



Her elegant, seaworthy lines extend below the waterline and have always been a distinctive mark of this design



On test



Photos: Malcolm White



Contessa 32

Twenty-five years old this year, one of the world's favourite cruiser-racers is in production once more. Matthew Sheahan was the first journalist to test the new Contessa 32 from Jeremy Rogers

Elegant, unmistakable and unquestionably seaworthy, the Contessa 32 appears to be one of those few designs that never dates. She seems to have been born into her own timeless zone, watching others come and go around her. This year is particularly special as, not only is she 25 years old, but her original builder, Jeremy Rogers, has just launched the first 32 to be built by his yard since 1982.

If ever there was an example of near-perfect harmony between the needs of racing and cruising, the Contessa 32 has to be it. It is difficult to think of another design that has caught on in such numbers and yet spans virtually all aspects of the sport. Not only is she a staunch cruiser, but class racing has always been strong, as has handicap racing in everything from round the cans events to offshore classics.

Take the Ker family's *Assent*. Willy Ker is well known and much respected for his cruising exploits in both Arctic and Antarctic waters. Yet the family have frequently raced the boat successfully, too, winning Class 5 in the 1979 Fastnet Race.

So what makes this design so universally appealing? Jeremy Rogers set the scene for us as we sailed up a tranquil and crisp winter Solent aboard his new 32, *Wild Call*.

DESIGN

The Contessa 32 was first launched in 1971. "Designing a cruiser-racer to satisfy both camps was easier in those days," said Rogers, "as most people were combining racing and cruising anyway so they were looking for a boat that filled both bills."

In fact, the story of the 32 started well before her launch. In 1965 ex-military tank designer David Sadler bought one of the glassfibre hulls based on a Folkboat design from Jeremy Rogers. To this he added his own deck and a masthead rig and called her *Contessa of Parkstone*.

From this design, the well known and successful Contessa 26 followed in 1966.



Unmistakable from any angle, the Contessa 32 is a landmark design

Builder Jeremy Rogers takes the helm of the new boat, 25 years after building the first one

"At that time we were working under the RORC rule and, to improve her trim, we levelled the bottom of the keel, moving the centre of gravity of the ballast further forward in the boat. This also had the benefit of allowing her to take the ground more comfortably than in her Folkboat guise," said Rogers.

By 1970, Rogers and Sadler were looking for a bigger boat to build and started their research into the current examples afloat. In particular, they looked at designs like the S&S34, the She 31 and the Arpège, and finally came up with the design for the Contessa 32.

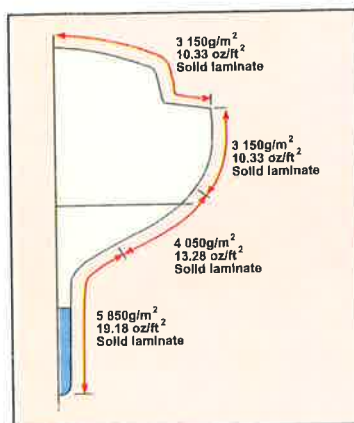
"I think one of the factors that has helped the success of the design is the lack of tumblehome. At the time we agonised over whether to incorporate this into her shape as it was a common feature of the day. The problem was that we knew what we wanted to do with her after sections and including tumblehome meant that we would have to change her shape aft.

"In the end we opted for a low freeboard and no tumblehome and this, I am sure, has helped keep her looks through the years while her contemporaries now look dated."

The boat was an immediate success and was announced as Boat of the Year at the 1972 London show. The order book filled quickly and soon there was a long waiting list.

"At our peak in 1977, we were building eight 32s per month and employing 200 people. We were, of course, still building others in our range at the same time, such as the Contessa 35 and 26." ▶

CONTESSA 32



Designed by: David Sadler
Built by: Jeremy Rogers
Marketed by: Carl Phillips Yachting Ltd,
 Firefly House, Hamble Point Marina,
 School Lane, Hamble, Hants SO31 4NR.
 Tel: (01703) 457577. Fax: (01703) 454966.

Ballast ratio 47.6
Personal stowage 10.25 per cent

Stowage factor: 3ft³ per person for stowage of personal effects. Factor is shown as a percentage of total volume.

Pounds/inch (kg/cm) Immersion: How much weight it takes to sink the boat parallel to DWL.

Prismatic coefficient: The ratio of volume to displacement to a volume of LWL and the maximum cross sectional area below the load waterplane. An indication of fineness or fullness of the hull.

