

Anglia Afloat

January/February 2012

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Norfolk Oyster, a modern classic
Broom 370, a style revolution



£3.95

Testing a modern classic

On a fine, surprisingly warm and sunny Saturday in the middle of November, Garth Cooper took to the waters of Blakeney Harbour for his first-ever sail in a Norfolk Oyster.

NEIL THOMPSON BUILDS NORFOLK OYSTERS AND HIS CLOSE FRIEND JAMES COWAN RUNS AN RYA-RECOGNISED SAILING CENTRE

at picturesque Morston Quay on the North Norfolk tidal estuary of Blakeney Harbour and uses two Norfolk Oysters in his training fleet.

"They are an ideal boat for taking out groups and for introducing people, especially adults who may be less agile, to the art of sailing. They're also a great family day out boat too," commented James.

With their firm bilge and slightly raked bow they're also pretty boats.

So, with most of the Oyster fleet laid up for the coming winter, James not only lent us his boat, Lucinda, but also came along as crew and navigator. It was a smart move on Neil's part too: let a customer extol the virtues of the boat!

The boat was lying on a mooring a little way down Morston Creek, so we took James' launch down, from which Neil and four-year-old son Archie shadowed us and took the action shots of us on the water. A quick pump out, hank on the jib and raise the sails (all in about a third of the time it takes to prepare my own Bermudan sloop!), slip the mooring and we were off.

Slipping quietly down the creek against the flood and out into the harbour where the wind rose and fell between a top F2 and a middling F3, just enough to raise wavelets on the stunningly clear and deep-blue-green water, and we reached away up harbour learning the intricacies of the boat. Only to find there are none.

She is delightful to sail, stable, goes exactly where you point her (even with the keel raised as you skirt muddy banks), the rig is almost infinitely tweakable or can be left to look after itself.

One of the exercises James enjoys teaching with these boats is sailing without a rudder. She'll track along in a straight line if she's balanced almost level, induce some heel and she'll turn gently in opposite direction.

She tacks almost as close to the wind as a Bermudan sloop, runs down-wind goose winged as steady as you please. Not only



Enjoying the Norfolk Oyster on a sunny day. Her full bilge gives a high stability factor.

does the Norfolk Oyster make you feel safe, she is safe. That doesn't mean she's stodgy or slow. She is remarkably responsive to the helm and feels more like a surprisingly quick 25-26 foot sailing cruiser rather than a typical dayboat and is much less frisky than say a Wayfarer (of which the school also has two).

Her deep topsides and bow sections make her a dry boat in rougher conditions and safe with young children on board.

The longitudinal benches down each side are extremely comfortable, and the slightly angled coamings make a deep and secure backrest. Unlike the older wooden versions she has no cross thwarts, the rigidity being gained from a massive GRP sub-frame bonded in under the floorboards.

When designing the original Norfolk Oyster, John Leather insisted that the rig should be big enough to ensure she sailed well but not so large as to overpower her in breezy conditions out at sea.

Certainly tacking back to windward up the twisting creek between the raised marsh banks to her mooring showed that in lightish airs she still performed as crisply as early on out in the harbour.

An additional pleasure for me was a turn round Blakeney Point to view the recently pupped seals basking in the late autumn sun on the shingle bank.

Unfortunately, I couldn't bring you a picture as my camera was in the motorboat being used by Neil to get pictures of James and I sailing! →



As the breeze freshened so did our enjoyment. James Cowan never tires of having fun in either of his Norfolk Oysters.

→ So steady was the Oyster that returning from the Point we came across an Enterprise which had suffered a partial capsize and was somewhat full of water which the crew were busily bailing over the side. I really hadn't felt that much wind other than we both climbed on to the gunnel for a spell as we positively flew across the water.

Neil Thompson runs Neil Thompson Boats Ltd, based at Glandford near Holt, about 10 minutes away from Morston, where he builds and refittles the Norfolk range of traditional-style boats first started many years ago by the father of local boat builder Charlie Ward. They were well known for building lifeboats and had taken up building wooden Oysters designed by John Leather; it was Charlie who adapted

them for building in GRP.

These boats are built to an incredibly high standard. One of the early ones (No 6) was back in Neil's workshop being titivated. Apart from a change of interior moulding gelcoat pigment from light grey to the more attractive cream of today, she looked as if she'd been launched only a couple of years ago.

