

Can you make a good thing better? **Peter Poland** meets a man who fell in love with the Drascombe concept – then decided to update it. The result is a practical small cruiser with a surprisingly impressive performance.



Dynamic new

If you've reached 'bus pass' age, you may just remember the advert that used to flash up on the old ITV networks that featured a grinning American grasping an electric razor. "I liked the product so much," he cheesily drawled, "that I bought the company." Well, maybe, but it was certainly a good line and it never failed to grab your attention.

Anyway, I've just found another one and this time I know it's for real, because the man who bought the company gave me a personal demonstration of his latest product. It wasn't a razor though. It was much more fun. It was a nice, new boat.

Many moons ago, Stewart Brown worked in the construction industry. To amuse himself off site, he decided to take up boating and invested in a secondhand Drascombe Lugger, but he soon found he had done far more than just buy a boat – he'd bought into a whole new boating fraternity. Through Drascombe rallies and events, he met a new sphere of friends and entered into a new way of life. Soon he was a stalwart member of

the Drascombe Owners' Association Committee and enjoyed the whole scene so much that he decided to quit the construction industry and get into the marine trade. While running Churchouse Boats (which then specialised in refurbishing and brokering secondhand Drascombes), he also became sales manager for McNulty Boats, who built new Drascombes. Then, in 2002, the razor thing happened. McNulty Boats ceased trading, so – enjoying the product as much as he did – Stewart bought the business.

Niche marketing

Of course, unlike a shaver (unless you belong to the bearded fraternity) you don't actually need a boat, so it was a bold move. Still, given the fanatical loyalty shown by Drascombe owners both to the brand and to the practice of trailer-sailing, it was a safer bet than entering the cut-throat market of AWBs (average white blobs). Provided Stewart manages to keep overheads sensible and commensurate with satisfying a small but consistent niche market, it should be a safer investment than many.

Also, as Stewart explained to me,

Drascombes have a wider market than one might imagine. The range, which encompasses the Dabber (15ft 6in), Lugger (18ft 9in), Longboat (21ft 9in), Coaster (21ft 9in) and Gig (25ft), has broad appeal. The French Navy, for example, stumbled across the Drascombe Gig when looking for a modern equivalent of the old fashioned whaler for teaching its young *matelots* to sail. Instead of automatically buying French (as is so often the case with our Continental cousins), the navy ordered a couple of British-built Gigs to see how things went. Now there are four Gigs at naval bases at Brest and another four at Toulon. What's more, a further two have now been ordered for Cherbourg. Perhaps the Royal Navy should take note.

Then Stewart went on to tell me about a Lugger to which he added lifting points so it could live in davits on the ample stern of a large superyacht. Still, to get back to the typical owner's reason for buying a Drascombe, the prime appeal, I suspect, lies in both the boat's predictable performance and her ability to be trailer-sailed – with a not inconsiderable element of aesthetic

charm thrown in for good measure.

The trailer-sailing aptitude is an essential ingredient. As mooring prices continue to outstrip inflation, a trailer becomes a cheaper option and, of course, it opens up an unlimited number of new cruising grounds. If your car can tow the boat to a slipway, the distance this might be from base becomes irrelevant. As the current Chairman of the Drascombe Association (who owns a Coaster) succinctly summed it up: "The question you should be asking me is not how far have I sailed my boat, but where have I sailed it." In his case, the answer is: "Along virtually every stretch of the UK coastline – thanks to a trusty trailer."

Which brings me back to the circumstances of my meeting with Stewart Brown. He told me that the input he was getting from many Drascombe owners was that they wouldn't say no to a new boat that was slightly larger and had slightly more accommodation. A spacious and self-draining cockpit would also be nice, but it was vital that it should retain the Drascombe ethos and look – and still be trailerable.

The more Stewart pondered on



Drascombe!



Practical outboard well with enough space for the 4-stroke Yamaha to be tilted.



All mod cons? Not quite, but the simple galley is adequate and well planned.



Fancy eating *al fresco*? The Drifter's removable table can be used in the cockpit.



Hardly sumptuous, but the Drifter's berths are extremely well proportioned.

this, the more he realised that such a boat would also suit his own personal needs to a tee. The old Drifter – built in considerable numbers in the 70s and 80s – was a good stop gap, but times had changed. A new Drifter could offer more beam, more space and perhaps more performance, so Stewart approached Paul Fisher of Selway Fisher Design to come up with a proposal and the all new Drifter 22 came into being. It was the wooden prototype of this new creation that I'd come to sail.

Appropriately perhaps, my first sight of the Drifter 22 was of her sitting sedately on her trailer, still hitched up behind a Jag and awaiting some action beside the launching slip

at Ashlett Creek. "You don't have to do anything to help," said Stewart. "I can do it all myself. We'll be afloat in about 20 minutes. Perhaps you'd like to take some photos?"

