

The Shape of Boats to Come?

Imagine the scene: it's blowing 35 knots outside Dartmouth as a sleek 55-footer reaches in towards the mouth of the river. Some way astern is a much smaller, grey-hulled, traditional-looking boat with a bowsprit. But she's not astern for long. Though dwarfed by the larger yacht, the little 30-footer, with her varnished wooden spars and lugsail yawl rig, sails straight past at over nine knots.

That was last summer, and it wasn't the first time *Grey Merlin* had demonstrated her complete lack of respect for larger boats. Since her launch less than a year ago, she's probably been responsible for more gasps of admiration and expressions of utter bewilder-



David Harding investigates

ment from other boat owners than most of the new designs of the last 10 years put together.

Asking the impossible?

She came about because of the particular requirements of one man. David Still had owned a Sadler 34 for 11 years, but all his earlier boats had been classic designs and he wanted to go back to one. "There wasn't enough string to play with on the Sadler," he explained.

The new boat had to be slightly smaller. Good performance was essential, particularly in light winds so he wouldn't have to do much motoring. She also had to have shallow draft, for exploring the upper reaches of rivers and drying out quietly at the top of creeks. And though a traditional-style rig would provide the necessary strings to pull on, she had to be easily managed by two people.

It was a tall order – and not surprisingly there seemed to be noth-

Water level: there's not much freeboard aft, but the high bow makes her a surprisingly dry boat.

ing suitable. But then he found out about Nigel Irens' beautiful *Roxane*. Designed by a man best-known for his leading-edge, high-speed multihulls such as *Fujicolour* and *Formule Tag*, *Roxane* – like her smaller sister *Romilly* – was born of a desire to create an uncomplicated fast cruiser which would bring the fun back into sailing and owning a boat. Her high aspect-ratio lugsail rig, with

Beneath the traditional facade lurks a modern Nigel Irens-designed hull

the main mast right forward and a small mizzen almost on the transom, makes her one of the most distinctive and graceful craft afloat.

Theme and variations

Having sailed *Roxane*, David was impressed by the hull and her sailing ability. But the rig wasn't what he wanted – and Nigel's 'back to basics' theme had been taken a little too far for his liking. *Roxane* was designed for weekend coastal sailing and occasional ventures

further offshore, while David wanted a boat more suited to extended cruising – one which he and his family could live on for several weeks at a time. He knew exactly what he wanted and had a lifetime of sailing and boatbuilding experience to draw on. So he bought a set of hull and deck mouldings, and set about developing his own rig and interior.

When I first saw *Grey Merlin* sailing down Chichester Harbour, I couldn't believe it. Compared to *Roxane* she looked so different. From a distance, she has the appearance of a real old-timer – the rig had totally transformed her. Only when you get closer do you see the smooth, slippery-looking grp hull and those dished topsides which give her a narrow waterline beam. Then you see her catch a gust of wind and accelerate like a dinghy, leaving hardly any wake.

A gentle sheer runs from the transom up to the high bow. Below the waterline, the shallow canoe body is drawn out into a long straight keel, the bottom of which runs almost parallel to a line taken from

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But there's not a wire shroud to be seen. "I didn't want stainless steel," he said, "and I preferred to use something more modern than galvanised. So Nigel suggested Spectra, which he'd seen on traditional-style boats far larger than this. It looks the part and works extremely well."

Some of Grey Merlin's blocks and dead-eyes came from suppliers of classic boat fittings like Daveys, while others are genuine originals from Spencer rigging which, says David, "someone found lying around in the bottom of a bag. One or two had been used on boats built before the turn of the century."

In her owner's words, "her lug rig is as near to a gaff as you can get without having jaws." With the unstayed, offset mizzen stepped forward of the rudder head she's strictly speaking a ketch, but in practice she's really a yawl.



Old and new: the traditional-looking halyards are Terylene, but some of Grey Merlin's blocks are 19th-century originals.

stem to stern. With its deepest point right aft, it gives her a draft of just 2ft 6in (0.76m) and means the propeller and transom-hung rudder are well protected for grounding. A small, high aspect-ratio cast iron centreplate drops down to increase the draft to 5ft 9in (1.75m).

