Holland. A marine journalist who has sailed his boat extensively for a quarter of a century, Vandersmissen has written what is regarded as a definitive manual of Drascombe sailing (*The Seagoing Drascombe*, later rewritten as *The Shallow Sea Drascombe*).

A seaworthy open boat should be capable, in competent hands, of meeting the conditions for which she was designed. Crew competence and stamina play a definitive role. For all but the most sheltered waters, this implies that under sail, oar, or engine she must perform steadily and dependably with sufficient overhang and flare to keep the sea, but not with so much freeboard as would constitute a liability in top-hamper. She must be equipped to deal with shipped water, even if crewmembers are cold, tired, and occupied with sailing. Her rig must be able to be reduced to a functional and balanced heavy-weather rig. The Lugger's yawl rig leaves crew with a clear space amidships to work and, if necessary, pump ship.

Back the headsail

The Lugger has good tracking and sure tacking to spare the tired crew,

Continued on Page 8

Corning Glass in New York, found themselves living in an area of beautiful lakes. This was an opportunity to return to an interest in sailing that young children and work moves had inhibited. Although a fiberglass version was also available in America, David was keen on wooden Drascombes and found that Ted Perry, of East/West Boats, was building them under license at the time. Ted says they built eight Luggers and remembers *Guillemot* and her British owners with whom he subsequently became friends.

Forgiving boat

The Swindells' new craft was to be sailed on Lake Cayuga, one of the Finger Lakes. The comings and goings of the English couple as they learned to master their new craft may have occasioned a few smiles. The boat was forgiving, an ideal craft to learn on and no slouch in a good breeze. In the hot summers she was a delightful platform for picturebook picnics or swimming in the warm water. Not so idyllic, reminisces Joan, was when the wind got up one time and *Guillemot* dragged her anchor with Joan aboard waving farewell to the swimmers.

When David retired from Corning, the couple returned to England and moved *Guillemot* with them to her new home and what was to be a time

Resources

East/West Custom Boats, Inc.

11 Sanborn Lane
Eliot, ME 03903
ewboats@comcast.net
866-324-6769

Churchouse Boats Ltd.

Apsley Sawmill
Andover Road, Whitchurch
Hampshire RG28 7SD
Great Britain
011-44-1256-896292
stewart@drascombe.org.uk
<<http://www.drascombe.org.uk>>

Drascombe Owners of North America

<<http://www.dogona.com>>

Drascombe Association

<<http://www.drascombe-association.org.uk>>



Following an extensive refit, Stewart Brown prepares *Guillemot* for her second major launching and first-ever saltwater sail, at left and below. The joy on the face of Joan Swindells when reunited with her boat, also at left.

trailer; Stewart was able to hop on and off as he quickly got her rigged. The Gunter rig implies short masts that travel conveniently and step easily.

of desolate sadness for Joan. Shortly after their return, in a dark and cruel event while traveling abroad, David Swindells was to lose his life. For the next eight years *Guillemot* sat on blocks in the garden of the Swindells' Oxfordshire home, until Joan resolutely determined that the boat should be restored to the craft they had once known. Stewart Brown agreed to undertake the refit.

One reason it was possible to do this was the high standard to which *Guillemot* had been built and the uncompromising quality of the materials used. Her scantling specification included mahogany marine plywood for planking, deck, and bulkheads, teak floorboards, iroko keel and bilge rubbers, galvanized steel centerboard and rudder, and Sitka spruce spars. That list reveals care in selection dictated by function.

Good workmanship

When I saw her, her perfect plate and rudder still evidenced good original workmanship, and her planking was sound. This did not surprise me. The ply used throughout was Bruynzeel. This superb material was, I believe, the only ply warranted by Lloyd's at the time. Ted Perry recounted how he had kept an untreated piece of Bruynzeel tethered in the tide for a year. The sample discolored but showed not the smallest sign of rot or delamination. This account revealed to me how it was that a boat from a builder of his standards would endure.

Those standards were still there to see when I met *Guillemot*. There is no doubt that the restoration work was of a quality fit to honor her original build, although Stewart, in deference to Ted's

work, insisted that the restoration was only partial, none of the work required being due to deterioration of original structure but simply the natural entropy attributable to time and neglect. My guess would be that, notwithstanding their differing accents and the ocean that separates them, those two are of the same ilk.

Joan had given me some photographs of *Guillemot* before the refit. She looks somewhat lost, with her New York license numbers chipped and

“The boat was forgiving, an ideal craft to learn on and no slouch in a good breeze.”

fading in an English country garden. But, under the worst that tree and bird could deposit, she looks salvageable.

