



TALKIN' BOUT A REVOLUTION

A carbon mast? What other secrets does the new Crabber 24 hide? We go sailing with her designer Andrew Wolstenholme to find out

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHS **NIC COMPTON**

Spring was definitely in the air when I headed down to Mylor Yacht Harbour in Cornwall last April to photograph the latest flowering from an iconic local boatbuilder. Boats of every description were being readied to go back in the water, from a brand new Bavaria to an old wooden Tosher, but one name stood out above all the rest. Wherever I looked, it seemed, I couldn't help seeing a Cornish Crabber of one kind or another. There was a line of Shrimpers on trailers waiting to be launched, two Crabber 26s moored up on the pontoon, a smart-looking Crabber 22 on a mooring, and an old Crabber Yawl looking a bit sorry for herself moored off the main jetty.

Then, from further up the Carrick Roads a boat appeared, heeling as a gust caught its sails and pushing up a nice little bow wave. With its high-peaked gaff, black sheer strake and clinker topsides, it looked very much like it might be another Crabber, but not one I'd ever seen before. There was something subtly more modern-looking and sporty than you'd expect of a typical Crabber – and was that a white, carbon fibre mast poking up between the tan sails? The clue was the number '1' printed on the sail, for this was the new Crabber 24 Mk V, launched a week before and being sailed for only the third time by its designer, Andrew Wolstenholme.

And what a long way the little Crabber 24 launched at the London Boat Show in 1975 has come. As a teenager, I skippered one of the first GRP versions of that boat in Greece in the late 1970s, sleeping on board and taking guests for day cruises around Spetses and nearby islands. There was nothing else like it around, there or anywhere else. It was the beginning of the 'modern classic' concept; the idea that new designs inspired by traditional boats could be produced in modern materials. In its way, it was just as revolutionary as the bulbous Carter yachts that had started popping up in the Old Harbour in Spetses a few years earlier.

The Crabber 24 was followed in 1980 by the even more successful Shrimper, and both boats selling in their hundreds – 350 Crabber 24s and 1,100 Shrimpers, and still counting. Other designs were added to the range, mostly drawn by amateur yacht designer Roger Dongray, but the Crabber 24 and the Shrimper remained the mainstay of the business. Like all successful companies, Cornish Crabbers then had the problem of how to keep their best-selling products fresh and interesting. The



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ANDREW WOLSTENHOLME

Crabber 24 duly went through several incarnations – the Mk III version was even marketed with a long keel and bermudan rig – before being phased out altogether.

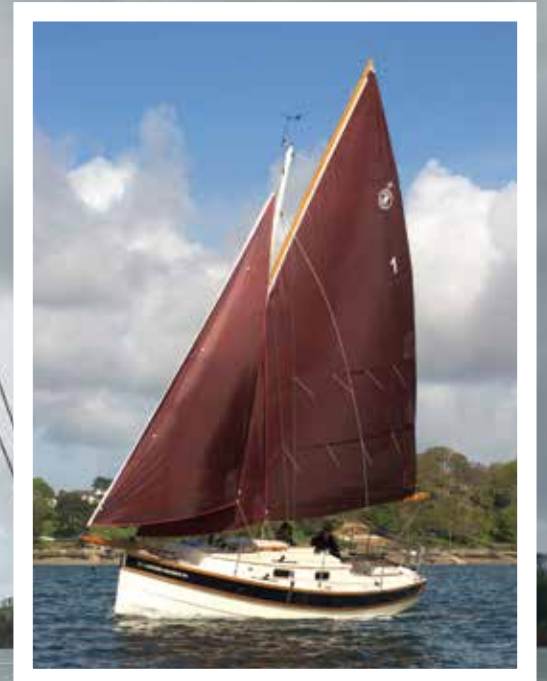
By 2017, with new owners at the helm, it was time for a fresh approach. After introducing the new Shrimper 21 to revitalise that range, they decided to revisit the 24 by going back to its roots as a shallow-draught family cruiser. After much consideration, they chose Andrew Wolstenholme to take over the mantle of designer. Classic Boat readers of old will be familiar with Andrew's traditional-yet-modern sailboats, such as the Norfolk Gypsy and the Kite, and exquisite little dinghies such as the Coot and the Mallard (see our July issue p79). Designing a follow-up to such a well-established and successful design must have been an onerous responsibility. So how did he go about it, I asked, after I'd climbed on board and made myself comfortable in the boat's remarkably spacious cockpit.

“First of all it had to be recognisably a Crabber, which meant clinker topsides, gaff cutter rig, coloured sheer strake with wooden rub rails and plumb bow – you couldn't do a Crabber with a raked bow. To get back to the original concept, the boat had to be shoal-draft, and the builders wanted it to be about 2¼ tons, so owners could put it on a trailer and tow it home at the end of the season. It also had to be Category B, which was a bit of a tall order...”

The EU Recreational Craft Directive didn't exist when the original Crabber was built, so builders had a lot more leeway in the kind of boats they produced. Nowadays, all new boats have to conform to a whole set of safety rules – especially if the builder wants it to be classed in Category B, the desirable 'Offshore' rating – including stringent buoyancy tests.

