

FLYING A *Kite*



How a boatbuilder and designer at the top of their games came up with the ideal small, trailable cabin yacht – and in plastic

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On the Solent Raid in 2010, a tiny yacht with sharp, attractive lines tacked west up the Solent toward Keyhaven. We chased hard in the light winds, tacking further and further into the shallows in an attempt to catch her, but she slowly slipped away. There were – maybe – a couple of faster boats that year (no one really counts at these things) – but they were garish craft with strange rigs and open cockpits. But Kite had it all. Light weight, pleasing looks, speed and... luxury!... a cabin to sleep in at night and to keep gear dry in during the day.

She was conceived by naval architect Andrew Wolstenholme, best known to CB readers for his Neil Thompson-built boats (particularly the 19ft 6in/5.9m Gypsy, of which more than 120 have been sold) and upper Thames boatbuilder Colin Henwood.

Soon, a GRP production version was being talked about – more than a few people had seen Kite and wanted to know more. The result, something of a long train coming, was launched earlier this year by Demon Yachts, the high-tech specialist whose other work includes the building of transatlantic rowing boats. The headline here is that not only have Matthew and Euan of Demon Yachts succeeded in bringing Kite to life in plastic – but they've done so without adding extra weight to the original version, which was in plywood.

For our short test sail, we were blessed with near-perfect conditions near Demon's HQ. We motored out of Shotley marina, through the lock and into the dramatic estuary, a caprice of glitter and breeze on a sunny, 24 deg C July day, with the dramatic backdrop of Felixstowe Container Port in the background.

We lacked instrumentation, but windspeed was 10-15 knots, and hoisting the mainsail brought a surge of acceleration that would have floored me had I been standing. Kite is well named: it flies.

Taking the tiller extension revealed a boat that seems to skate over the water downwind, with a light helm and almost skittish feel, thanks to the dinghy-like hull form. Kite, unlike some much heavier boats in the small trailer-sailer category, is more of a 'big little'un' than a 'little big'un' – a dinghy with a lid as some would say. The entire boat weighs in at around 750kg (1,653lb) and this includes 114kg (251lb) of internal ballast and the 80kg (176lb) of encapsulated lead in the NACA-sectioned centreplate. The shape is a single-chine with a flattish vee-bottom with a moderate rocker profile from fore to aft, including a flat section in the middle for easy trailing. The rocker is sufficient for serious manoeuvrability but moderate enough to allow sailing well beyond its theoretical hull speed of just under six knots. Andrew and Colin have seen eight, and we were doing at least six, even in the light-to-moderate wind.





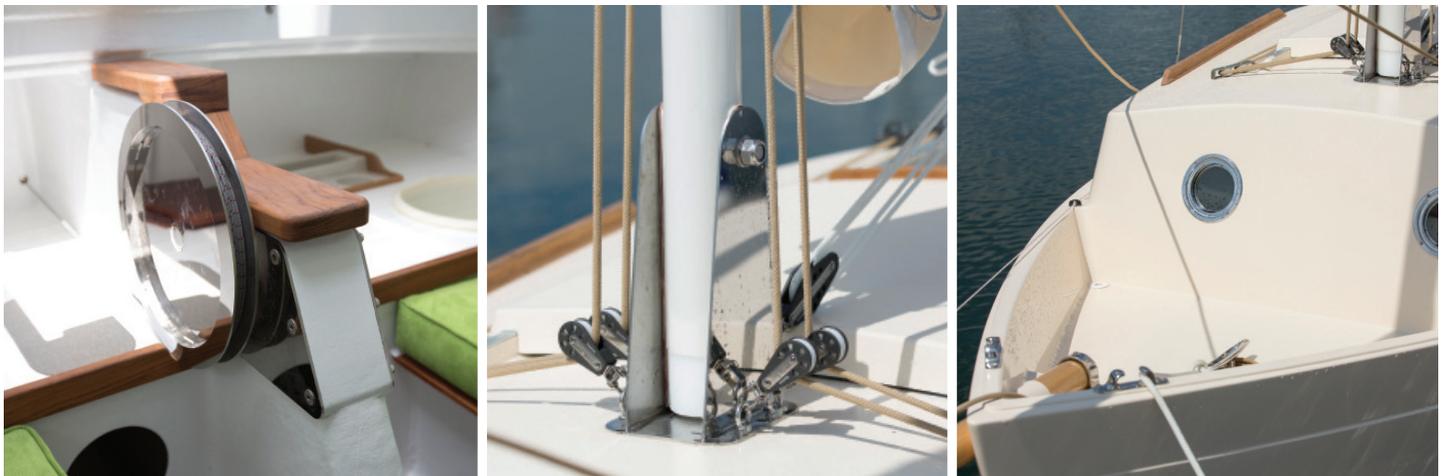
Going upwind, the boat heeled easily but in an exhilarating rather than alarming fashion (we had no reefs in). She sails as close as many bermudan boats, the high-peaked gaff rig giving the lie to the myth that gaffers can't go upwind. The tiller gave a reassuring pull to weather – sometimes a bit more than reassuring until we had the sails balanced right. This tester was, as always, crying out for coamings that you can sit on, in order to get better visibility and balancing moment, as well as just the feeling of flying high, face in the wind.

