

Norfolk EXPLORER

The latest addition to the Norfolk series of traditional GRP boats by Neil Thompson is a pretty and capable motor launch, ideal for exploring

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHS **PETER WILLIS**



Above: Neil Thompson at the helm of the Norfolk Explorer.
Right: the boatyard (and café)



In some ways it sounds so simple: turn the hull of a successful sailing dinghy into a handy motor launch. Actually, as we'll see, it's not that straightforward, but the basic idea is sound – especially when the original comes with the pedigree of the Norfolk Oyster. The Norfolk Explorer from Neil Thompson Boats combines elements of that original design by the great John Leather with the necessary modifications for its new purpose by Andrew Wolstenholme.

The Oyster, a classic large sailing dinghy, is one of the mainstays of the range of high-quality, heavy-layup, traditional GRP yachts developed and built in North Norfolk by the legendary Charlie Ward, and now carried on by Neil Thompson. Neil used to work for Charlie, until 2000, when he set up on his own, at first subcontracting for Charlie, but eventually buying out the whole business. The Explorer is the first new boat launched by Neil under his own company name.

The Norfolk Explorer is just under 17ft (5.2m) in length, bulletproof in construction and extremely pretty. The absence of the mast, rigging and sails gives the hull a long, low elegance, emphasised by the curved tiller and the stern-hung rudder. Like the Oyster, her fine entry slices through the waves and her clinker-style moulded lands help her to shed water as she moves through it at speeds her sailing relative could only dream of.

But she's not just an Oyster hull without the rig. Instead of the 10in (26cm) draught, plus centreboard, of the sailing yacht, the Explorer has a long keel, 15in (38cm) deep to protect the 14in propeller. The

underwater section has also been "scaloped out", as Neil puts it, to provide some cavitation. This is where the work of Andrew Wolstenholme came into play, but in a way the Norfolk Explorer was a collaborative project right from the start and, unusually, with a customer.

As Neil tells it: "We were approached by a guy who wanted a pretty motor launch and who thought the Oyster would make a good basis for one." Neil agreed in theory, but it took some time and some persistence by the customer, before the project got under way.

The first boat was launched in April; already three have been ordered and two delivered. We took one of them out for a spin – literally, she turns on the proverbial sixpence – in Blakeney Harbour and found that the design input – ideas by Neil and the maths to make them work by Andrew – has produced a very capable motor launch indeed. She performed smoothly under power from her 14hp twin-cylinder Beta diesel engine, edging easily up to about 8 knots, the bows rising forcefully above the waves, and the seating areas both forward and towards the stern remaining reassuringly dry. There was power in reserve – Neil estimates a top speed of around 10 knots, possibly 12. As a tender for a large yacht, she would certainly make short work of the distance between the mooring and the quayside restaurants.

Inboard, the liner has been designed to provide comfortable lean-backs for the seating. Our test model came with just the plain moulding to sit on, but the addition of cushions could transform her into a very comfortable picnic boat. Capacity is "four to five adults

plus children" and there are generous lockers fore and aft. Teak trim adds to the traditional ambience.

As we made our way in the low November sun down from Morston Quay, Neil told me the story of the third Explorer, currently in build. She's been ordered by a widow who used to sail a Norfolk Oyster with her husband. A boat with an inboard engine will just suit her. It's a story that rather typifies the 'family' feel of the Norfolk range, where customers become friends and regularly bring their boats back for maintenance, overwintering or resale. Neil, his wife Richenda and about eight employees, run the business in a former farm in the hugely picturesque village of Glandford, just a few miles inland from Blakeney Harbour. Flint-faced houses with Dutch gables abound and the farmyard also boasts a café that sells works of art alongside its excellent cakes.

In the nearby field about 40 Norfolk Oysters and 20-plus Gypsies, were already laid up for the winter. To date, 146 Oysters and 126 Gypsies, the 20ft (6.1m) Wolstenholme-designed centreboard cabin yachts, have been built. "They've gone all over the world," says Neil proudly, but a remarkable number stay locally, used to explore the shallow tidal estuaries and creeks of the North Norfolk coast to which they are so well suited."

The Gypsy's hull has also now been adapted and a second Norfolk motor launch, the 20ft (6.1m) Norfolk Spirit, is on the way.

Built by Neil Thompson Boats, NR25 7JP Tel 01263 741172
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NORFOLK EXPLORER

LOA
16ft 9in (5.2m)
BEAM
6ft 2in (1.9m)
DRAUGHT
1ft 3in (0.4m)
WEIGHT
1,488lb
(675kg)
PRICE
£23,125
exVAT