



Graham Snook

# The Contessa man

Jeremy Rogers sparked a revolution in yacht building, made and lost a fortune, and created two of the best small cruising yachts ever. Peter Nielsen met the maker of a legend



Philip T Smith

**J**eremy Rogers Yachts. If you miss the sign, there is no indication that the box-like building on an industrial estate in the retirement haven of Milford-on-Sea, just outside Lymington, has anything to do with boatbuilding – until you see the rack of masts down the side. There was a time when that name was on the walls of five factories around Lymington, and its owner was one of the biggest boatbuilders in the country.

*Jeremy Rogers Yachts* is a classic story, spanning four decades – a revolution in boatbuilding, a fortune made and lost, and two of the best small cruising yachts ever built, the Contessa 26 and 32.

Son of an RAF officer and keen sailor, Rogers always knew where his future lay. He built his first boat at the age of ten and served his time with caulking mallet and drawknife, apprenticing himself to a boatbuilder in Fareham in the late 1950s. When he set up on his own in 1960, he soon forsook the carvel-and-clinker techniques in favour of more efficient – ie faster and more cost-effective – methods.

Soon he had to move from his first 'yard', a shed behind his house in Lymington, to a small factory built on an apple orchard. Before long he was turning out cold-moulded boats by the dozen: Finn and OK dinghies mostly, but Folkboats, too. He rapidly acquired a reputation for good workmanship.

Working with wood in the traditional ways might have been good for the soul, but as a racer Rogers placed a high value on lightness as the foundation of speed; as a boatbuilder he was always looking for ways to combine

efficiency with strength. How could you build more and better boats in less time, with less labour, and at prices that would open the door to people who wouldn't have been able to aspire to a well-built new wooden boat?

The new-fangled combination of spun glass fibres and polyester resin looked as though it held all the answers to the questions many builders hadn't even begun to ask. Rogers was one of the first to see that the writing was on the bulkhead.

'I had no doubts that GRP was the future,' he says. 'I first started using it to hold together the chines on wooden OK dinghies. The potential was obvious.'

Soon he was building dinghies in GRP. The next step, logically, would be automobile-style series production, something that could never be possible with wooden boats. The opportunity arrived almost by chance.

'I was building cold-moulded Folkboats during the early Sixties, alongside the dinghies,' recalls Rogers. 'They were built to class rules with fractional rigs. One of my customers was David Sadler, who put a masthead rig on his. It performed so well that we thought we would take it a step further.'

In 1966 the first Contessa 26, designed by David Sadler, was launched; the phrase 'overnight success' springs to mind. The boat ushered in what Jeremy's wife, Fiona, calls the 'magical years' of the late 1960s: a booming economy and the beginnings of a fundamental shift

in social structure saw more people taking to the water than ever before. Many yards, the Rogers operation among them, were hard pressed to keep up with demand. The orders kept on coming in for Contessa 26s ('Many of

**Jeremy Rogers (right) discusses the plans of a Contessa 32, currently under construction, with a shipwright**



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## “Losing your grip?”

The answer could be a new set of grab-rails; Martin Parker makes his own. With the ending of SA, we also measure the accuracy of GPS – and test the latest, low-cost radars. Colin Buchanan passes on his top trailer tips, while Colin Jones enjoys the Mediterranean good life on the tightest of budgets. With inside information about the Isle of Man – and a seawife's private, unexpurgated thoughts about families afloat – not to mention an extra 16-page section about choosing the right sail handling gear, it's too good to miss...



# Hands-on Information

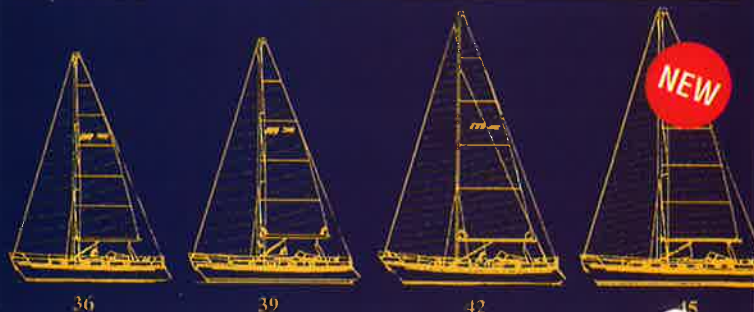
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**Main picture: In 1977 Rogers skippered the Contessa 43 *Moonshine* in the winning British Admiral's Cup team. Inset: In 1974 Rogers won the One Ton Cup and was named Yachtsman of the Year**







**Above: the Milford-on-Sea factory where Rogers's own 26 (red hull) is being refurbished. Right: the young builder with an early GRP mould. Below: the Contessa 32 stole the show at Earl's Court in 1972**



my old dinghy customers bought them when they had families of their own'), but in the boatbuilding business, as in any other, to stand still is to risk falling behind and, as the decade ended, Rogers and David Sadler were kicking around an idea for a bigger boat.