These coamings, though too sharp for that, do allow a very comfortable sitting-in position, which is how most would want to sail it. The boom is high enough that you barely notice it and all lines are led back to the cockpit and just where you want them to be. The centreboard case, just inside the cabin, has a geared winch which is simply pulled up and let down on a single line with a jammer. It's just about light enough to be reasonable and has a pin to lock it in the down position for increased safety in the event of a capsized.

Above left to right:
Roller-furler jib and forestay on a lowering block; jammers for the jib sheets set on attractive pedestals; kick-up rudder (secondary echo-sounder!)

The engine (Matt and Euan use a Torqeedo) sits in a dedicated aft well and simply lifts into any one of four huge cockpit lockers: Andrew chose not to use this valuable space to try to squeeze in quarter berths, and the result is a reasonable cabin for two and a really decent cockpit to seat five or six, depending on conditions. The cockpit is made even bigger, as Andrew has designed the boat without the usual aft deck, which is a waste of space on a boat this size, particularly with the capacious side lockers in the cockpit.

This is an easy boat to live with. The concept from the start was to produce a boat that could be trailed behind an ordinary family car rather than a powerful all-wheel-drive vehicle that could effectively double the cost of ownership. The white-painted carbon-fibre spars are comically light: about 8kg (17lb) each for mast and boom, with a neat tabernacle that sports an additional lower gooseneck for dropping the boom on to before dropping the mast back. Andrew hasn't spent many years on the Norfolk Broads for nothing.



Top row left to right: the centreplate winch is simple and visible; the tabernacle has lower gooseneck for trailing; Kite's recessed foredeck
Far left: razor-sharp chine and slight curve to the transom are a joy! Left: pared-down 'first boat' interior

The GRP boat is made up of 12mm (1/2in) closed-cell foam sandwiched by layers of quadaxial glass cloth soaked in vinylester resin on the outside with a single layer on the inside. The transverse rigidity comes from the 9mm (23/64in) marine ply bulkheads.

Matt and Euan, with their high-tech background, built much of the boat by CNC router, and their ascetic approach has guided them to leave it pretty much unadorned. "We didn't want to dress it up as a yacht and make it into something it isn't," Matt explained.

Interestingly, Andrew Wolstenholme agreed, although I think some sort of coloured "top strake effect" would do wonders to the slightly unforgiving acres of white plastic that make up the topsides. That would be an easy option to order. Other than that, the boat looks beautifully sharp, with the chine gently rising up towards the stern of the boat and the blunt-fronted cabin shape, similar to the Norfolk Gypsy.

I only sailed Kite on one day, so it is hard to speculate how well she would fare in the rough. One suspects that she would lose out some of what she gains in speed to the sheer solidity of the often-heavier trailer sailers in this size range; but then who buys a boat like this to sail around the Horn? Kite should look after you in any conditions that you ought to be out in – and for most, her great speed, sharp looks and easy trailability will more than make up for that. Kite is the sort of boat most of us need in this confounded real world, where work gets in the way of sailing, with weekends the only refuge. *Kite will be on display at the Southampton Boat Show this 11-20 September with the wooden boats of the WBTA, just inside the entrance. See p67 for more.*

KITE

LOD
21ft (6.4m)
LWL
18ft 10in (5.7m)
BEAM
7ft (2.1m)
DRAUGHT
4ft (1.2m) plate down;
26cm (10in) plate up
SAIL AREA
212sq ft (19.7m²)
RCD
Category C
PRICE
£31,950 inc VAT
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