The renewed *Guillemot* is a delight to the eye. As a wooden Drascombe, she is likely to be non-standard, but she would be interesting to any Drascombe devotee and many other open sailboat enthusiasts. Her multi-chine hull sat securely on her road

Through-deck trunk

The solid unit of rudder blade and stock drops into a through-deck trunk, like a daggerboard, the trunk slot reinforced at its forward end at deck level by a strong bronze keyhole plate where the stock pivots and the head rests. A 4.5-hp Evinrude outboard is shipped on a stout timber pad protruding from a dished deck, the leg passing through a keyhole well that appears to be adequately ventilated, permitting the engine to be tilted clear of the water when sailing and giving good protection

to the outboard, safe onboard access for running maintenance and controls, and a high level of security

against loss. Indeed, the motor had traveled by road in this position.

Practical features also include ring-type rowlocks refinished to a fine polish. There is also a sculling rowlock on the transom that could facilitate the use of an oar as a jury rudder for maneuvering in tight places at speeds below steerageway or for pulling the stern out of irons if caught in stays



while tacking. At the foot of the mainmast she has a fife rail with bronze belaying pins to serve the halyards, not just a salty decoration but a fast way of letting the halyards run in a squall.

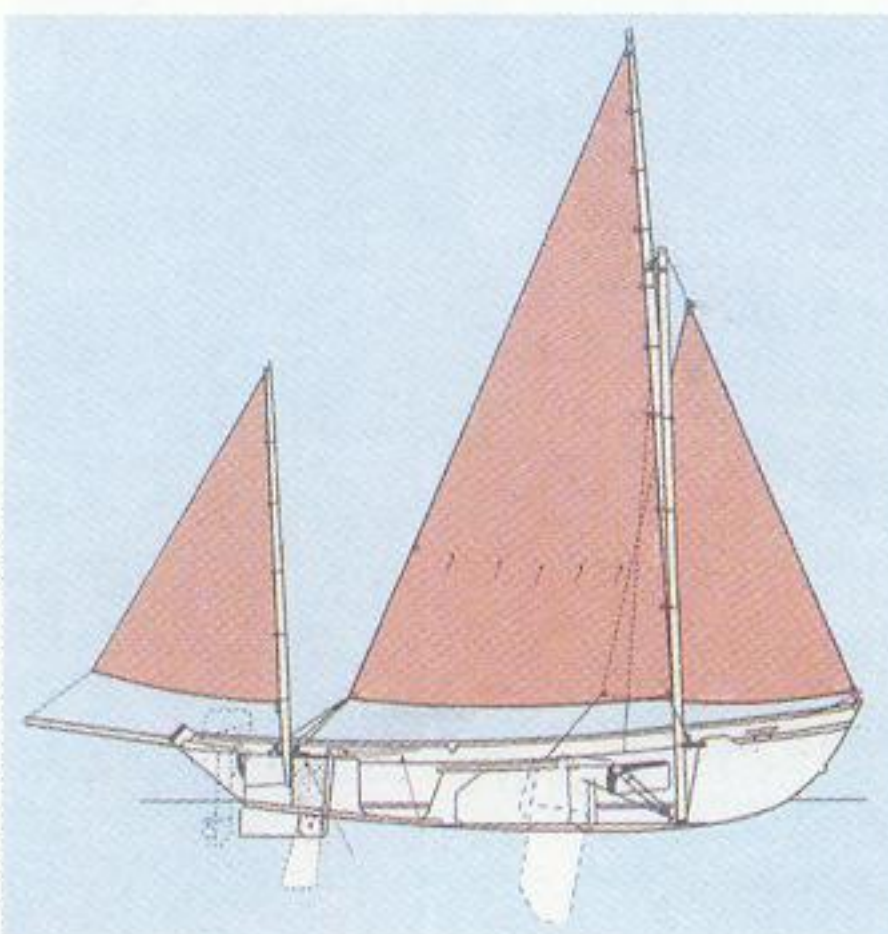
Her Gunter yard is fitted with substantial spliced timber jaws at the throat, with parrel line and trucks to facilitate swift lowering of the mainsail. The main, as is the case for all Drascombe Luggers, is loose-footed for convenience and safety. All spars are nicely refinished and octagonal in section. Her buoyancy has been upgraded and rigging has been modernized in line with current Drascombe philosophy. Her original Anson sails are still in good order. Elegantly-finished timber quarter knees, breasthooks, and semi-bulkheads complete a craft that is light for her type but strong.