True to tradition

Above the deck, there's little to tell you this is a new boat. Her spars are protected with five coats of epoxy and another five of varnish, to which David added some colouring to darken the pale-coloured Douglas Fir. Being hollow, they apparently weigh the same as they would if made from carbon fibre.

acceleration; a fascinating combination of speed and docility together with the sort of directional stability you don't normally experience with so fast a boat.

As with most long-keelers, she needed a degree of pressure on the helm to turn her and liked to be sailed fairly gently through tacks and gybes rather than spun around. But the relatively shallow keel combined with the centreplate made her far more manoeuvrable than a traditional long-keeled yacht. And she was so nicely balanced the tiller remained pleasantly light even though the wind, between 12 and 15 knots most of the time, occasionally gusted to over 20. She responded to each gust by going over fairly readily to about 15 degrees of heel before stiffening up, shooting forward, then heeling progressively as the wind built. Not once, though, did she even threaten to dip her gunwales.

With the mizzen so far aft, she understandably liked the sheet to be eased when bearing away – and that was when the benefits of the big square mainsail really made themselves felt. On a bermudan-rigged boat, unless it's blowing hard or you hoist a chute or spinnaker,

I found David's answer to my question about how he designed the rig reassuring. "I drew the sail plan as I wanted it and sent it to Nigel for his approval. He said it looked OK so it probably was – but he ran through the calculations all the same to confirm the balance."

Despite using state-of-the-art computers, Nigel still goes to a large extent by what looks right. He builds models of his designs – which normally start life as a pencilled sketch – from lines produced by computer. He takes a long hard look at them and feeds the results back into the program. It's good to know the human eye still has some input in this age of high technology.

Bewitching

My first impression on stepping aboard and sheeting home was one of smoothness with tremendous

power once the wind goes abaft the beam. Not so with Grey Merlin – she just kept creaming along with the log barely dipping below the 6.5 to 7 knots it was reading on a beam reach. I just couldn't help thinking that a kicking strap would make the sail even more efficient. You don't normally see them on gaff or lugsail rigs, but the boom did tend to sky when the sheet was eased. It would also eliminate the danger of a Chinese gybe.



Lazy jacks keep the gaff under control when hoisting the mainsail.

Windward wizardry

We all know that given a following wind, gaffers and luggers can pass boats with modern rigs. But they don't like going the other way, do they? Well, as a rule maybe not. But someone forgot to tell Grey Merlin.

As we hardened up, we centred the mainsheet horse by taking a couple of turns of the control line around the windward samson post in the corner of the cockpit – a simple but effective system. Then we sheeted the mainsail in hard. With the powerful leech brought well in towards the centre line, she point-





ed to within 35 degrees of the apparent wind and still made over 5 knots.

It was an impressive performance for a boat with this type of rig – and David confirmed he'd often sailed both higher and faster than more modern boats, particularly in light conditions.

An easy haul

Nothing on board required much physical effort. Both headsails were small enough to be easily managed by the size 8 bronze winches without using handles, though the staysail blocked the view of the jib from the leeward side. I also found it difficult to see the luff from the helm. A tiller extension would help here.

Apart from splitting the sail area into easily-manageable portions, the cutter-headed yawl rig lets you set the boat up so she's balanced for virtually any conditions. The first step when the wind pipes up is to drop the mizzen. We brailed it on a beam reach during a breezier spell and it did make the helm lighter. We also tried dropping the mainsail. Under just mizzen and headsails we still made 3½ knots to windward and a knot more on a reach.

Walking around on deck, I had to remind myself that *Grey Merlin* has no guardwires. But as well as jackstays and the sturdy, teak-capped bulwarks, unlike *Roxane* she does at least have shrouds to hang on to.

"Boarding is so much easier without guardwires," pointed out David's wife Jenny. Thanks to the low freeboard aft, something else that's much easier is getting at the water if you need to. "We don't like being too high up, looking down on the sea," said David. Jenny continued: "It's so nice being able to dangle your feet over the side on a hot day – to us it's all part of the fun of sailing."

Happily I had an excuse to try it. After bringing an anchor on board I had some very muddy legs and ankles to wash. Just sitting on the side and splashing away did the job very nicely. I'd recommend it to anyone who's been sailing a boat with six feet of freeboard for so long they've forgotten what it's like.

