

How Kite became Kate

Andrew Wolstenholme designed the 21ft trailer-sailer Kite for his own enjoyment; now there's a GRP production version, so we can all have one! **Peter Willis** takes her for a sail and meets her builders

It's the Junior Regatta Week at Aldeburgh Yacht Club and we have to pick our way down to our mooring through flocks of fiercely-helmed Oppies, Fevas and the odd clinker Lapwing. Much later on, when I'm on my way home, it occurs to me that the boat I was on my way to sail, though a kind of classic, is a boat that would make sense to these youngsters when they're a few years older.

This is Kite... oh, hang on, according to the transom she's *Kate* – the 'i' has been struck out and an 'a' scripted in above. Says her builder Matthew Lingley, who's taking me out for a trial sail: "We decided she deserved a bit of individuality, even though she's come out of a mould."

In fact, she's Kite 3, the first production model from Demon Yachts. The first Kite, actually called *Kite*, was designed and built for their own pleasure by, respectively, Andrew Wolstenholme and Colin Henwood in 2010. A 21ft (6.4m) trailer-sailer with a small, simple cabin, she was built in marine ply, and Andrew and Colin have had a lot of fun with her – on the Solent Raid in 2010, and generally messing about on various rivers as well as at sea.

By the time Andrew and his family took her to the OGA's half-century celebrations at Cowes in 2013 she'd been joined by a second

Left: the first GRP Kite shows her paces (photo by Gill Moon)

Below: Builder Matthew Lingley at the helm



Kite, called *Mary Hay*, built, with a slightly longer cabin, for a customer, by Dick Phillips at Willow Bay Boats in Dorset. Incidentally, in the big race at Cowes – sailed by some 90 varied gaffers in Force 5-6 wind-over-tide conditions – *Kite* was declared overall winner on handicap.

A GRP version had been on the cards for some time, and here she is, bobbing on her mooring looking eager to go. Although at first sight, it has to be said, she also looks a tad bland, all in a single, unalleviated neutral colour. And undeniably plastic. But on growing acquaintance this unadorned simplicity allows her lines to speak for themselves.

Well-proportioned like any Wolstenholme boat. “If it looks right, it is right.” And so it is, with deceptive nuances here and there – a slight flare to the topsides, good for deflecting spray, and a sweet, subtle curve to the sheerline, with the upsweep picked up and emphasised by the short, jaunty bowsprit. And there is a bit of adornment – tasteful mahogany coamings to the long cockpit, an inlaid wooden tiller.

Then there’s the colour, in which the whole boat, hull, deck, coachroof and cockpit, is finished. At first glance, it seems white, but no, it’s a creamy shade. “Flaxen” according to Matthew. “We didn’t want to make a white boat,” he grins “This looks well with wood, and it goes well with almost any other colour, for example on the sheer strake.” (A graphite stripe had been added for the Southampton Boat Show.)

But the true test is in the sailing. We clamber aboard and very quickly the sails are set. “I’m still getting used to gaff rig,” admits Matthew, but he easily gets up the high-aspect main, on its lightweight carbon-fibre spars. The jib is unrolled and within ten minutes we’re under way.

“When Andrew took Euan (Matthew’s business partner) and me for a sail, with a view to our building them I was initially somewhat sceptical,” admits Matthew, “I was thinking, something like a Shrimper, so why? But when I sailed her, I got the concept.”

And so do I. She’s light, responsive, positive. Just frisky enough to make her fun to sail, but at the same time reassuringly



She’s responsive, positive, frisky; but also reassuringly steady... I know I’m talking about her as one might about a new girlfriend, but yes, sailing Kate the Kite is a lighthearted experience

Right: This model’s finish is in a shade of cream, with mahogany coamings and an inlaid wood tiller (Photo by Gill Moon)

Below: stages in the building of Kite 3: from left: the NACA sectioned centreboard with its 80kg of lead ballast; the finished hull plug; the mould; hull and topsides about to meet; internal fit-out taking shape

steady in the way she grips the water and goes. I can’t remember a boat giving me this amount of enjoyment in ages. And I do realise I’m talking about her as one might about a new girlfriend, but yes, sailing *Kate* the Kite is a lighthearted experience.