A dozen reasons

The best evidence of how she looks could be observed in the sheer joy on Joan's face when she saw *Guillemot* for the first time since the refit.

I have long been an admirer of the fiberglass Lugger; these are fine boats. Faced with a decision, I would choose

COURTESY OF CHURCHOUSE



Drascombe Lugger

LOA: 18 feet 9 inches
LWL: 15 feet 0 inches
Beam: 6 feet 3 inches
Draft: 0 feet 10 inches/4 feet 0 inches (centerboard up/down)
Sailing weight: 748 pounds
Sail area: 132 square feet

fiberglass for a dozen sensible reasons, yet in *Guillemot* I could easily see David's preference for wood. It had taken this handcrafted timber boat to bring out the Cinderella from the prejudice of my perception and draw my eye to the swiftness of those lines. A craft I had considered beamy now seemed slim,

canoelike. For the first time I could see how she would be capable of speed.

Guillemot, a craft designed and finely crafted on two continents, was soon to have a chance to show us what she could do. A major advantage of her rig is that in high winds she is balanced to sail under foresail and mizzen, her mainsail snugged down, leaving the minimal windage of the short Gunter mast. I had expected to see Stewart doing just that, but he was determined to show off what *Guillemot* could do at the gallop. It was electric. This was a re-launch, a one-shot deal under tricky conditions for us all.

The trailer was backed down the ramp, tilted slightly, and *Guillemot* was afloat. Stewart took the trailer back up the ramp while Joan and I held *Guillemot* by her straining painter. There were seas breaking against her hull, but she rose to them. She bumped on the unforgiving concrete and stone of the slip, but the spring in her fine timbers absorbed it as she landed on her metal runners there for the purpose.

Stewart was back, he and Joan jumped quickly aboard, and the engine

How seaworthy?

Continued from Page 6

although backing of the headsail is recommended under foresail and mizzen only. Under full sail the Lugger tacks easily; that center-sheeted mizzen is an advantage as the sheets of main and mizzen need not normally be handled.

Stability is a vexing design question. Serious ballast is out of the question on an open boat that might put her gunnel under. That leaves form stability. The boat must not be too tender or she will exhaust crewmembers who have to hike out, a practice to be avoided in a small cruising craft offshore since it cannot be sustained by those of ordinary stamina. Besides, a hole in the wind may tip a less-than-athletic sailor in backward. Form stability is the answer, but there can be too much of a good thing. An extremely form-stable craft, say, with a dead flat bottom, will stick to the surface of the water like glue.


Unfortunately, that water surface offshore may often be far from

horizontal, and the water itself can thus suddenly capsize the too-rigidly form-stable craft. This is a design factor in sea kayaks where the paddler survives a beam sea by tilting his tender craft into the face of the wave, keeping her on an even keel paradoxically by virtue of that tenderness. A conventional ballasted yacht does something similar in a way that a multihull may not.

The Lugger achieves a nice compromise with secure, usable inboard seating and nothing more than sitting to windward in a stiff breeze required of the crew. The low aspect, modest sail plan, and yawl rig assist in this. If the mainsheet is let run in a squall, the foresail and mizzen will help to protect against any sudden roll to windward by lowering the crew gently, a sort of damping, parachute effect. Although while reduced to foresail and mizzen the Lugger has a snug storm rig when needed, she possesses the facility to run up on the beach at the first sign of deteriorating conditions. Should this be done under power, her outboard is protected from inundation.

Well-found design

Like most open boats, the Lugger can capsize or be swamped. Modern Luggers are built with more than the European Union's standard required levels of buoyancy, and the top of the centerboard case is now above designed flooded level. (On older boats it was necessary to stop up the slot before pumping out.)

On balance, the Drascombe Lugger is a proven and seaworthy open boat within the limitations defined by her type and crew. She cannot reasonably be expected to have the ultimate ability to sustain heavy weather in blue water that a well-designed and decked yacht would possess, yet so long as her integrity is maintained — and the Lugger does seem to be blessed with a well-found design — she is most unlikely actually to sink, and she may often escape heavy weather by running up the beach or into shallow inlets and harbors. How many times have the rest of us sat out heavy weather in deep water wishing we could have done just that? 

was started and put astern. *Guillemot* was clear as I scrambled to the rocky platform from which I would shoot pictures while Stewart and Joan put her through her paces.


