

Sailing a Contessa 32 from Sunderland

Alan Dixon takes Theo Stocker out for a day sail aboard his classic cruiser-racer

PHOTOS: THEO STOCKER



Charlie the cocker spaniel is always keen to get aboard Charlotte – just like his skipper

The first yacht I ever sailed was a Contessa 32. I was ten, crossing from Vlissingen to the Deben. I remember the long night followed by a dawn landfall on the Suffolk coast, then slipping silently onto a mooring at Waldringfield. So it was with some nostalgia that I travelled to Sunderland Marina to meet up with *Charlotte*, a 1980 Contessa 32, on a misty March morning.

Charlotte's current custodian, Alan Dixon, aged 63, is commodore of the Sunderland Yacht Club, and owner of Charlie, a cocker spaniel with more sea miles than many a 'salty old sea dog'.

The lines of a Contessa 32 are instantly recognisable. The low freeboard, long overhangs and forward raked stern of this

classic racer-cruiser have come to define what a 'good boat' should look like.

With high pressure giving the storm-battered UK its first taste of spring, we weren't sure we'd be able to really put her through her paces, but not wanting to waste the glorious sunshine, we were soon under way.

Alan is used to singlehanded day-sailing and quickly had fenders and lines stowed and sails up. He uses his Raymarine tiller pilot to steady the boat while busy on deck, although in open water he prefers his Neptune servo-

pendulum windvane self-steering gear. In defiance of the forecast, a perfect Force 3-4 sprang up from the south-east against the flood tide. It may have felt like spring but it wasn't warm. 'Anything from the south-east is usually cold,' explained Alan, 'and it's got a long fetch so it can get rough.'

Outside the breakwaters, *Charlotte* gamely put her shoulder to the slight chop. We were glad of the large sprayhood to huddle under, where, thanks to the Contessa's long tiller mounted in the cockpit sole, the helmsman

Lunchtime treat: Theo enjoys his fried spam and onion roll



Alan Dixon bought Charlotte in 2004, and has now sailed her as far afield as Holland and Orkney



can sit in shelter with the mainsheet and all the instruments in reach, while the crew take the more exposed space further aft.

Hard on the wind, *Charlotte* had slight weather helm in the gusts, but generally she was well-balanced enough to take your hand off the helm to sheet in the main or the genoa on one of the Lewmar 40 winches. There's also a pair of coachroof winches for halyards and another pair aft for the spinnaker sheets, and winches at the mast for reefing. In 11 knots of true wind we were tacking through 105 degrees at 4.5-5.0 knots and could have possibly hardened up a little more but may have lost some way.

She has a masthead rig on a keel-stepped mast with an adjustable backstay and a single set of spreaders above fore-and-aft

lower. The chainplates are in the middle of the sidedecks, which slightly hampers moving forwards, but she has a generous foredeck and the solid gunwales make it feel secure. The 50m (164ft) of chain and another 40m (131ft) of rope for the 15kg (33lb) Delta anchor on the bow roller, as well as a kedge anchor and chain, are ready for *Charlotte's* regular forays into remote anchorages.

Designed by David Sadler in 1970 as a big sister to the 26, the Contessa 32 made her reputation in the 1979 Fastnet when *Assent*, skippered by Willy Ker, sailed straight through the storm and was the



CHART: MAXINE HEATH

The overlapping genoa came into its own in the stiff breeze, bowling Charlotte along at six knots

'Cutting through the waves, she'll eat up the sea miles, whether that's around the cans or crossing the North Sea to Norway'

'Why I keep my boat in Sunderland'



It costs around £2,600 to keep a 27-34ft yacht in Sunderland Marina

Sunderland Yacht Club members keep their yachts either in Sunderland Marina, or around the corner on club-owned trots in Sunderland North Dock. Both are located just inside the mouth of the River Wear, little more than a half-mile sail from open water and the cruising grounds of County Durham, Northumbria and the northern North Sea.

What does it cost to keep your boat here?

In Sunderland Marina a 27-34ft boat will pay around £2,600 for an annual berth. The yacht club moorings are much cheaper at £140 for the six-month summer season, but they are not available in the winter and members are expected to help out with their maintenance. Still, it helps keep the cost down and there's a twice yearly crane lift and club hardstanding. Club membership is £175 for a full member, or £90 for an introductory crewing membership for people who want to get into sailing.

only vessel in the small boat class to finish. More than 750 have now been built, and counting, by Jeremy Rogers' yard in Lymington, now run by his son Kit.

Charlotte is a big improvement on Alan's last boat, a 27ft (8m) Jeanneau Fantasia. 'She had very comfortable accommodation,' he recalls, 'but she was a pig to sail'.

His first yacht was a Hunter 701, 'a great little boat and I could reach the mast lines from the companionway.' In fact, it's been a steady progression in size from the Carry Craft his dad taught him to sail in and the dinghies and windsurfers he sailed from Beadnell in Northumbria.