This is the basis of Neil's business. Owners are encouraged to place their boats with his brokerage side of the business and they are then taken through an intensive refit and upgrade to make them almost as good as new. For buyers it means a virtually new boat for less than the cost of brand new one and for sellers means the depreciation on their investment is considerably reduced. They're also sold with a year's warranty,



First view of the Norfolk Oyster, Lucinda, on her mooring in Morston Creek.



The transom has an outboard mounting cutaway, which is heavily reinforced. The cuddy is an optional extra in the stern compartment.

exactly as the new ones.

The attention to detail that Neil and his six staff lavish on the boats would do justice to some of the superyacht builders.

Currently, he is expanding his workshop facilities at Manor Farm, Glandford, to meet demand from both owners of the Norfolk range boats and an increasing number of other designs.

He has a three-acre field at the back of the complex which is packed solid with neatly laid out rows of the different models – starting with the smallest, the very pretty Urchin, Oysters, Gypsies and Smugglers. There are several RIBs, a beautifully varnished motor launch and several "other" trailer and shallow draft yachts also stored there.

The largest vessel the company ever



Coasting along on a quartering breeze past Blakeney Point and the newly pupped seals.

produced, the now famous 45-foot barge yacht Juno, owned by Charlie Ward and used for charter, lies on a mooring in Blakeney Harbour.

"I'd really like to build the 65-foot version," commented Neil.

Neil, the son of a schoolteacher, was born in Bedfordshire and spent all his school holidays at Blakeney, where he and wife Richenda now live along with Archie and his younger sister Grace. On leaving school he moved back to Blakeney to his grandparents and joined Charlie Ward as an apprentice some 11 years ago. He took over the business from Charlie when he retired four years ago. His parents eventually retired back to Blakeney as well.

Today the core of the business is refurbishment and he's expanded the

brokerage side. Currently he is having an area outside the workshop and alongside a newly erected office, levelled and gravelled to form a brokerage display area complete with environmentally friendly boat wash-down facility.

The workshop itself is a large and airy flint-walled barn and he plans to install a mezzanine floor where all the wood-working equipment and benches will go so he can fit heated bays underneath the decking for working on the smaller boats over the winter.

"We can't sensibly heat the whole of this building in the winter. It's not insulated and it's too large an open space to heat. We do almost all our moulding and major GRP work during the warmer summer months and our spray work by 'tenting' off an



A Norfolk Oyster stripped for maintenance. Note the positively massive sub-frame bonded to the outer hull and reinforcing the centreplate box.



The forepeak is divided into sections. The starboard side has mouldings to support an outboard engine while the port side is used for sails, covers and general gear. Both sides have high-fiddled shelves.



Twin dinghy hatches can be used for storing items that need to be kept dry.

area," he explained.

When a boat arrives at the site it is thoroughly cleaned before it comes into the workshop. In the case of the Oyster, floorboards are removed, cleaned and sanded down and given several coats of traditional tung oil varnish. Dings or scrapes on the gunnels and permanently fixed wood trim are scraped, sanded, levelled and the whole lot varnished. Any scratches on the interior or exterior are polished out (or if too serious, filled and sprayed with new gelcoat). Spars are de-rigged and sanded and re-varnished. Sails are sent away for cleaning and repair (they're made by Jeckells), cordage is renewed and outboards serviced. Metalwork (mostly gunmetal or bronze) is polished and refettled. →



Heading up harbour in a light breeze. The Norfolk Oyster's lines are reminiscent of Essex workboats.



A Norfolk Gypsy being laid up in Neil's yard. She will be



Norfolk Oyster No 6 is undergoing a complete refit. Other than the colour of the interior mould she's as good as a new one. Today's boats are the same as the originals.

→ The Oyster hull is hand laid using five layers of chopped strand mat on the topsides and seven below the water line – there's even more in stress areas such as around the centreplate box, bow, stern and keel. Unlike many GRP clinker mouldings, the lands, the edges of the overlapping planks, are sharply defined as they are in a wooden hull and not rounded off.

The interior is a single mould, which is dropped into the hull and bonded in along the gunnel, around the centreplate box, and the sections of the strengthening sub-frame, which gives additional bracing and strength and in effect supplies the boat with bilge space for water to collect. This moulding includes twin lockable waterproof hatches in the foredeck, with moulding and fixing points for an outboard in the starboard

locker and sail and cover storage to port.