So that's exactly what I did.

Easy to rig

Being gunter rigged, the Drifter's pretty varnished mast (from Collars of Oxford) was relatively short – and went up in a jiff. The heel locates and hinges in a proper (and expensive looking) tabernacle, on to which Stewart also attached a temporary mast raising strut. Then he led a webbing strap from this strut, over the stem and down to the winch on the trailer and wound away. Once

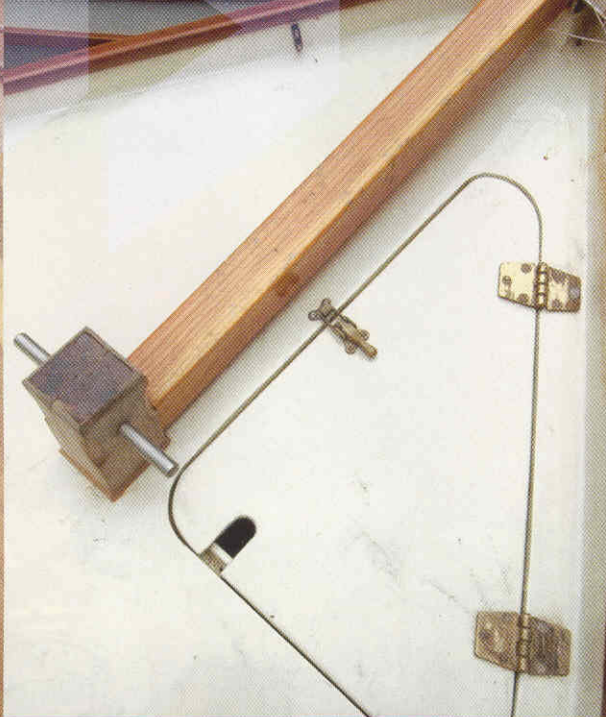
the mast was vertical (and the lifting strut now horizontal), he shifted the forestay from the end of the lifting strut to the end of the bowsprit. Job done. He then inserted the mizzen mast into a slot in the stern deck, attached the sliding gunter and mainsail to the mast, hopped back down and got into the car. Having reversed the trailer down the slip, he stopped as soon as the bases of the wheels (but not the hubs) were in the water. "This trailer has so many rollers, the boat slips off easily without my having to submerge the axles or immerse the brake drums," he said as he lowered the Drifter gracefully into Ashlett Creek. What's more, we did indeed get on board about

20 minutes after we arrived and he'd done all the work by himself. Such is the joy of trailer-sailing, especially when the boat builder knows what he's doing and has made sure that all the essential little tricks of the trade are incorporated into boat and trailer design from the word go.

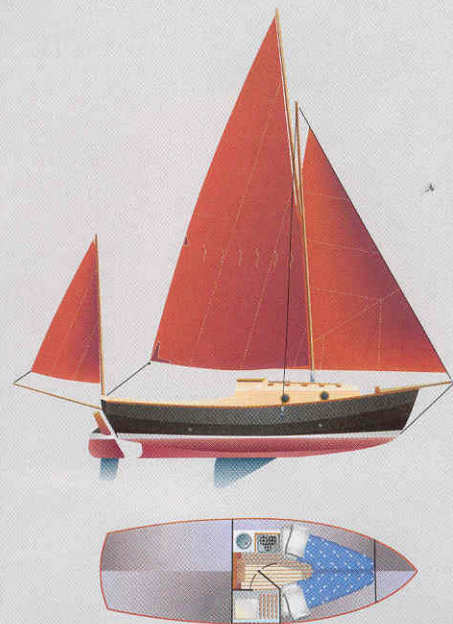
Once the Drifter was rigged and floating in her element, I could take a step back and see what she looked like. After all, part of the Drascombe charm is the way the boats look and on that score the Drifter is surely a success. Her sheer is pronounced and jaunty, accentuated by a wooden rubbing strake. The shape of the coachroof is attractive and its proportion to the hull's freeboard



Conventional portlights and timber trim accentuate the traditional style.



Chunky bowsprit, useful anchor locker and practical samson post.



Contact: Churchouse Boats Ltd.
Telephone: 01256 896292
www.drascombe.org.uk

and length just about right. Also, the high cockpit coamings (which give protection and support to the crew when sitting inside the cockpit), continue the visual line and draw the eye nicely to the stern deck. In short, she looks the part.