It probably helps that it’s a nice day, bright, sunny with a fresh breeze. We tack down the river past the unusual quatrefoil Martello tower, with the Anthony Gormley sculpture watching us from the top. I try going a little hard on the wind. The scuppers are awash (Matthew points out where he might add a couple more drain ports to shed the water

a little more quickly) but we’re still zinging along comfortably. And as we go, we chat.

It turns out that Demon Yachts is about as old as the original Kite, founded towards the end of 2010, by Matthew and Euan Seel. Matthew is surprisingly young, not quite 30. He graduated in yacht and powerboat design at Southampton Solent University, followed by a frustrating couple of years designing wind turbines. “But,” he adds, “I’ve always worked in boatyards, ever since I was 16.” These notably include Peter Wilson’s yard at Aldeburgh, whose launch we’re using today. Euan is the time-served traditional

boatbuilder of the pair. He went to Oulton Broad boatbuilding college, before it became IBTC. He later worked closely with the legendary Austin Farrar. More recently, he helped restore *Fathom*, a Windermere 17, working closely with designer Ian Howlett, and developing a new light, strong deck in solid spruce. At that time, Euan was working as Demon Yachts; Matthew was helping with *Fathom*, and eventually they decided to combine their skills in a partnership under the name of Demon Yachts Limited.

One of Matthew’s skills is in CNC (computer numerical control) programming for

cutting complex shapes such as foils in high-tech materials such as foam-cored glassfibre. For its first few years Demon has been mostly building parts such as keels and rudders for other yachts, including “the complicated bits” for the Boat Project, that 2012 boat built of donated bits of wood (including a prominent coathanger on the starboard bow), as well as a lot of ocean rowing boats, notably the one Charlie Pitcher’ used for his record-breaking transatlantic row in 2013.

For all this hi-tekkery, though, Matthew is an unreconstructed classic boat lover. He has a Dragon, *Kestrel*, at Aldeburgh. And

Kite specifications

- Hull:** single-chine, shallow-draught with lifting centreboard, built to RCD Cat C.
- Construction:** vacuum infused vinyl ester resin, multi axial glass fibre, with a closed cell foam core, with gelcoat finish.
- Centreboard:** lead ballasted NACA sectioned foil with stainless-steel wear strip and Coppercoat antifoul; lifted by easily-operated differential winch.
- Accommodation:** two-berth cabin, galley area with removable sink bowl; ample storages; space for Porta-Potti.
- Spars:** lightweight carbon-fibre tubes, white painted;
- Sails:** high-aspect battened gaff main and furling jib on short ash bowsprit; sails in Dacron, by McNamara.
- Length on deck:** 21ft (6.4m)
- Length overall:** 23ft 7in (7.2m)
- Beam:** 6ft 9in (2.1m)
- Draught:** plate up
- Draught:** plate down
- Ballast:** internal, 250 lb (114Kg); center-board 176 lb (80Kg)
- Sail area:** Overall: 212sqft (19.7m2)
- Weight :** 1650 lb (750Kg)
- Price inc spars, rigging and sails:** £31,950
- Design:** Andrew Wolstenholme
- Builder:** Demon Yachts Ltd, Harkstead Hall, Harkstead, Ipswich Suffolk IP9 1DB
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Below: the simple two-berth cabin, with Porta-Potti

he is charmed to learn that Harkstead Hall, Demon’s base on the Shotley peninsula, had once been the home of Arthur Ransome when he’d owned *Nancy Blackett*. “I’d always tested potential girlfriends by whether they liked *We Didn’t Mean to Go to Sea*,” he admits. “My wife loves it,” he adds.

We also find a shared interest in Windfall yachts, the square-metre classes brought back as reparations from Germany after World War Two. I did a three-part article about them back in 2006; Matthew did his dissertation on 50 sq-ms at university, and he was instrumental in helping to rescue one of





“They specialise in high-tech mouldings which keep down the weight – she’s no heavier than our plywood version”

the most famous, *Marabu*, which I’d last seen rotting away on Ipswich dock. Matthew also found her there and arranged to have her shipped back to Germany where she’s now at least stabilised stored under cover.

