

BOAT PROFILE

The Drascombe Dabber

A 15' lug yawl for sail, oar, and
outboard

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SAVE TO MY FAVORITES ☆

The Drascombe Dabber was designed by John Watkinson around 1970 when Honnor Marine, builders of the fiberglass [Drascombe Lugger](#), requested a smaller version of that enormously popular boat. Watkinson based the resulting Dabber, a 15' 6" yawl, on his slippery 19' double-ended Peterboat. With little prep time before an upcoming boat show, Watkinson shortened the Peterboat design by 4', swapped its canoe stern for a transom, and sent the lines along to Honnor Marine. The first fiberglass hull was created just in time for the show. It was well received, and full production began around 1972. The boats continue to be produced in England, and to date more than 900 Dabbers have been built, with many shipped abroad.

When introduced, the Dabber was described as a “top quality GRP [fiberglass] polyester resin long life hull built to specifications approved by the Ship & Boat Builders’ National Federation, with genuine teak trim.” In 2016, we restored a 1978 Dabber, and the fiberglass was in great shape, despite having received no care for

decades. After a \$75 rinse at the carwash to remove pounds of oak leaves and acorns, the hull showed little sign of wear except for a small portion of wood rot in the keel and bilge runners, which were designed with ease of replacement in mind. Also impressive was the quality of the marine-grade stainless-steel rigging and oiled teak used for the tiller, rudder, thwarts, rubrails, and centerboard trunk. The original Terylene tanbark sails and cordage were still serviceable. The varnished spars were select Douglas fir, and the centerboard was galvanized mild steel—all in reasonable shape. On early Dabbers, expanded polystyrene foam blocks in the bow, beneath the side benches, and in the stern compartment provided enough buoyancy to keep the boat and crew afloat when swamped, but not enough to float the boat sufficiently high for the crew to bail it out. Some owners would stuff a sponge or towel into the centerboard trunk opening to slow the ingress of water. Newer Dabbers have additional flotation in the bow, sides, and stern, and a redesigned centerboard in which the lifting arm is angled to extend out of the top of the trunk rather than the forward face.



Gijs van Kemenade

With its pivoting centerboard and relatively flat bottom the Drascombe Dabber is easy to trailer, launch, and recover. The two rowing thwarts are both removable.

As with the earlier and larger Lugger, the Dabber offers the choice of adventure by sail, oar, or motor. The yawl rig is set low on short spars, and while originally a gunter or sprit rig was available, most Dabbers now sport a standing lug mainsail, some with a boom. The multiple sail choices of jib, main, and/or mizzen along with the low sail plan contribute to the Dabber's stability and desirability as a coastal boat. Thanks to the use of both a bowsprit and a boomkin, the sail plan is spread out to both the bow and stern,

freeing up as much space as possible within the boat. Indeed, the Dabber has as much, if not more, open space on the floorboards as the Lugger. The spacing of the sails relative to the keel helps drive crisp handling and reduces rudder force when well-trimmed. The sail plan stretches the Dabber from an overall length of 15' 6" to a sparred length of 23' 7", demanding alert attention from a skipper and crew when sailing in a tight anchorage.

Some Dabber owners have flown small spinnakers with good results, and one common upgrade is a roller-furling jib. If a furler is installed, the forestay can be replaced by a wire stay within the jib luff, and a bobstay is added to balance forces on the bowsprit.



Kent Lewis

The lockers are the ideal location for an anchor, sponge, and other items that are needed on a regular basis but do not need to be kept dry. The removable forward thwart sits in locators molded into the side benches.

The Dabber has a towing weight of 1,100 lbs and is easily trailered, especially on a tilt trailer, which facilitates launching and recovering; on a regular trailer, the hull is rugged enough to be moved on bunks and rollers. Rigging is easily accomplished by one person in well under 30 minutes. The

mainmast steps easily, and the bowsprit and boomkin simply slide into place and are held by the tension of the forestay and mizzen sheet. Often, we will wait until the boat is in the water before we set up the boomkin and mizzen to avoid bumping into them or catching them on land objects. Because we are both righthanded we rig the mainsail's yard to the port side of the mast so that the halyard comes down to the starboard belaying pin where we have good access when raising and lowering the sail. We added a quick-release snapshackle on the end of the parrel, so we can easily move the lowered yard and mainsail off to the side when we're rowing.

The long, straight keel and well-veed stern contribute to responsive steering at low speeds, and the tucked stern helps to push the stern wave aft and keep the small rudder covered when heeled at higher speeds. The rudder's wetted surface area is small but adequate, although some care must be taken to avoid excessive heel and crew weight too far forward.



