

Boatchat

Contessa 32

Twenty-five years after her launch, the archetypal cruiser-racer is back in production with her original builder. JAMES JERMAIN explains why this classic still has a place in the new-boat market

Patrick Roach/PRPA



David Sadler's Contessa 32 is probably the most instantly recognisable, most universally admired cruiser-racer design to come out of a British yard since the introduction of GRP. When Jeremy Rogers put the boat into production in 1971 she was an instant hit, exactly fitting the popular requirement for a good-looking yacht which could be cruised or raced with equal success.

She rapidly collected an impressive array of silverware at the highest level and continued to do so for many years, including a Class V win for Willy Ker's *Assent* in the notorious 1979 Fastnet Race. He has subsequently proved the cruising abilities of the design during many expeditions to high latitudes.

It is a remarkable history, not least because a yachtsman who admired one of the first Contessas, *Sunmaid IV*, at the 1972 London Boat Show would hardly find a thing out of place if, today, he boarded *Wild Call*, the latest of the marque and the first by Jeremy Rogers since 1982. Partly this is due to the active Owners' Association which, once restricted design racing had been established, kept a firm control over modifications. But mainly it is due to the fact that David Sadler got it right first time (well almost – see panel). There have been a few modifications over the years, most notably in the running of a stringer through the heads compartment, and *Wild Call* has a lower sole to improve headroom in the saloon.

There can be few yachtsmen who have been sailing since the early seventies, who haven't, at some stage, enjoyed the

Contessa 32 experience, even if only by watching one sail gracefully by. For me, stepping aboard *Wild Call* brought back memories of cruising on the Clyde, racing in the Solent and many one-off days pottering. That long, narrow cockpit with its high, upright coamings: the tiller which curves up well forward in the sole so that the helmsman sits forward with the crew astern of him: the view forward over the, long, slightly curving coachroof, and the moulded bulwarks which have been blessed by many a crew going forward to change sails in the graveyard watch. Even the rig, although not unusual for the times, with its tiny main and huge genoa (which racing crews seem to hang on to in ridiculously strong winds), seems so much part of her character.

Going below

It is sometimes said that the Contessa's interior was small, even in 1972. Compared to a cruising yacht of the times, this might have been true but she was spacious compared to many contemporary cruiser-racers. Today, however, there is no getting away from the fact that modern yachts have moved on a long way in 25 years. Not all the movement has been to the good, of course, and for keeping a crew of four safe and comfortable during a hard flog to windward, she is every bit as well designed, if not better, than today's 10m (32ft) yachts.

The original galley was little more than adequate but that on *Wild Call* is much better. The saloon is almost un-changed although the upholstery is improved

Wild Call shows off her elegant profile on a fast, controlled spinnaker reach



The deep, secure cockpit with helmsman at the forward end

and, some odd veneer mismatches apart, the woodwork is sound.

I remember the heads and forecabin being cramped but I was surprised by how small they actually are. Headroom, hovering just under 1.83m (6ft) in the new, low-sole saloon, drops dramatically to just 1.52m (5ft).

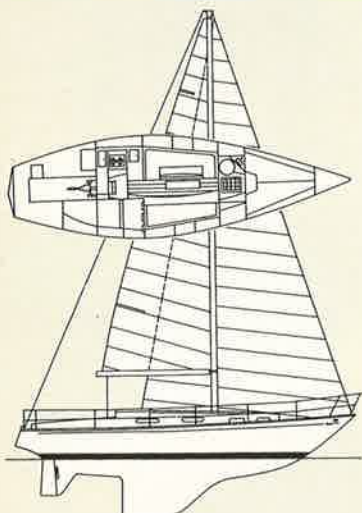
Stowage throughout the boat is good and plentiful by any standard. The bunks are long, comfortable and usable at sea. In the saloon the U-shaped dinette and settee opposite are very practical off-shore and in harbour.