The mast is stepped in a substantial tabernacle bolted into a seriously reinforced area at the junction of the foredeck and the forward end of the centre plate box. On the test boat were two open-fronted bins moulded into the aft bulkhead of the forward lockers.

The fore-and-aft side benches are all part of the inner moulding and form watertight buoyancy chambers. Charlie Ward chose not to fill these spaces with foam following his experience with lifeboats where within six years the foam became waterlogged, partly from soaking up condensation and partly from small leaks when joins became stressed. The sealed space between the outer and inner mouldings forms an air gap, which aids buoyancy.

Across the transom is another watertight compartment, fitted with twin dinghy hatches, which can be used for storing items that need to be kept dry but also acts as additional buoyancy. The transom itself is solid with a plywood core to take the weight and vibration of the outboard motor.

The transom has a section cut out of it, which is covered and reinforced with a bronze plate where the up to 4hp outboard attaches. The rudder has a drop blade and hangs on substantial pintles. The heavy 16mm galvanised mild steel centre plate is controlled using a line that feeds round a large drum on the starboard forward side of the box, and cleats off at the aft end of the box close to the helm.

In the lowest section of the side benches, which follow the line of the sheer, roughly



covered like her sisters in the row.



A Norfolk Gypsy nearing the end of a refit. When her owner collects her in the spring she'll be as good new once again.

amidships is a recess into which water collects and is discharged over the side via a vertical pipe that terminates below the water line. Along each side of the boat at the back of the side benches is a row of small hooks to which the outer edges of the inboard cover fit, with the centre made fast on the boom with ties to form a tent, the water being shed down into the recesses in the seats. It means the boat can be left secure and dry on a mooring.

Another reason for using an internal cover rather than one which spreads out over the sides is that hooks and fittings are not attached on the outside of the hull where they can both get ripped off bumping into quays or indeed against other boats. Also they are easier to erect from inside the boat.



You're never too young... Four-year-old Archie Thompson is already a handy little chap round his father's boats.

Specifications

■ **Length overall** 5.1m (17ft)

■ **Waterline length** 4.7m (15ft 4in)

■ **Beam** 1.9m (6ft 2½in)

■ **Draft 1** 1.16m (3ft 9½in) plate down

■ **Draft 2** 0.25m (10 in)

■ **Sail Area** 138 m² (149 sq ft)

■ **Displacement** 650 kilo (1,433 lbs)

■ **Engine** Up to 4hp.

■ **Price** £16,400 + VAT

■ Neil Thompson Boats, Manor Farm, Glandford, Holt, Norfolk, NR25 7JP. Tel: 01263 741172. E-mail: ifo@neilthompsonboats.co.uk. Website: www.neilthompsonboats.co.uk.

■ James and Victoria Cowan at Norfolketc, Morston Quay, Quay Lane, Morston, Norfolk, NR25 7DJ. RYA recognised training centre and OnBoard centre. Tel: 01263 740704. E-mail: info@norfolketc.co.uk. Website: <http://www.norfolketc.co.uk>.

Other small details include moulded troughs down each side of the centreplate case for stowing the oars and a teak plank on top of the centreplate box that makes a good rowing seat and somewhere comfortable for the crew in light airs. All the side benches and part of the floor moulding are topped with teak strip. A large section of the larch floorboard lifts up on each side of the centreplate box.

Then there's the sacrificial hardwood insert in the long keel to save the edges of the centreplate box being damaged when she takes the ground, lazy jacks are fitted for easy stowage of the mainsail and there's a hardwood gallows that supports the boom when the boat is moored for long periods.

The spars are all of spruce and the rig allows for them to be short enough to lay

comfortably inside the length of the boat when towing or storing. The mainsail has two slab reefing points and the jib a single reef.

At £16,000 for a new Oyster and as much as £14,000 for an 'as new' second-hand version with a year's warranty, they are not the cheapest option.

But if you want a boat that will last more than one generation, that the whole family can enjoy, that can be raced, rowed or mechanically powered, that can be safely left on a mooring without fear of damage on drying out (or of getting the dreaded boat pox), that has class and above all is a delight to sail, then the Norfolk Oyster must be at the top of your dayboat list.

Which probably explains why some 140 have been built and sold worldwide. ⚓