“That's where the carbon mast came in,” says Andrew. “Because there's no way we could have passed Category B with a wooden pole. There's just too much

Below left: the end of the double berth forward hinges up to create a 6ft 2in space. *Below right:* well-appointed interior includes a cooker with heads opposite



Above: distinct roach in the mainsail and three battens in the leech to hold its shape. *Main:* the white carbon mast with a cutter rig





weight high up. It was tricky enough as it is. For me, carbon fibre is no-brainer for a gaff boat.”

Which is how, after more than 40 years of all-wooden spars, the Cornish Crabbers ‘classic’ range came to have its first carbon fibre mast. A revolution indeed.

And there were other changes.

“I wanted a shorter keel to get more performance,” says Andrew. “All the previous Crabbers had quite a deep forefoot running into a long keel, but I cut away the forefoot and stopped the keel well clear of the rudder aft to give a bit less wetted surface and make the boat a bit faster. I also wanted a big cockpit – as big as possible. I don’t see the point in having everyone crunched up in a tiny space. We compromised a bit there to get more space below, but it’s still a big cockpit which will comfortably accommodate four people.”

Or, as Cornish Crabber’s MD Peter Thomas put it: “We wanted to progress the boat’s performance without turning it into an average white racing boat, which anyone can build. The design needed to stay well-mannered while allowing for some progress, for the next step.”

So how did all this theory turn out in real life? My first thought after looking around was how different it was to the old Crabber 24 that I sailed as a teenager, which was a pared back, basic boat. By comparison, this was an extremely well-appointed, comfortable yacht, complete with hot water, shower and a wine rack! But there were also many similarities between the two boats, if only because they are both shallow-draught cruisers, the most obvious being the large cockpit – we regularly sailed with five or six people on board on the old Crabber and it never felt crowded.

The Crabber 24 does cleverly manage to maintain the family ‘look’ while carving out its own identity. The rounded coachroof is reminiscent of the cabin on the Smuggler (also designed by Wolstenholme), while the relatively wide transom and large cockpit give it a distinctly modern edge – as well as no doubt contributing an extra bit of speed off the wind. That bowsprit could be a tad longer to my eyes and you might argue that if you have a white mast then, to be consistent, all the spars should be painted white (boom, gaff and bowsprit). But these are minor quibbles in what is overall an extremely harmonious design.

Under sail, the boat picked up speed quickly and in a

trice was skimming along at nearly 6 knots (Andrew says they’ve had 7 knots out of her on a broad reach). In the gusty conditions prevalent that day, she didn’t heel excessively, thanks to her inherent form stability, although she did show a certain amount of weather helm – something I’ve come to expect from most gaffers I’ve sailed on. Again, the solution might be to make the bowsprit a few inches longer and increase the jib area accordingly. Alternatively, you could simply reef the main a bit sooner than you would otherwise. There’s always a temptation with a cutter rig to drop the staysail when the wind picks up, which is exactly what we did – and it’s certainly the quickest, easiest thing to do – but if the wind remains strong for any length of time, you’re usually better off reefing the main and keeping the staysail up a bit longer to reduce weather helm.

As soon as the wind eased to a gentle Force 3, she settled down to a steady 5-plus knots – definitely faster than the old 24 would have managed in similar conditions, and she almost certainly sailed closer to the wind than the old boat. Andrew is a firm believer that gaffers need sail battens just as much as their bermudan counterparts. The result is a mainsail with a distinct roach and three battens in the leech to hold its shape, giving a much better shape than the low-peaked sail we used to set. With the correct set-up, there’s no reason this modern gaff rig shouldn’t perform almost as well as its bermudan brethren (as I discovered when I sailed both the gaff and bermudan versions of the Crabber 24 Mk III back in 1994, see CB78).

Above: inherent form stability and a large cockpit. *Below:* the Crabber 24 Mk III as reviewed by the author in *Classic Boat* December 1994

BELOW DECKS

Below decks, Andrew and Peter have gone for an open plan, airy feel, with a generous-sized heads to port and galley facing opposite. There’s a U-shaped settee in the saloon, with a raised double berth filling the whole space forward of the saloon. The clever bit is the hinged back rest between the saloon and the forward berth. At night, this can be raised and locked in a horizontal position to extend the forward double berth to its full 6ft 2in (1.9m), while underneath the forward ‘kickers’ extend the side seats into full-length berths. The result is four berths, with the head of the double projecting over the feet of the two singles.

The Crabber 24 Mk V is certainly a very different beast to the Mk I version I sailed all those years ago, but really it should be judged on its own merits.

This is a comfortable shoal-draught yacht for a clientele who might be downshifting from a modern yacht with all the associated creature comforts and crucially are used to a bit of performance. In other words, they might like the idea of gaff rig, but they don’t necessarily want to sail a relatively slow boat.

The Crabber manages to combine these sometimes

conflicting demands with the trademark Crabber character. Like the revamped VW Beetle and Mini Cooper cars, which so put the traditionalists’ noses out of joint when they were first created, it is likely to become a classic design in its own right.