The Contessa 32 made its debut at Earl's Court in 1971 and was voted the Boat of the Show the following year. If the 26 had made the reputations of Rogers and Sadler – the tank designer turned yacht designer – the 32 would elevate them to cult status among yachtsmen all over the world.

'We couldn't build enough to keep up with demand,' Rogers recalls. 'At the end of that first Boat Show, we had a two-year waiting list.'

First one new factory opened, then another. In 1978, eight 32s were being launched each month. By the end of the 1970s, the Rogers operation spanned five factories, occupying a goodly chunk of Lymington's commercial real estate, and 200 employees, a not insignificant part of the town's workforce. Halcyon days, indeed.

With the 26 and 32 underpinning this vast operation, there was time and opportunity to diversify – and to play. The collaboration between Rogers and Sadler ended in the early Seventies, but the Contessa name lived on. A committed and talented racing helmsman, Rogers linked up with young Doug Peterson – and the fruit of this union was a long line of fast racers and cruiser-racers.

Rogers won the 1974 One Ton Cup in the Contessa 35 *Gumboats*, and an incident where he abandoned one of the ocean races to rescue the crew of a burning yacht led to his being named Yachtsman of the Year.

In 1977, he skippered the Contessa 43 *Moonshine*, the top-scoring boat in the winning British Admiral's Cup



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**Above and right: the redesigned interior of Rogers's own refurbished Contessa 26**

team, and competed again two years later in an event overshadowed by the tragic Fastnet race. His Contessa 39 *Eclipse* finished that race in second place to Ted Turner's maxi, *Tenacious*, and the Contessa 32's reputation was further enhanced when Assent and her young crew were the only finishers below Class III.

One of Rogers's other boats did not fare so well. The OOD (Offshore One Design) 34 fleet took the brunt of the storm and got hammered; there were knockdowns, capsize and two boats lost, and the design was criticised in the Fastnet Report for its tendency to remain inverted.

The OOD 34 had been Rogers's most ambitious project so far. The boats were built using a vacuum injection moulding process, developed by Colin Chapman of Lotus, so advanced that Rogers swore his workforce to secrecy and set up a new factory to produce the design.

'It was a year's work to set up the patterns and tools. Every boat was identical, right down to the last gram of weight. We built 80 boats in a very short time.'

That Fastnet race was the beginning and end for the OOD34, although most of those built are still sailing, and make fine cruising boats: 'Very strong boats, and not one has ever suffered from osmosis,' he says.

It was a setback for the Rogers operation but, at that time, far from terminal. The company's other boats were still selling well, and in 1980 Jeremy was awarded the MBE for his services to the industry.

It seemed the good days would never end. Demand for the Contessa 32 was still strong, and the orders kept coming in for the ever-evolving cruiser-racing line-up. In the early 1980s nearly 60% of the yard's production went to the USA.

Then the recession hit. As the pound soared in value against the dollar, so the number of domestic sailors able to find the price of a new boat dropped. Cashflow stuttered. The banks got twitchy and called in their loans. One by one, many of Britain's boatbuilding companies were forced to call in the receivers.

'We had just stretched ourselves too far,' admits Rogers. 'It needn't have ended that way, because we had plenty of orders, but the bank wouldn't listen.'

Boatbuilders are a perverse and stubborn breed, with more professional lives than the average cat. Within

weeks, Rogers and a couple of former employees had set up shop again in a farmyard outside Lymington, still redolent of its previous occupants, a herd of pigs.

The Contessa 26 and 32 moulds had been sold by the receivers, so his first projects were 'J-24s and firemen's helmets'. He moved on to building Etchells keelboats, which sold well, and in 1988 was able to move into his present factory in Milford-on-Sea.

For a few years he built one-off racing and cruising boats alongside the Etchells, drawing on the rich pool of boatbuilding labour in the area as need dictated. He did the tooling for the Wauquiez 37, and built the keels for the Whitbread yacht *Kvaerner*.

Was he ever tempted to go back into series production? 'Not really. It costs over £100,000 to tool up for a big production boat and that's a big risk to take.'

Rogers does not miss the days of running one of

the biggest yards in the country. The factories might be long gone, but the memories of being a key player in the biggest-ever boom time in British leisure boating are strong enough; more to the point, they are – simply – enough.