In open water

The mizzen was up, steadying the vessel as the outboard powered her through short seas that burst against her bows. The sails opened and the sound of the outboard ceased. A couple of short tacks, and they were in open water. Stewart gave *Guillemot* her head. She responded with spirit, dancing over the waves, even showing her keel at times, but not once did she seem overpressed, nor was she at any time other than under full command

of a man who was about as fine a small boat sailor as I have seen.

A group of hardy walkers stopped to admire her. Who could not? It took the breath away. This was a dazzling display of boathandling in a craft that showed her mettle at every evolution. She tacked handsomely, pirouetting in her own length and off onto the new board incredibly smartly, yet tracking as straight as an arrow. Stewart, determined that there should be good pictures, sailed through short breaking seas as close as he dared to the shoal waters below my rock but never touching, every time spinning that swift and sure craft back onto a course for deep water while the watchers gasped for air.

All too soon the shoot was over. I held up my crossed arms, the signal that I had used up all my film. *Guillemot* was brought up gently at the slip. Joan was glowing with pride. I was cordially invited aboard for a day trip but with some hesitation declined. I have sailed Drascombe Luggers before, though perhaps not quite so spectacularly, and this was a moment for her owner and the man who had so perfectly restored *Guillemot* and so expertly sailed her.

We waved goodbye, not for the last time I am sure, and *Guillemot* sailed away into the sunshine, a bone in her teeth as she headed for the other side of the water, a sheltered berth, and a champagne picnic. 

What was learned

This daysailer handled very well, at least as well as others I have sailed and seen sailed, and it brought happiness to those sailing her. Stewart and Joan had a great day on the water when few ventured to sea in larger craft. This traditional boat shows a fine turn of speed and sails well on all points. The advice is to sail her on an even keel and full and by, not to pin her in as though she were a racing dinghy. The loose-footed sails draw well, including the mizzen, which is single-sheeted amidships. According to documents supplied with Luggers, the mizzen is a trimming and balancing sail, rather than a driving force. One of the few serious caveats attached to sailing these boats is that downwind in heavy conditions the mizzen can render the craft liable to broach and should be furled to the mast, a straightforward task for which that loose-footed simplicity is the answer to a prayer.

One of the problems with the Gunt-rig is getting the mainsail to set nicely without wrinkles across the sail that would disturb the air flow. The Gunter rig can be tricky initially but, once understood, is a simple rig to use. The recommended practice is to hoist the main until the halyard hitch slips into the sheave port in the mast, then get the luff tension by hauling down on the tack. It is also important to get a good luff on the foresail.

There may be a tendency, when running in moderate conditions, for a loose-footed main to belly forward inboard of the shrouds. A whisker pole to hold the clew out can resolve this. Or one may avoid a directly downwind course, steering at enough of an angle to the wind to fill the sails and then jibing occasionally, a practice usually referred to as tacking downwind.

Reef early

As Luggers are best sailed on an even keel, one should reef early, reducing sail from forward when beating, from aft when running. The yawl rig heaves-to well. Under difficult conditions when tacking, the mizzen may be either released or bagpiped, hauled aback to weather in order to force the stern around in much the same way as backing the foresail to blow the bow across. In a stiff breeze when under power, a touch of centerboard may improve control.

Small boats are sailed more frequently than big ones. One should consider the size of vessel with an intelligently minimalist rationale: not how big can one afford or manage but rather how small a boat will meet one's needs.

A critical component in this kind of sailing is the trailer. Launching and retrieving should be easy. With a poorly designed trailer, the heavier

open boat (a craft that cannot be physically carried comfortably by one or two people) could easily be the worst of both worlds. She may have to be kept on a mooring, with all the cost and associated problems, yet she cannot be lived aboard as a small yacht can. The Drascombe Lugger equipped with a good trailer is easily launched. Stewart launched *Guillemot* singlehanded, without any sign of a struggle in quick time under fairly testing conditions. The rig goes down the ramp until the trailer wheels, but not the hubs, are in the water, the cradle tilts, and in she goes. Recovery is no more difficult but involves a winch.

Short masts, easily rigged, and general lack of unnecessary complexity complete a system that inspires sailing in differing locations.

It is desirable that the boat be reasonably fast since most trips will be daysails; one would naturally want to cover enough distance to explore interesting new cruising grounds.

The Drascombe Lugger scores well in all categories, as well as in the one that just about all boat enthusiasts will understand: that she should be a craft to be proud of. Judging by the comments I heard from an admiring public, Joan could have set up an auction and made a quick sale that day in the extremely unlikely event that she were so disposed. 