Stepping aboard, I was pleasantly surprised by the initial stability, even with the twin drop keels still raised. Bearing in mind that this was a wooden prototype and therefore probably lighter than the eventual production GRP boat will be, I was expecting more movement under foot. Yet, even though she draws a mere 1ft 4in with the plates up, her 7ft 3in beam (wide by Drascombe standards) definitely had something to do with this. Ballast in the prototype took the form of the twin drop keels (which will be 12mm galvanised steel and weigh 65kg on production boats), twin (large) batteries to power Stewart's fridge and some temporary lead trimming ballast. On production boats, a 200kg keel shoe will add to the overall ballast – more of which later.

The Drifter's cockpit definitely fulfils the design brief to provide a pleasant place to sit and socialise as well as an efficient area from which to control the boat. The mainsheet leads aft, while the jib sheets run through the coaming to a central winch mounted on a moulded pedestal in the middle of the cockpit. At first glance, this looks like a potential obstruction to movement around the cockpit, but in practise works well and also doubles as the base for a removable cockpit table. The seats are long and comfortable, while the high backrests provide excellent support. The cockpit will also self-drains.

"Let's get going while we've still got enough water," said Stewart as he

fired the 4-stroke Yamaha outboard into life. It was neatly located in a well under the stern deck and easily pivoted down from its horizontal stored mode to its vertical running position. It pushed the Drifter out of the creek at a rate of knots then, once in clear water, Stewart hoisted the main and mizzen and unrolled the genoa. According to the fancy and as yet uncalibrated electronic anemometer, the wind started by blowing at around 4m/s then increased to 7m/s. In luddite speak, this felt like a nice breeze that steadily grew. Stewart had set the mainsail reefed, explaining that the sail area on the prototype was on the large side and the ballast on the low side. Both were being evaluated before finalising everything, which seemed sensible enough. That's why people build prototypes. Anyway, the Drifter set off like a scalded cat at a speed I'd never have anticipated from a Drascombe.

Striding ahead

On the wind, she tacked through around 95° at a speed of around 4½kn. With sheets eased and reef shaken out, she romped off on a broad reach in pursuit of a Hunter Horizon 23 (twin keeler) and rapidly overhauled her. That really surprised me. When I asked Stewart if he planned a booming-out spar (or even, perhaps, a proper boom) to hold the mainsail steady on a reach or a run, he said he was still considering it. Maybe the Drifter 22 will end up as the first Drascombe to have a conventional boom instead of a block on the clew of a free-footed mainsail. Were she mine, that's what I would do. The prototype has a substantial mainsail and a boom would make it a lot more efficient.

What of her appendages? The

helm felt light once the rudder was lowered, although the prototype tiller seemed a little on the flimsy side. This will probably get amended in the transition from prototype to production boat. Stewart left both the keel plates lowered at all times when we were sailing. They live in twin boxes that form the inside panel of each saloon settee front and the boxes extend aft into the front ends of the cockpit lockers, where drum winches are located to raise and lower the plates. While twin drop keels will add to the price, the benefit in terms of uninterrupted floor space inside the cosy cabin makes it worth the extra cost. The cabin sole is wide and movement around is surprisingly easy. The settee and forward berths are of usable proportions. The heads is a chemical type that lurks in a locker, so operation will be of an open plan variety that may not be to everyone's liking. A simple galley sits to port at the after end of the cabin, with a substantial fridge opposite. Stewart puts great store in carrying ample supplies of food and drinks and says that the fridge is worth every penny it costs as well as the

space it takes up. Obviously these Drascombe sailors enjoy their fresh food and chilled cocktails – and why not? It's all part of the pleasure of a life afloat, as amply proved by the civilised lunch Stewart whisked up once we were back in harbour and lounging in the cockpit.

I came away with a revised opinion about Drascombes. This one is no slouch and will clearly reward the keener skipper who enjoys a bit of performance. Obviously there are still modifications to consider as the prototype evolves into the finished product, but she looks good and feels lively.

Stewart says he already has four orders and a stack of interest, so sailors who enjoy a boat with character, which can be towed to distant cruising grounds then lived aboard in tolerable comfort, will await its intended unveiling at the 2007 London Boat Show with interest and, doubtless, then form an orderly queue to 'try her for size'.

Any builder who launches a brand new trailer-sailer amid the towering ranks of large white cruisers at ExCeL deserves a bit of success! ■

Vital Statistics

	m	ft in
LOA	6.70	22ft
LWL	5.88	19ft 3in
Beam	2.25	7ft 3in
Draught (plates up)	0.40	1ft 4in
Draught (plates down)	1.05	3ft 5in
Sailing weight	900kg	1985lb
Towing weight	1300kg	2865lb

	m ²	ft ²
Sail areas:		
Jib	6.87	74
Main	12.57	135
Mizzen	2.32	25
Total	21.76	234

RCD category:

C

Each **drop keel** will be in 12mm galvanised steel and weigh 65kg. A **keel shoe** will weigh 200kg.