Gijs van Kemenade

The underwater shape and pivoting centerboard and rudder blade make the Drascombe Dabber an ideal beaching boat, as it will sit almost upright while drying out. The Dabber's wood trim, varnished spars, and tanbark sails add a touch of tradition. When the sails are furled, the lug-yawl rig leaves the cockpit uncluttered.

When rowing, the Dabber's wineglass transom, relatively light 585-lb hull weight, and 13' 7" waterline combine to make an easily driven hull. There are two rowing stations. For the aft rowing station there are various configurations: no thwart (the rower is seated on the centerboard trunk), a fixed thwart that rests on the aft end of the centerboard trunk, and a removable thwart that rests in brackets below the side benches. The forward thwart, just

aft of the mainmast, is removable to give easy access to the bow and forward side-bench storage. A pair of 8' oars can be stowed on the cockpit sole or on deck, out of the way forward.

Storage space is generous. There is a large cuddy locker aft, some open stowage (which can be enclosed with hatch covers) below the bench seats, and limited space below the removable floorboards. While the side lockers are well protected, none of the stowage is watertight and the bung for the bilge drain is in the open aft locker.



Dick Pizer

On some Dabbers owners have made minor alterations such as moving the forestay to the outboard end of the bowsprit and adding a bobstay, and replacing the straight tiller with an arced version to give better clearance of the outboard when it is raised. The original arrangement for the mainsheet (as seen here) is to lead it through a block on the tiller so that both sheet and tiller can be easily held in one hand.

When motoring, a short-shaft 2- to 4-hp outboard will easily push the Dabber to hull speed. The outboard is set in a well to port. It is hung on a wooden bracket, and when lowered, the propeller shaft is forward of the rudder. When not in use, the motor can be tilted up to reduce drag; in the raised position, the propeller is above the arc of the rudder blade. The outboard well is roomy enough that steering can be from the motor itself, but it can also be set in a fixed position so that the rudder can be used. For best directional stability and maneuverability, the centerboard is lowered slightly when motoring. The standard Dabber tiller is straight, and in most under-power operations there is no need for the helm to be pushed hard over. However, if this does become necessary, the tiller must be lifted slightly to pass above the motor. To avoid this, a curved tiller has become a common modification.

The cockpit of the Dabber offers plenty of space for two adults, and lines are placed so that it is also easy to sail singlehanded. The boat's volume is sufficient to carry up to four people, but when

sailing this does lead to some crowding, especially when reaching for sheets and halyards. The mainsheet traditionally runs to a block mounted on the tiller so that both the sheet and the tiller can be managed with one hand, freeing the other hand to tend to the jib- or mizzen sheets. However, many owners have changed this, choosing instead to lead the sheet directly to hand from a block on a stern-mounted traveler. There are no cleats for the mainsheet, but nearby docking cleats below the side benches can be used to take a turn and thus relieve some pressure while keeping it easy to let free.



Gijs van Kemenade

For the singlehanded sailor, all the sheets are readily to hand, although care must be taken when coming about as the jibsheet at the clew of the sail can get hung up on the forestay.

The jibsheets run through fairleads mounted on the side benches to cam cleats and are easy to manage, although when tacking the sheet attachment at the jib clew can snag on the forestay. A short, small-diameter piece of PVC pipe wrapped around the forestay and a sharp tack helps to keep the clew from getting fouled. The mizzen sheet runs from the boomkin through a fairlead mounted on the mizzenmast, and down to a jam cleat on the after deck; we have found that once the sail is set, we can forget about it, easing the sheet only when running or if sailing closehauled in high winds when the sail can introduce too much weather helm. In high winds, the Dabber sails best with just the mainsail, while the jib and mizzen are both stowed. With just the jib and mizzen set, the boat is well-balanced, but with little sail area the arrangement is primarily good for maintaining directional stability while slowly picnic-drifting.

It is always fun to read old advertising brochures and see how well a boat has lived up to its marketing hype. In an ad from the 1970s the Dabber was described thus: “The attractive and seaworthy little Dabber is also tough enough for serious inshore fishing from tidal beaches.” Almost 50 years on, our Dabber has, indeed, proven

tough enough for the fresh afternoon breezes along the Florida Gulf Coast and for excursions from our tidal beaches in Virginia. It sails well and brings us home safely and securely through wind and wave—a small but great boat for messing about on lakes, rivers, and inshore coastal areas.



Audrey and Kent Lewis mess about in Drascombes as well as a private fleet of small boats in the Tidewater Virginia region, southside of the James River. Since 2013, they have logged their adventures at smallboatrestoration.blogspot.com, where they have also published pictures of their [Dabber restoration](#).

Today the Drascombe Dabber is built in the U.K. by [Drascombe Boats](#) and by [Honor Marine](#) as the Devon Dabber. For more information, visit the [Drascombe Association](#).