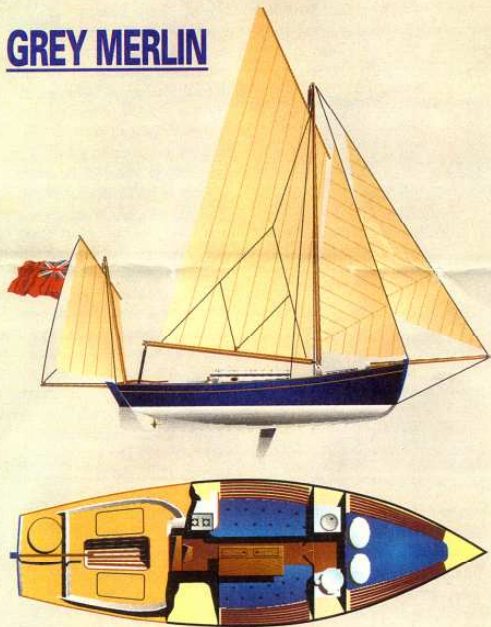
Practical measures

Grey Merlin's rig and sailing performance proved so absorbing I almost ran out of time for looking at her engine and accommodation. Besides, she sails so well David finds he seldom needs mechanical assistance. When he does, the



Galley and wet locker are sensibly sited just inside the companionway. Wide berths and dished topsides give her a particularly comfortable saloon – as long as you don't try standing up.

GREY MERLIN



SPECIFICATION

Length over spars	45ft 1in
Length on deck	29ft 6in
LWL	26ft 7in
Beam	9ft 0in
Draft	2ft 6in - 5ft 9in
Displacement	7,044lb
Ballast	3,300lb
Sail areas - mainsail	321sq ft
- jib	97sq ft
- staysail	85sq ft
- mizzen	75sq ft
- spinnaker	522sq ft
Price (inc VAT)	£85,000
Designer	Nigel Irens
Builder	David Still

David Still is planning to build a limited number of *Grey Merlin*-style boats based on the *Roxane* hull. You can contact him at Van Veen Jachtbouw, Stellendam -the Netherlands. Tel 0031 187 49 1276

Roxane is available part-complete (hull and deck bonded together with ballast installed and spars etc.) for around £30,000. Details from: Nigel Irens Yacht Design, Staverton Bridge Mill, Totnes, Devon, TQ9 6AH. Tel: (01803) 762770. Fax: (01803) 762377.

smooth, low-revving twin-cylinder 20hp Lister swings into action, driving a three-bladed feathering propeller which produces virtually no drag under sail. At a gentle 2,200 rpm it drove her along at 5 knots, another 500 rpm easily taking her up to hull speed.

Down below, I was reminded once again how narrower boats always seem to make better use of space than beamier ones. By modern standards, *Grey Merlin* is both narrow and low, but not a cubic inch is wasted. The lack of headroom didn't worry me – there was plenty of height to sit in comfort and that's the important thing. After all, if you can't stand up straight I see little point in sacrificing aesthetics and sailing performance just to gain a few extra few inches so you can stoop uncomfortably.

Lounging space

A compact galley is to port by the companionway, with a combined wet locker and glory bin opposite. Further forward, the wide berths and angled hull sides give her one of the most comfortable saloons for lounging in I've come across on any size boat. Up in the high bow, ahead of the toilet and wash basin between the two cabins, the forepeak houses a truly king-size double – well, by the standards of a 30-foot boat anyway.

Though there's only one small scuttle each side in the coachroof, the interior is surprisingly bright – thanks largely to the four prisms set into the deck. It's neatly finished in American walnut, with slatting along the hull sides and a routered, white-painted plywood headlining vacuum-bonded to the deckhead.

Only the best

Within reason, *Grey Merlin* has been fitted out with the best materials and equipment available – which is why she cost a cool £85,000. And David used British names wherever possible.

The result is a unique boat which, in some ways, breaks every rule in the book but gets away with it. True, the Stills' philosophy won't be shared by everyone – most builders these days seem to be concentrating on increasing freeboard and reducing the number of strings you need to pull, not the other way round.

"A balance between aesthetics and practicality in the modern world" is how David described what he set out to achieve. It's difficult to see how anyone could have done better. ●

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