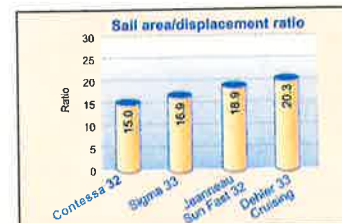
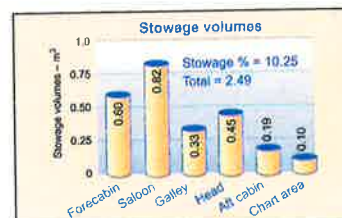
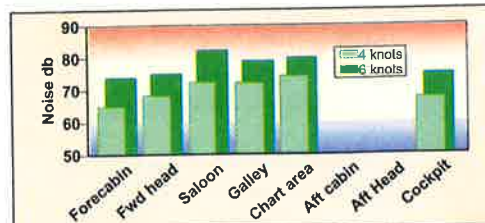
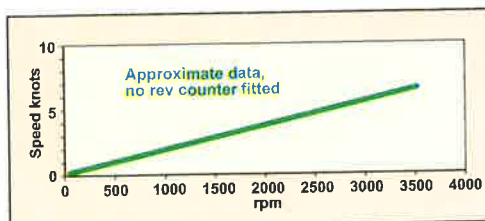
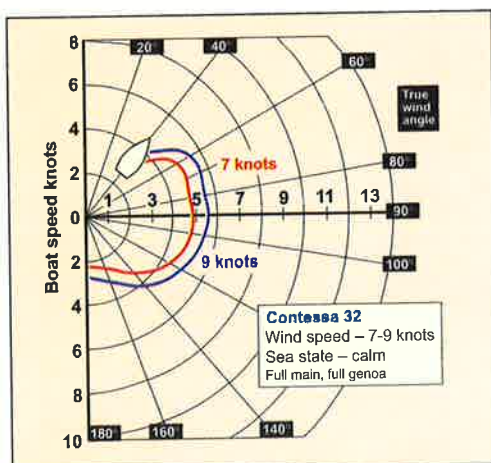
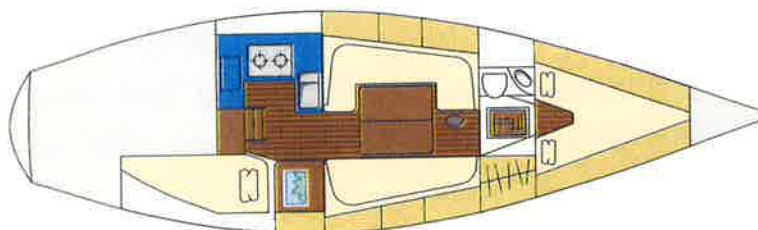
Polar diagram: Shows the optimum close-hauled angle to the true wind. Also shows speed attained on all courses. Important – consider in conjunction with the true wind speed during the test.

Sail area; displacement ratio: This ratio gives some indication of power available. Higher numbers = greater performance.

$$\frac{SA(ft^2)}{(Displacement(lb) \div 64)^{.666}}$$

Ballast ratio: A comparison between displacement and the weight of the ballast.

Displacement; waterline length: Performance indicator. Low numbers = higher performance. $(Displacement(lb) \div 2240) \div (0.01 \times LWL(ft))^3$



COMPARABLE BOATS

	CONTESSA 32
LOA	9.75m
LWL	7.32m
Beam (max)	2.98m
Draught	1.65m
Disp (lightship)	4,300kg
Ballast	2,045kg
Sail area (100% foretriangle)	39.06m²
Berths	3-5
Engine	Yanmar 2GM
Power	15kW
Water	82lt
Fuel	45lt
Sail area:disp	15.0
Disp:LWL	306
Price (ex VAT)	£59,750

	SIGMA 33
LOA	9.91m
LWL	8.00m
Beam (max)	3.20m
Draught	1.75m
Disp (lightship)	4,173kg
Ballast	1,550kg
Sail area (100% foretriangle)	43.11m²
Berths	4-7
Engine	Yanmar 2GM20
Power	15kW
Water	91lt
Fuel	68lt
Sail area:disp	16.9
Disp:LWL	227
Price (ex VAT)	£67,750