He knows that the best days of boatbuilding in this country are long gone. 'These are not good times to be a major British boatbuilder,' he says emphatically.

In 1995 life moved almost full circle for Rogers when he bought back the



**The new interior of the 32. 'It should have looked like this to start with,' says Rogers. He'd bought back the moulds in 1995**

Contessa 32 moulds. He builds them strictly to order, turning out a couple of boats a year, mainly for overseas customers. In his workshop, a quarter-century-old 32 undergoing refurbishment lies close to a new one for a German sailor based in the Canaries.

The boat he speaks of with most enthusiasm, though, is the old Contessa 26 which he and Fiona bought last year. He's built a new interior and they'll get the boat on the water this summer, with time to enjoy her. There'll be chances to get out on the water with the family, the 'Lymington Mafia'.

Two of their three sons are heavily involved with boats; Simon is a talented yacht designer and Kit is an environmentalist film-maker.

At 60, Rogers looks a man content with his lot. He started small, and he's finishing small; in between times he was one of the greatest of them all. ▲



# The best cruiser ever?

The Contessa 32 was an instant hit on her debut 1971 and is still a benchmark for seaworthiness. Peter Nielsen pays homage to a much-loved classic

**T**he Contessa 32 was a runaway success from the day the gates opened for the 1971 Earl's Court Boat Show. By the end of the show, the first two years' production had been sold and the 32 was set fair for legendary status.

Nearly 30 years and more than 700 hulls later, the legend has lost none of its gloss. It is reflected in the high prices which old examples command, the fanatical loyalty of hundreds of owners, a thriving class association and the fact that there are still people willing to pay twice the price of a new mass-production 31-footer to have Jeremy Rogers hand-build a new Contessa for them.

The secret of this enduring appeal is not hard to pin down. In the Contessa's fine ends, slim but deep canoe body and modest freeboard are echoes of the work of great designers – Arthur Clark, Jack Laurent Giles, Alan Buchanan, Kim Holman, Olin Stephens – whose stars shone brightest in the 1950s and 60s, when the distinction between cruising and racing was not as clearcut as it is today and seaworthiness was still a prime criterion.

The David Sadler-designed 32 quickly built a reputation as a fast, tough racer and passagemaker. Within a few years it had its own class start at Cowes Week, and to this day remains one of the biggest classes in the event. By the mid-1970s Jeremy Rogers was building two a week and the waiting list stretched into years.

In the 1979 Fastnet Race, *Assent* was the only finisher out of the 58 boats in her class, plugging into seas under triple-reefed main and storm jib. The design was later singled out for praise by the Fastnet Race Inquiry Report for its seaworthiness and stability – able to right itself from an angle of 165° past vertical, the Contessa is a superb heavy-weather boat.

## Cruising pedigree

It is this seaworthiness, coupled with its strong construction, that has made the 32 such a popular choice with long-distance voyagers. Willy Ker's *Assent*,



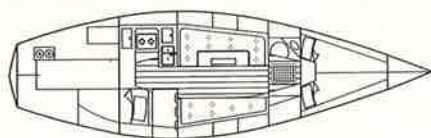
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for example, has covered more than 100,000 miles, many of them in Arctic waters, and has been knocked down twice, each time bobbing straight back up like a duck. Singlehander Karen Thorndike bought one in the Falkland Islands and circumnavigated south of the five capes, surviving some serious weather. After doubling Cape Horn, delivery skipper John Kretschmer's *Gigi* was rolled through 360° off Bermuda and came up with the rig still standing. There are dozens more stories like this.

When Jeremy Rogers fell victim to the 1982 recession, the moulds passed through several pairs of hands before he bought them back five years ago. The 2000 Contessa is little different from the 1971 Contessa. Jeremy has reinforced the mast step area, stiffened up the hull amidships, raised the headroom a little, and made a few detail changes to the heads, galley and chart table area.

Otherwise, the five-berth, two-cabin interior layout remains the same; she is the kind of boat that fits glove-like around her crew, and she has nowhere near the interior volume of a typical modern 29-footer, let alone your average new 32-footer. And at around £85,000 on the water, she does not have the kind of price tag that has boat show crowds reaching for their cheque books. Still, there are those who are enamoured enough of the 32's timeless good looks and seakeeping qualities to want to sail nothing else, enough of them to keep Jeremy as busy as he wants to be. In a sense there's still a long waiting list for this classic, the boat which is widely considered to be the best all-round cruiser of her size ever built... ▲

## CONTESSA 32 BLUEPRINTS



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