Leaving me on deck to helm with Charlie, Alan headed below to whip up some lunch. As the breeze picked up to 14 knots, the huge overlapping genoa came into its own and got *Charlotte* bowling along at six knots, heeling to 25 degrees.

She was a real pleasure to sail and, as I relaxed into watching the tell-tales, we were soon past Seaham and Peterlee.

Wonderful smells wafted up from the galley as Alan served up his speciality of fried spam and onion rolls, much to the envy of Charlie.

Having almost reached Hartlepool it was time to turn for home with the tide and we bore away onto a reach to close the coast.

Across the wind *Charlotte* can easily sit at over 6.5 knots but the breeze dropped off to 7.0 knots under clear blue skies and we were making 3.5 knots. Opting for a bit more speed, Alan rigged the spinnaker and we were soon broad reaching at 6.5 knots in 9.5 knots of apparent wind.

The cliffs rose out of the light haze, silhouetted by the low sun.

'This coast used to be black with heavy industry,' said Alan. 'But that's gone and



Alan drops the mainsail as they motor back into Sunderland Marina

things are much greener, but it has left a big gap.'

Now retired, Alan started his working life with the Coal Board as his father and grandfather had done before him, but when the pits closed he had to go elsewhere and eventually found his way to IT consulting. He served ten years on the RNLi inshore lifeboat at Sunderland as a senior

helmsman and is still involved as a sea safety officer, helping with training and sea safety checks.

It was sobering to hear that of the 50 lifejackets he checked last summer, at least three would have completely failed to

operate. He and his crew always wear a lifejacket when under way.

When all else fails, Alan likes to know he can get to where he's going. He replaced the original 'gutless' 12hp Petter with a 25hp Vetus and changed the old two-bladed propeller to a meatier three-bladed prop, which was easier said than done. The prop is well protected in an aperture behind the skeg so the rudder has to be dropped completely to get at it. Alan has also found that the arrangement makes the lubrication of the cutless bearing less effective.

With the boat settled on a nine-mile spinnaker run, I headed below decks. *Charlotte* is well laid out, though smaller than modern designs, with diminishing headroom forwards. She has a decent-sized chart table forward of the pilot berth on starboard, and a neat U-shaped



LEFT: The hardstanding at Sunderland YC
RIGHT: A well deserved beer in the clubhouse after a long day's sailing



What are the tidal constraints?

Both the marina and the trot moorings are accessible at all states of the tide.

What is the shelter like?

The marina is very well sheltered from the wind, but in an easterly storm swell coming in through the river mouth can refract around the various wave breaks and cause

a bit of movement on the pontoons. The moorings are slightly less sheltered but are, nonetheless, perfectly secure.

What facilities are available?

Visitors are welcome in the marina and clubhouse. There are no designated visitors' berths but with pontoon space for 114 boats, berths for boats up to 40ft (12m) can be

provided at £2.40 per metre a night. There is a two-tonne crane on the quayside for club members and twice a year a crane is organised for a club lift. The club also has 46 fore-and-aft moorings. There is a half-tide shelf to scrub off and antifoul. Alan uses Royal Quays Tynemouth, a few miles north, to lift *Charlotte* out for repairs, having found the staff knowledgeable and very helpful.

ME & MY BOAT

Key cruising features

There are plenty of winches, although they aren't self-tailing

The main is easily stowed between the lazyjacks

The pushpit is kept clear with a neat mast for the various aerials and a permanently fitted LED anchor light

The large cockpit locker has enough space to carry a spare main and genoa

Spray dodgers keep the crew dry but limit windward visibility

The liferaft on the foredeck used to snag the genoa sheets, so Alan has rigged a strop to stop this

An anchor windlass is on the 'must-have' list to stop the crew complaining about hauling in by hand



Alan had a delicious curry warmed up and ready to eat as they tied up in the marina

galley to port. There's no fridge, but two deep, insulated cool lockers. Handholds abound around the chart table and galley, plus deckhead grabrails for going forward.

The saloon table drops down to make the seating area into a double berth. The heads is forward of the keel-stepped mast, and has a sliding door aft, but is open to the double V-berth in the forepeak, with a good-size wet locker to starboard.

Since buying her in 2005, Alan has made improvements every year. She's had new running rigging, a new suit of sails, new furling gear, a stack-pack sail cover to help with short-handed sailing, LED nav lights, insulation in the forepeak, and a battery monitor. The latter helps keep an eye on things when power-hungry crew are

charging gadgets from the 12V sockets he has installed above each bunk. The boat is also kitted out with a Navtex receiver, AIS, a tablet with Navionics, and a laptop with Neptune plotting software.

Charlotte is a labour of love for Alan. He first got to know her when she was bought in a sorry state from a yard in Whitby by his friend Richard Mills. They worked together on her and soon sailed her to Holland and Orkney. Richard died in 2004, and although Alan hadn't been looking for a new boat, he knew he'd always regret it if he didn't give *Charlotte* a good home.

'In some ways she found me, as did all my other boats before her,' he says.