	JEANNEAU SUN FAST 32
LOA	9.50m
LWL	8.05m
Beam (max)	3.35m
Draught	1.96m
Disp (lightship)	3,601kg
Ballast	1,080kg
Sail area (100% foretriangle)	43.66m²
Berths	4-6
Engine	Yanmar 2GM20
Power	13kW
Water	159lt
Fuel	45lt
Sail area:disp	18.9
Disp:LWL	192
Price (ex VAT)	£53,389

	DEHLER 33 CRUISING
LOA	9.99m
LWL	9.00m
Beam (max)	2.99m
Draught	1.65m
Disp (lightship)	4,000kg
Ballast	1,390kg
Sail area (100% foretriangle)	50.30m²
Berths	5
Engine	Yanmar 2GM20
Power	13kW
Water	90lt
Fuel	60lt
Sail area:disp	20.3
Disp:LWL	153
Price (ex VAT)	£51,204



Old and new – the very first Contessa 32, *Contessa Catherine* (left), alongside the new Jeremy Rogers boat, *Wild Call*. Main picture, *Wild Call* sails with *Blueshank*, a 1977 version



On test

Photos: Malcolm White



Sharing the aft quarterberth, the navigator's seat is conveniently close to the companionway

ON DECK AND UNDER WAY

Stand in the Contessa's cockpit with the tiller between your legs, the genoa sheet in one hand and the mainsheet in the other and there is little more to be said about her ease of handling.

For a 32ft boat, her cockpit is small, but then every aspect of her design will seem small compared with modern designs. The advantage, though, is that small means manageable.

Deep coamings surround the teak-laid cockpit and at first her long swan-neck tiller seems to dominate this area of the boat. However, once you get under way, the helmsman is well forward in the cockpit leaving plenty of space towards the after end, a safe place for children especially.

The mainsheet traveller runs across the cockpit just abaft the companionway, an arrangement that is often criticised aboard other cruisers. To my mind this is certainly a small price to pay for ease of handling when sailing short-handed. Not only is everything easily within reach, but her well mannered and predictable handling makes her a doddle to manoeuvre.

Letting go of the tiller when motoring at, say, five knots is a reminder of how directionally unstable some modern boats are. The Contessa 32 just continues in a straight line. Even if you let go of the helm in a turn, she will centre up and continue with very little deviation.

Under sail she's the same – well balanced, easy to feel and pretty manoeuvrable, especially considering the long keel.

Another aspect in her favour is the sail area distribution. Normally, a masthead-rigged boat will have a large genoa with the associated effort of sheeting in after a tack. They are sometimes more tricky to balance as well, because of the large amount of area in the headsail and relatively small main.

The Contessa 32, on the other hand, is small enough to ensure that the furling headsail is never too much of a sweat to sheet home. The mainsail is also small by today's standards, making it easy to handle and simple to stow when short-handed.

Like many older designs, her Achilles heel is downwind sailing in heavier airs. The masthead spinnaker, or the imbalance in sail area



Above, there is increased headroom in the saloon, now typically 1.8m (6ft). Far left, handy locker/shelf in the galley. Left, better engine access

between main and jib can make life exciting, especially when she gets to hull speed. Unfortunately, the Contessa 32 was born in an age when narrow transoms were the norm and a typical downwind motion would emulate a metronome.

Despite this, though, the Contessa 32 is an eminently seaworthy boat with a good range of positive stability, docile handling and a manageable and safe deck layout.

CONCLUSIONS

Owning a Contessa is not about space, speed or being seen with the latest model. Instead, this marque says: seaworthy, practical and

timeless elegance with the back-up of a successful class association that keeps the spirit of the class alive.

Perhaps a clue to the success of a class can be found in the value of the second-hand boats. A 1980 example in moderate condition could fetch around £30,000. If the waiting list for those wanting to buy one is anything to go by, then the Contessa 32 class must surely be one of the most successful – a situation that looks set to continue for some time yet.

At the end of our trials I was prepared to bet that this was just the first of many anniversaries for this class. I only hope I look as good in 25 years' time. □



Success, as they say, breeds success. Over 600 Contessas have been sold since the first boat was launched 25 years ago, making it one of the most prolific cruiser-racers of all time. To match that, the loyal ranks of owners have one of the largest and most active class associations of any fleet.

Around 370 owners belong to the association, which costs just £20 to join. Most are from the UK, but Contessas are spread

round the world, and there are members in Holland, USA, France, Spain, Germany, Saudi Arabia, Canada, the Caribbean and Australia.