Drascombe Dabber Particulars

LOA: 15' 6"

(Sparred length: 23' 7")

LWL: 13' 7"

Beam: 5' 10"

Draft centerboard up: 8"

Draft centerboard down: 3'

Sailing weight: 585 lbs

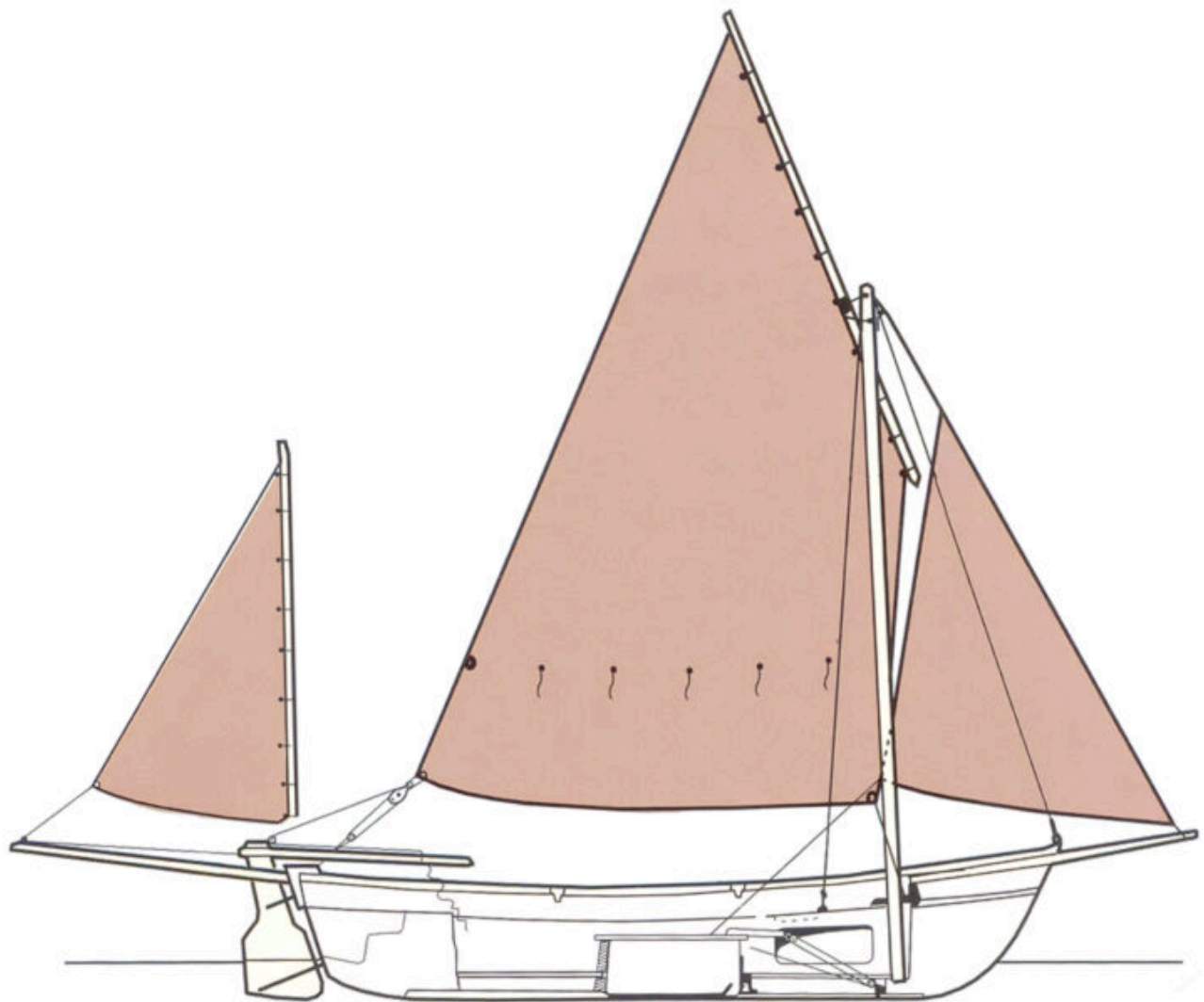
Sail area: 118 sq ft

Mainsail: 83 sq ft

Jib: 21 sq ft

Mizzen: 14 sq ft

Recommended outboard: 2- to 3.5-hp short-shaft



For more from Audrey and Kent Lewis, read their review of the [Drascombe Lugger](#).

For more on the origin story of the Drascombe range, see “[John Watkinson and the Elliott Brothers](#).”

Is there a boat you'd like to know more about? Have you built one that you think other Small Boats readers would enjoy? Please [email](#) us your suggestions.

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