She has certainly looked after him since then on his cruises along the East Coast.

On one occasion in an Orkney sound, a simple error nearly got them into real bother. 'I'd worked out the tides and it should have been slack water, but before we knew it we were surfing down 15ft standing waves. It's the only time water has come over her stern.' He later realised he'd read the tide times for the previous Thursday – easily done. But these moments are contrasted with memories of nights that never got dark, and isolated anchorages under silver skies encircled with monochrome silhouettes of hills.

Heading back into Sunderland, we finished off a glorious spring sail with a spinnaker reach at 6.5 knots.

Secured alongside, Alan warmed up some curry, another delicious *Charlotte* speciality, before we wandered ashore to enjoy a pint, or two at the Sunderland Yacht Club.

Thanks to Frank at Sunderland Marine Centre for driving the RIB for photos.

Contessa 32

ARTWORK: MAXINE HEATH



FACTS AND FIGURES

- **Guide price** New £189,000+VAT (1970s-80s: £25,000-£30,000)
- **LOA** 9.75m (32 ft)
- **LWL** 7.32m (24ft)
- **Beam** 2.9m (9ft 6in)
- **Draught** 1.6m (5ft 6in)
- **Genoa** 24m² (258 sq ft)
- **Mainsail** 16.2m² (175 sq ft)
- **Engine** Vetus 25hp
- **Fuel capacity** 45 litres
- **Displacement** 4,309kg (9,500lb)
- **Balast** 2,042kg (4,500lb)
- **Ballast ratio** 47%
- **Sail area displacement ratio** 15.5
- **Designer** David Sadler
- **Builder** Jeremy Rogers Limited (www.jeremyrogers.co.uk)
- **Class Association:** www.co32.org



Alan has invested in electronic navigation, including AIS

The Contessa's hull has elegant and distinctive tumblehome



OUR VERDICT ON THE BOAT

What's she like to sail?

The Contessa 32 is one of the most successful cruiser racers of the last 30 years – and it's easy to see why. She's a joy to sail on the wind, quick on a reach, and well set up for spinnaker work downwind. With a dry weight of over four tonnes, a deep forefoot leading to a long fin keel and a skeg-mounted rudder, she's a solid sea-boat that will see you through all seasons of offshore sailing. All that and she's still winning races on handicap.

The deep cockpit felt very safe, and the proper gunwales made working on deck feel secure. The grabrail attached to the aft edge of the sprayhood made stepping onto the slightly narrow sidedecks easy. With the sprayhood and dodgers in place it did feel a little too cocooned and visibility to windward was a bit limited.

She is heavier and slower on the helm than a fin-keeler with a balanced spade rudder, and she needs 12 knots or more to really get going. But all of that pales into insignificance when you're at the helm. She's made to sail and she does so beautifully, cutting through the waves in a way that makes you want to let her keep going. Given a chance, she'll eat up the sea miles, whether that's around the cans or crossing the North Sea to Norway.

What's she like in port and at anchor?

She manoeuvres predictably under engine in port. With the rudder immediately aft of the prop you have instant control when going ahead. Astern, it is a fact that she will walk to port and so as long as you work with that, you're fine. A solid anchor and plenty of chain mean *Charlotte* can anchor almost anywhere with confidence and her low-windage hull shouldn't be prone to sailing around her anchor. While the hull shape limits living space below decks – anyone over 6ft tall will have to stoop slightly – there is a surprising amount of stowage. There's space to sleep six, and Alan's had nine for dinner around the large fold-out saloon table before, but living on board with a full crew would be a bit cosy. The galley gives plenty of space to whip up hot meals for your crew in port or at sea. She is a comfortable and homely boat inside, with some of the old charm that you no longer get from sitting in a tupperware box.

Would she suit you and your crew?

It's hard to imagine many crews for whom a Contessa 32 wouldn't meet a good number of their criteria. She'll take you to Greenland and back without any qualms. She'll happily potter out for a daysail or a weekend away and give you somewhere to get away from it all. The next weekend, she'd be just as happy racing around the Isle of Wight and would still have a chance of winning. She's a true sailing boat and built for mile after mile of satisfying cruising, and solidly built – she will look after you in pretty much anything.

She's not a modern boat, so if you are going Mediterranean island hopping and want space to for an extensive bathing platform or a sun-deck, she can't really help you. But that's not what she does. For Alan, who often sails her singlehanded, or with a couple of crew on longer trips around the British coast, she's the ideal boat. She certainly suits her canine crew Charlie, who was introduced to her at three weeks old and has happily accompanied Alan ever since, almost entirely 'without accident', as long as he gets his morning walk before departure. The Contessa 32 is a versatile, trustworthy companion of a boat that is game for pretty much any type of adventure you might suggest.

Does she suit your style of sailing?

CREEK CRAWLING



COASTAL PORT-HOPPING



OFFSHORE PASSAGE-MAKING



TRADE WIND VOYAGING



HIGH-LATITUDE ADVENTURE