One of the unique features of the association is its 'introduction service'. The class secretary, Judy Evans Ruffell, matches buyers and sellers. Both parties register, for a fee of £35, and pay £150 on completion of a sale. It cuts out brokerage fees and, says Mrs Evans, "keeps boats in the fold". About a dozen are sold in this way every year.

Mrs Evans Ruffell likens the atmosphere in the association, which binds cruising and racing elements together, as "rather like an MG owners' club." The analogy is good, for the Contessa 32 has developed something of a cult following. "It's a very particular class," agrees Judy Evans Ruffell.

Contact: Judy Evans Ruffell, Rosedale Cottage, 16 Westfield Road, Lymington, Hants SO41 3PY. Tel: (01590) 672175. Fax: (01590) 674797.



Outwardly little has changed since the early examples. Additional stiffening in the hull is one improvement. Right, a teak-laid cockpit is a more obvious addition

But in 1982 financial problems hit the yard which was forced to close. Since then the moulds have been sold several times and the production of 32s reduced to a trickle from various yards.

In the meantime, Rogers has remained in touch with owners who regularly asked him to quote for refurbishing older examples.

"It was perhaps this, more than anything else, that convinced me to go ahead with building the 32 as a new boat again. I realised that I could produce a brand new boat for a similar cost to what some people were prepared to spend on a refurbishment," he said.

The result is that you can now buy a new basic boat for £59,750 ex VAT.

CONSTRUCTION

Contessa Catherine was the very first Contessa 32 to be built and we tracked her down so we could place *Wild Call* alongside her. Considering the difference in age, and the fact that she was the very first, little has changed. Her cockpit layout is still the compact and deep, yet comfortable layout that was first drawn, the only real difference – apart from the outward signs of age – being the teak-laid cockpit aboard *Wild Call* which replaces the plywood strips in *Contessa Catherine*.

Contessa 32s use a solid laminate for both hull and deck using a combination of chopped strand mat and woven rovings in an orthophthalic polyester resin.

The hull is built in a split mould with an encapsulated lead keel. After both sides of the hull have been laminated together, 2,045kg (4,500lb) of moulded lead ballast is lowered into the long keel moulding.

A combination of resin and chopped strand mat is poured into the moulding to bond the lead into place. After this, more resin and mat is poured over the top of the lead before the floors are built into the bottom of the boat.



Of the changes that have taken place though, most are behind the scenes. The stringers have been extended through the head and forward into the bow sections, as well as further aft. An additional stringer now runs along the port side and connects the galley bulkhead to the head bulkhead, providing additional support for the bunk front on the starboard side.

BELOW DECKS

The Contessa 32 has never been known for interior space and in today's volume-crazy market she looks no better, especially considering her overall length. But for many, volume is not everything and what comes across immediately is that she is highly practical, secure to move about in and simple.

Hot pressurised running water, heating, a shower in the head and an after cabin are all frequently found on the specification of modern 32-footers. These will not be

On test

found aboard the Contessa 32. At least, not as standard.

Instead, the Contessa offers her owners a solid base on which to add the features that they feel are important to them and not to be saddled with the extra cost of a comprehensive list of standard equipment.

There is no denying she's solidly built throughout. Nowhere did we find any hint of a flimsy fitting, or lightly built panel. You could fall against any of it and only damage yourself!

However, we were surprised by the rough and ready quality of her joiner work in some areas. Elongated saw cuts, untidy finishing to several areas of the joiner work and poor varnish work in some places did mar the overall impression, although it has to be said that these shortcomings were always cosmetic and never structural.

Her positive aspects will no doubt outweigh these niggles for true seagoing folk. If you're the kind of person who views boat show boats with your head on one side, (to help you imagine what she's like at sea), you'll be impressed with this boat. Her narrow form makes her secure below decks, there is always something to grab hold of and there seems little chance of being thrown across the cabin, even in the worst seas.

Her layout is easy to work, too, as the galley and navigation station are either side of the companionway. It doesn't take much to imagine passing out either a mug of coffee, or the next heading, to the helmsman without ever leaving your position below decks.

She's not blessed with a profusion of berths. There are three permanent berths and a further two available if you use the saloon seating. But again, the point is that she is practical, especially for short-handed sailing. A wide pilot/quarter berth on the starboard side is close to the companionway and also adjacent to the navigation table and instrument panel – perfect for the single-handed sailor.

One of the most noticeable improvements in the saloon is the increased headroom which is now typically 1830mm (6ft). ▶

Right, the second of the new 32s in build at Rogers' yard. Below, a classic fine entry

