

Classnotes

The Norfolk Oyster

BY VANESSA BIRD

The Oyster was designed as the sort of dayboat I wished to own after many years of experience of the type," wrote naval architect John Leather of the 16ft 9½in (5.1m) dayboat that he designed in the early 1960s. "I wanted a boat that could be sailed by one person yet could happily carry several of my family or friends safely with nimble sailing performance. Shoal draught was necessary to suit our mooring and allow exploration of the creeks and shallows that are a pleasurable part of small boat sailing."

Classic Boat's former contributing editor designed the Oyster to be built in wood, and in 1965 *Yachts & Yachting* magazine published details of his design, selling plans for home construction for five guineas per set. More than 100 sets were sold, and nearly as many built to the design, and it was from this that the Norfolk Oyster, a GRP version evolved.

The wooden Oysters proved to be popular around the world, with boats built not only in the UK, but in Ireland, Sweden and Italy, too, as well as further afield in South Africa, Australia and even Venezuela.

However, it was the launch of one particular boat, *Emily*, in the harbour at Blakeney on the North Norfolk coast that led to its production in GRP. The gunter-rigged clinker dayboat caught the attention of many local sailors, and such was the interest that her owner, boatbuilder Charlie Ward, approached John Leather with the idea of producing a version in GRP. Following extensive filling and fairing, *Emily* was used as a plug, and the first Norfolk Oyster was launched in 1989. Since then around 150 have been built.

Simplicity is the key with the Norfolk Oyster, and apart from the



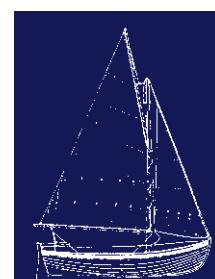
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construction method and material, little has changed from the original design and concept. Both Ward and Leather were keen that the boat not only looked traditional in appearance, but that it felt traditional, too, handling as a wooden boat does, and this is certainly something that it has achieved, and one of the reasons behind its subsequent success.

Neil Thompson Boats took over production in 2007, and has maintained an enviable reputation for good-quality, well-built boats. The lay-up on the Norfolk Oyster is heavy and of high spec, with thicker than usual hull laminates for this size of boat, and a separate interior moulding. The finish is superb, with teak capping on the centreboard case and slats on the seating, larch sole boards and bronze fittings. Internally, the boat is generous, easily accommodating four to six adults, plus children, and including copious stowage for an outboard or extra sails.

It's hard to believe that next year this design will celebrate its 50th anniversary; but although the construction is now very different, its ethos is not, and thanks to two very skilled boatbuilders, it remains very much true to the original.

Above: the Norfolk Oyster was designed for family sailing, and provides plenty of room for lots of crew



SPECIFICATIONS

LOA
16ft 9½in (5.1m)

LWL
15ft 4in (4.7m)

BEAM
6ft 2½in (1.9m)

DRAUGHT
3ft 10in/10in
(1.2m/25cm)

SAIL AREA
149sqft
(13.8m²)

DISPLACEMENT
1,320lb
(599kg)

OYSTER RACING

Blakeney is now home to a large fleet of Oysters. There are around 30 boats in the harbour, many of which compete in regular points series racing during the summer months. The Norfolk Oyster Regatta is also held annually.

NO AGE LIMIT

Under sail or oar it does not disappoint, slipping easily through the water with a well-balanced rig that provides good windward performance.

ALL-ROUNDER

Although popular with the family market, many are sailed singlehanded or by couples, and the design is well liked by older sailors, too.

THE PRICE

The plans for the original wooden Oyster were sold within the pages of *Yachts & Yachting* in 1965, and cost five guineas. The lines plans included offsets and sail and rigging plans. Such is the quality of build that secondhand boats retain their value. As well as building new boats, Neil Thompson Boats reconditions secondhand Norfolk Oysters to as-new condition, many of which sell for between £13,000-£17,000.

Vanessa's book, *Classic Classes*, is a must-buy. For more details, go to classicboat.co.uk

