

# Onboard

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Above: Oysters and, to the right, a Gypsy - the two most popular boats in the Norfolk range

NEIL THOMPSON BOATS

## OYSTERS IN NORFOLK

*Steffan Meyric Hughes* discovers the benefits of heavy displacement in a John Leather-designed daysailer on the Broads

The Norfolk range that started life in 1989 under builder Charlie Ward is surely the superlative line of small, traditional GRP sailing boats in terms of cost and displacement and, for many small-boat sailors, desirability. For someone to whom 'light' and 'cheap' are the watchwords in small craft, this success story was something of a mystery, so the chance to drive to the north Norfolk coast for a late-summer sail at the builder's annual regatta was not to be missed.

Neil and Richenda Thompson took over the company in 2008, building and maintaining the range, which runs from the Urchin (13ft/4m GRP gunter sloop) to the Trader, a 45ft (13.7m) steel sailing barge, all prefaced by the 'Norfolk' moniker. We gathered in strong sun at Morston Quay on Blakeney Harbour, a sailor's haven protected from the North Sea by the golden sand dunes of Blakeney Spit. This is part of a nature reserve of flat lands under Norfolk's famous big skies.

Although only practice day, 18 Oysters and four Gypsies raced around the short course under the mournful, canine gaze of hundreds of common and grey seals on Blakeney Point. I crewed a John Leather-designed Oyster for owner Andrew Nicol, a refugee from London with grown-up kids and time to enjoy his boat in this magical seascape.

The Oyster is the larger of the two open boats in the Norfolk range. It's a beautifully simple gunter centreboard sloop in simulated GRP clinker, 16ft 10in (5.1m) long, with a breathtaking weight of 1,500lb (675kg). Out on the water it makes sense; as Neil points out, these are boats designed to look and sail like their wooden predecessors.

The design has benefited from years of tweaks, with 146 built, and I can't find a thing to fault, from the simplicity of the rig to the quality of fittings. Even the outboard arrangement (transom bracket with plenty of stowage in the boat's huge lockers), now considered old-fashioned, is still the most workable solution in terms of space.

She won't set speed records and won't tow without a big car or braked trailer, but she's nimble and weatherly and the ballast makes her wonderfully impervious to crew weight; she'd take a solo helm or a family of six or even eight – and in most weather.

A new one costs £19,800 (inc VAT). As Richenda tells me, they build to a standard, not a price. The hulls are moulded in heavy lay-up GRP near the Thompson yard and not, as Neil tells me without the reproach I had feared when I suggested it, in Poland. Secondhand, they go for £8,000 to £16,000.

After a quick sail in a Gypsy, the popular 20ft (6m) Andrew Wolstenholme-designed cabin boat (138 sold – but that's a different story), we sailed back up the creek to our moorings. There was time for a look around the yard, a large, picturesque brick building a few miles inland, where the boats are built.

After some years spent mainly maintaining the existing fleet, big things lie ahead for Neil and Richenda, with the launch of the new Explorer next year, an engine launch version of the Oyster; and even some serious interest to build a second Trader. Watch this space, as they say.

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