In another coincidence, Demon Yachts Limited’s first full yacht build was another Windermere 17, and this was in fact where I’d first come across Demon’s name when I’d been researching the class in 2011, exactly when they were building *Flying Duckman* (hull spruce, deck foam sandwich GRP).

All of which helps to explain why developing Kite as a GRP boat has been, as Matthew puts it, “a bit of a slow burn” – three years since that initial sail with her designer.

Andrew, who enjoyed his first sail in *Kate* a few days after mine, seems to think this is par for the course with the Kite – the concept, or perhaps just a whim was first mooted with Colin back in 2001, and it took another nine years before their original boat was launched. A production version had nearly always been at the back of his mind, he says, at least “once we got [the original Kite] sailing and saw people’s reactions.” A number of people were interested in taking on the build, but it was Michael McNamara, Kite’s sailmaker (then and now) who suggested Demon Yachts.

“They’re ideally placed,” says Andrew. “They specialise in high-tech mouldings which keep down the weight. The danger was that a regular fibreglass hull would be heavier than our 9mm plywood boat; you need a stiffer laminate to keep the weight down.

Above: High-aspect gaff rig means short spars for trailing; long cockpit makes for a family dayboat (Photo by Gill Moon)

Also they have their own CNC machine and Matt is computer literate which is a rare thing in a boatbuilder.

“The basic shape is virtually identical to our Kite – we’ve just added a hint of a curve across the cabin front and the transom – not so you’d notice but it takes the flatness out.”

The weight is the important thing in Kite 3 and her undoubted successors. Keeping it down by the use of these advanced composites, as well as the lightweight carbon-fibre spars, means you don’t need a gas-guzzling 4x4 to drag her around. She can be towed behind a 1.8 litre car – say a Mondeo or even some models of the Focus – on a simple two-wheeled trailer which can be used for launch-ing without the need for the extra complexity, weight and cost of a breakback.

The spec sheet shows her weight to be identical to the original ply version. After his sail, Andrew comments that she felt “maybe slightly lighter,” but otherwise no different to his own boat.

And it seems the Kite has the potential to be an extremely versatile little playmate. As we skip joyously along in our comfortable F3, turning crisply on the tack, or easing her round to gain some ground, Matthew can’t help mentioning the previous evening’s club race, where he finished close behind a 27ft (8.2m) Trapper 500.

“My handicap got changed very quickly!” he grins, adding “One of the people I took out for a trial described her as ‘somewhere between a Shrimper and a Gypsy, but for people who like to sail’”

Racing’s one thing, but the Kite’s tempting little cabin invites thoughts of overnight explorations, perhaps up shallow creeks where her centreboard can be hauled up and the flattened-V shape of the hull will settle gently into the mud to give a more or less level bunk for the night.

The cabin is ridiculously simple, as bare as a hermit’s cave: two bunks in V-formation, a transverse work surface across the companionway with space for a camping stove and a cutout for a washbasin. There’s space for a Porta-Potti – optional but so much more eco-conscious than the traditional bucket. The long cockpit can also be converted into a dormitory – or just sheltered sitting space – with an over-boom cockpit cover.

Cockpit lockers are capacious, and include a suitably-vented cavity for an outboard up to 6hp, with petrol storage. The outboard – it could be a Torqeedo electric one – drops neatly into a well just forward of the transom.

Kite, in short, is a delight. She’s traditional enough to appeal on the grounds of her looks and performance, yet innovative enough, with her weight-saving construction, to earn a place on the shortlist of anyone who’s in the market for a nippy, rewarding, low-maintenance GRP trailer-sailer. Or indeed anyone who hadn’t been thinking of getting one.

As well as providing all those Aldeburgh juniors with something to aspire to, she’d make a great mid-life crisis buster. “She just puts a smile on your face,” says Andrew. That’s *Kate*... er, Kite. ★