The saloon is equally effective offshore and in harbour



The new galley is much improved. The quarter seat and chart table needed little updating



Specifications

LOA 9.75m (32ft)

LWL 7.31m (24ft)

Beam 2.98m (9ft 6in)

Draught 1.65m (5ft 6in)

Displacement 4,300kg (9,500 lb)

Ballast 2,045kg (4,500 lb)

Sail area 52.2m² (562sq ft)

Engine 20hp Yanmar 2GM20 diesel

Prices Complete £70,206,

part complete £19,593.

Builder Jeremy Rogers

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My impression is that the new Contessas are at least as well built as the best ever were. With production numbers planned to be less than twelve a year, each boat is hand built and finished. Compared to a modern production yacht, the joinery does not have quite the

precision of fit which a jig and machine built interior can achieve.

Under sail

The Contessa's virtues and faults have been well documented over the years. Due to the restricted-design status of the class, today's Contessa will handle pretty much as a 1972 model. In a blow you will still sail her on the genny, feathering the main to the gusts and accepting a bit of weather helm in exchange for speed. You will still find downwind sailing under that huge spinnaker exciting.

In moderate conditions, though, or reefed conservatively in cruising fashion, she is as well mannered a yacht as you could wish for, balanced yet responsive, quick, yet always under control. With all lines brought aft, the helmsman has everything to hand. She heels more than we are currently used to but she won't gripe as a wide-bodied boat will. She will drive to windward in a way we have almost forgotten about; spray flying, yes, but eating up the miles with a comfortable, easy gait that puts a minimum of strain on the crew.

Conclusions

It is hard to avoid clichés when writing about this boat since she has become a cliché herself. She is used so often as shorthand to describe what is best in a whole generation of yacht design. In technical books and articles, it is no accident that, as often as not, a drawing of a boat intended to represent a 'typical seaworthy form' has lines suspiciously like the Contessa's.

Jeremy Rogers has given two reasons for wanting to put the Contessa 32 back into limited production. First, for years he has had a steady stream of owners asking him to refurbish their boats, at not inconsiderable cost. Second, the demand for second-hand Contessas has pushed prices to extraordinary heights. In short, there is an insatiable demand for top quality Contessas.

The market for the new boats will be

Birth of a Contessa

In 1964, a young Ministry of Defence designer of battle tanks took the lines of a standard Folkboat, and redrew them to overcome some of her well-known shortcomings. The result was *Contessa of Parkstone*, named in honour of his wife, Tessa Sadler. Such was her racing success that up and coming dinghy builder, Jeremy Rogers, approached him to modify the design for GRP production building. Inspired by the numbers sold, David Sadler determined to design a bigger boat. Jeremy Rogers agreed to build it on one condition – it had five to six berths – everything else was left to Sadler.

So, in between design work on the Chieftain tank and the Warrior combat vehicle, the Contessa 32 took shape.

Sadler spent hours balancing cardboard cut-outs of sailplans and hull forms – anathema to today's CAD designers. 'I treasured my shoebox full of little pieces of cardboard,' he told me. Eventually he submitted the design to Rogers. He, Rogers, called in a designer from the Laurent Giles office to give a second opinion. Apart from the size of the forehatch, he gave the drawings the thumbs up.

Amazingly, David Sadler waived his royalty fee – 'a decision I have regretted a thousand times since'. He says he expected sales to be no more than ten. As it happened, he could have made hundreds of thousands of pounds but got no money until Jeremy Rogers sold the rights to MacBar Marine in 1982.

On the first sail trials, though, Sadler must have wondered if customers would exceed one. *Contessa Catherine* (named after his grand-daughter) floated by the stern when first launched and a hurried bit of retrimming was necessary. Then, first time under sail, there appeared to be something dramatically wrong with the steering. 'I had the tiller about 45 degrees to windward on one tack and 45 degrees to leeward on the other. Had I produced a monster? I eventually found the yard had forgotten to fit the key locking the rudder shaft to the tiller head.'

Success was assured when *Sunmaid IV* won the Boat of the Show award at the London Boat Show in 1972. Since then over 600 Contessa 32s have been built and now, at least, her designer is seeing some return for his genius.

small and the price high but she is a special boat. If you admire the active class association, top flight fleet racing and safe family cruising, then one of Rogers's new boats may be the best way of joining in. □