



A Kite Called Kate

Hard chine lightweight GRP hull, carbon spars, NACA section foils...
She's a gaffer, Jim... but not as we know them.
Marc Fovargue-Davies goes racing.

With photographs by Gill Moon and Peter Chadwick

Seeing the latest incarnation of Andrew Wolstenholme's Kite for the first time was a surprise. She's still clearly the same design but the new GRP version has changed more than just the building material. While the original had a more traditional appearance, this was that most elusive of beasts, an utterly contemporary gaffer.

At first, it's hard to put a finger on exactly what's different. The overall 'Flaxen' colour of both the hull and deck moulding, set off by a mahogany coaming and her white painted carbon spars, obviously contributes to the transformation but there's more to it than that. This is not simply a boat built from a mould taken off the wooden original; Euan Seel and Matt Lingley at Demon Yachts in Harkstead approached the build with a clean sheet of paper and built their moulds from scratch; this was to be a Kite with few strings attached.

Kite's lines – and indeed character – owe more than a little

to an American 'knockabout' but in the GRP version these have been slightly softened; most obvious is the moulded sheerstrake, which helps to lower and lengthen her a little visually. Closer inspection reveals subtle curves have appeared in the shape of the cabin. A glance below finds a powerful looking winch for the aerofoil section centreplate and an equally contemporary choice of upholstery trim but not much else to get in the way – or add weight. Light weight was key to the original plywood Kite's performance and the change of construction material has certainly made her no heavier – just as well, as it looked like we might need all the help we could get on a hazy east coast morning, with light airs which couldn't make up their minds what they wanted to be.

Getting ready to go was hardly a complex process, consisting mostly of fishing the Torqeedo electric outboard motor out of its locker, taking the ties off the main and



Top: The cabin is not intended to be a cruising caravan but there's space enough for two decent berths and a Portaloo.

Above: A capacious locker for the Torqeedo outboard.

Below: Modern gear includes the custom centreplate winch and roller furling on the short bowsprit for the single headsail.



stowing our gear in the cabin. Leaving the marina at Shotley via the lock is always an interesting test in itself. Unless you're very early or very late, there's usually an appreciative audience – somewhat reminiscent of the ladies knitting at the foot of the guillotine – happy to offer their thoughts and advice on any evolving incidents. However, with the outboard positioned just forward of a proper-sized rudder, there were no problems on that score and once out in clear water the main on its carbon gaff was a doddle to hoist. Even before you start sailing then, this is a fast boat; there's very little in the way of getting out on the water quickly, which means more time afloat.

These thoughts though, were interrupted by a very dinghy-like sounding gurgle, eerily reminiscent of a 505 just starting to get interested, as *Kate* – a good name for a Kite if you want to challenge your proof-reader – quickly picked up speed in the fitful breeze. She initially notices where you put your weight but once heeled enough to engage the leeward chine, she abruptly stiffens up and tracks well, with just enough rudder loading to give a good feel to the helm.

While her light weight helped her accelerate quickly in what wind there was, she's clearly far from tender; Her high form stability and response to the few stronger puffs that we managed to find, suggested that she'd stand up well to her 212 square feet (19.7m²) of sail in a breeze – when that lightweight carbon rig would reduce weight aloft and keep her centre of gravity low.

Kite is intended to be enjoyable to sail rather than a stripped back racer and the large, uncluttered cockpit means there's plenty of space for company. A responsive feel and a good turn of speed always makes a boat enjoyable to sail and Kite will certainly appeal to those looking for something smaller and more fun than a family sized cruiser. The sails are not large enough to need the complication and expense of winches and there's not much in the way of string. She'll also appeal to dinghy sailors wanting something a little larger; aside from sounding a bit like a big dinghy, she also seems to encourage you to move your weight forward in light weather – occasionally to the point of running out of tiller extension. Both Euan and Matt – who admittedly still sails a Contender – have also noticed the feeling. However, while a longer extension is being fitted, it might be mostly down to imagination, as watching Kite's waterline from the pontoon with Euan right aft unshipping the outboard, revealed no significant change in her trim!

Speed is important in a cruising boat; it means that you have wider cruising grounds and you're also likely to spend more time sailing than motoring. But in a boat for going places, you also need the right kind of performance; the speed needs to be easily accessible, rather than requiring significant effort and compromise. Many race boats are fast but need a lot of crew and effort to take advantage of it and they can be quite twitchy – in some cases downright angry. Kite on the other hand, is relaxed, even forgiving but still apparently faster than she has any obvious right to be, raising the blood pressure of competitors and handicappers alike.

Having finally run out of wind entirely and traded tiller extension and sheets for pint mugs, that then was the last, niggling question: just how fast is Kite – and what's she like

DEMON YACHTS' KITE SPECIFICATION

Length over spars: 23'7" (7.2m)

Length on deck: 21' (6.4m)

Beam: 6'9" (2.05m)

Draft – c/p raised: 10" (254mm)

c/p lowered: 3'10" (1.17m)

Sail area: 212 sq.ft (19.7m²)

Trailing weight: 1650 lbs (750kg)

RCD: Cat C





Photo: Peter Chadwick – www.pigmentprints.co.uk

to sail in some real wind? It's hard to find out during a quiet day on the Orwell, with few other boats about. So four weeks later, it was time to rejoin Kite, this time in Aldeburgh for the regatta. Not only did this provide the boats to put Kite's performance in perspective, it also brought more wind.

Stepping aboard Kite following a race in a classic Dragon, I was immediately reminded of just how comfortable she is. Since hiking is not actively encouraged, the coaming is a pleasant backrest, rather than a device for cutting off circulation to the nether regions – and there's no winch to sit on either. *Kate* though, had clearly taken umbrage over being assigned to the 'slow handicap' section of the cruiser fleet and had little difficulty in more than holding her own on the first long, downwind leg. This was a surprise, since the fleet included a Hunter Horizon 23, a Trapper and a Nicholson 32; not only did Kite have the shortest waterline length by some margin, she was also sporting her new carbon whisker pole whilst others were using spinnakers. The beat back to the club, into a 15-18 knot breeze didn't seem to put her off either, resulting in a comfortable – if you discount the monsoon rain – win.

Day two provided a stiffer test. The wind was up to a good 25 knots, blowing down river over a flooding tide, so in went the first reef, a straightforward enough process with the slab reefing system in the main. On a similar course to the previous day, the situation at the leeward mark was also much the same but the beat home was a something of a surprise. Our first thought was that we might have been better off with

the second reef in as well but setting about the short steep chop that wind against tide always whips up, Kite steadily pulled away from the bigger, heavier boats and by the finish, was much closer to the fast handicap than the slow.

Day three upped the ante still further. With winds well north of 30 knots on offer and the Life Jackets Compulsory signal flying, there was no argument about the second reef this time. Unlike the previous races, it was also a windward start, which gave the lightweight *Kate* the opportunity to demonstrate the full extent of the stability offered by those hard chines and her lightweight rig. There was also some discussion about whether we should perhaps shake out the second reef for the run home in order to find out just how fast Kite might be *in extremis*. It wasn't to be though, as we were interrupted by the arrival of a RIB to windward. Our race had been abandoned, as Kite was the only starter.

Comments in the clubhouse bar afterwards about 'that little gaffer' were also quite revealing, the general view being that while no one could really understand exactly why, she's far faster than her appearance might suggest – in a drifter, a full-on blow or anything in between. There's something of the bumblebee about Kite; theory suggests

she shouldn't be able to do what she does but practice clearly shows otherwise.

Kite is patently not intended as a 'home from home' cruising boat; comforts are limited to a couple of berths, a bowl, a cup holder, a portable cooker and a Porta Potti – although you could rig a tent over the vast cockpit if you felt the need for more space. If comforts on a similar-sized boat are indeed your thing, you might perhaps look at another of Andrew Wolstenholme's designs, the 20' (6m) Gypsy or possibly Cornish Crabbers' latest Shrimper 21 – but both of these are very different animals. At 1650 lbs (750 kg), Kite is less than half the weight of either, which aside from being key to her feel and lively performance, also makes her easier to move around ashore.

The curious thing about trailer sailers is that you don't see them being trailed as often as you might expect. If you have the space at home, you can certainly save on laying up costs but probably the best thing about Kite is that she's so easy to use. You don't need lots of skilled crew; with a little practice, you could do without any crew at all. She's quick to rig, fun to sail and as a result, you're far more likely to get your money's worth out of her than many, more complicated boats.

You might also just become a founding member of the Cool Gaffers Association.

CONTACT

Demon Yachts, Harkstead Hall Barns, Harkstead, Ipswich IP19 1DB
Tel: +44 (0)7766 040012 www.demonyachts.co.uk