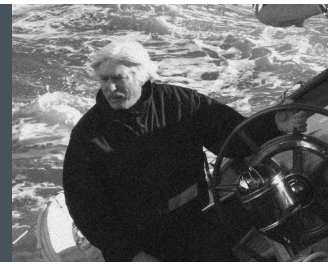


# Tom Cunliffe



A yacht for ocean cruising;  
lightweight or long keel?

Tom discusses his preference and why



*The old and the new: an aerorig alongside a gaff ketch*

Back in the 1990s, half a lifetime after I bought my first elderly, heavy-displacement ocean cruiser, I found myself commissioning a brand-new yacht. With the world modestly at my disposal and two decades of professional sailing recently behind me in the best the planet could offer, I opted for another long-keeled, easy-sectioned sea boat.

My colleagues in the sphere of mainstream yachting and I had worked many a useful bottle down to the dregs discussing why I persisted with tradition while they for the most part preached the word on behalf of the latest super-light flyers. The only conclusion I could draw is that there must be some truth in both positions. After all, everyone had left their nautical nappies far astern and experienced sea time in a

plethora of craft on which we'd founded our conclusions. It's a personal choice that in the end is entirely subjective, so here, for what they are worth, are some of the reasons why I continue to enjoy my old-fashioned yachts so well.

Because seamen are inherently conservative, there will always be some consensus in favour of boats in the direct line of descent from sailing fishing craft and pilot vessels. Builders of these stalwart supporters of Darwin's theory tended not to subscribe to radical ideas. A failure, after all, could be punished either by financial ruin or a one-way ticket to Davy Jones' Locker.

**Bristol  
Channel  
pilot cutters**  
~  
**'built by  
poor men  
for poor  
men'**



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Vernacular boats therefore developed slowly into wholesome all-rounders which performed as well as could be expected, bearing in mind the ever-present need to survive bad weather and the limitations brought about by the materials available for construction.

Although heavy displacement yachts of today have been considerably refined from their ancestors, many still stand firmly in the mainstream of evolution, achieving a harmony with the sea which is hard to define, but quite unmistakable. As Douglas Birt, speaking of Bristol Channel Pilot cutters, put it in 1951, 'We shall be forgetting half their glory unless we recall that they were built by poor men for poor men, suffering from the two great spiritual evils of poverty; ignorance and prejudice. That they still produced fine boats is to the glory of natural man, who, living close to elemental things, develops an instinct for earth or the sea which passes sophisticated understanding.'

Maybe as a result of all this, one of the great benefits of the heavy-displacement yacht is an innate sea-kindliness. It has become fashionable to rubbish this essential virtue, suggesting that the term is really a synonym for 'slow'. Speed is always relative, but if you forget about state-of-the-art superlights and compare a Laurent Giles Vertue, which has a notably high displacement-to-length ratio, with an equivalent flat-floored fin-and-spade production yacht, you would find that her passage times on long trips were similar.

From 1981 to 1996, I owned a 1911 pilot cutter - they don't come much heavier than that - in which we made a crossing from Anguilla to the Azores in 19 days. We were one of the quickest yachts that season and we didn't

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have an engine to help us through three days of zero wind. Given a decent hull form, an effective rig and a clean bottom, any boat that does not plane is as fast or slow as her crew choose to drive her.



*Fast and furious, or slower and seakindly?*

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The sea-kindliness of heavier boats means that their motion is easy. I have been bounced out of my bunk, thrown from the chart table, wrecked my knees on a bucking foredeck and suffered seasickness on modern lightweight yachts whose only benefits are slightly better speed upwind in flat water, cheapness of construction and sometimes a larger internal volume. The motion of a pre-war yacht would be a revelation to any sailor who has not yet had the experience. The tragedy is that most never will, because so much vested interest is pushing the majority in the other direction.

A sea-kindly boat can look after herself in the foulest weather, long after her crew are exhausted. A light boat certainly cannot. It is well-established that to lie a'hull in such a boat is a dangerous policy. I am personally able to testify that to do so in a traditional working-type craft can be safe enough. Heaving-to in moderate gale conditions is an entirely realistic option for a yacht with a deep forefoot. A cut-away lightweight that tries it will simply be thrown beam-on to the seas where she will suffer accordingly. She must therefore be steered, either by her autopilot or by her long-suffering crew, no matter how tired they may be. In my experience, confidence in your boat to take care of you when the ocean goes mad is a tremendous comfort.

A proper heavy-displacement boat is further secured against mishap by the fact that her rudder is hung solidly on the trailing edge of the keel, with its heel raised a little to protect it when taking the ground. This renders it proof against foreseeable damage and unlikely to be disabled by sheets of submerged plastic, ropes, or the dreaded polyester fishing nets. There is also every chance that such a keel and rudder configuration will offer a snug, well-protected aperture for the propeller, rather than leaving it out on a bracket in the run as a naked afterthought, a prey to every nastiness drifting by.



*Above: The author's well-protected rudder*

*Left: This rudder and prop are vulnerable*

A well-designed long-keeled cruiser can take the ground against a wall or on her own legs at no expense and without fear of disaster. Some moderate fin-and-skeg yachts can also do this, but many are prone to 'praying' nose down or squatting on their sterns with resulting risk to the rudder. Others are not inherently strong enough to risk it. The benefits of drying out on the tide are obvious and go beyond scrubbing and painting for free. It can be reassuring to walk round your boat when damage below the waterline is suspected, perhaps following a grounding. In many distant places a haulout just isn't on the cards.

Until recently, nobody would have questioned that long-keeled yachts steer easily. Certain modern propagandists would have us believe that this is a myth. Never mind the theorising, however. I have endured the misery of many short-keeled vessels designed by computer, as well as man, whose wheel cannot be left for long enough even to sheet in the genoa, let alone for the helmsman to nip below and put the kettle on. This is not tolerable in a cruiser and the slack can only be taken up by some sort of autopilot.

If your intention is to cross oceans blast reaching under spinnaker or code zero, a fin-and-skeg design from a quality operator such as Olin Stevens or German Frers will be your best bet. This is because the rudder is right aft, as far from the pivot point as it can be sited, and can thus pull you back into line all the better.

A knot or so below hull speed, however, as most of us prefer to make our passages, the long-keeler tracks merrily while the boat with cut-away forefoot and quarters pivots readily, requiring more steering movements. This helps her in close quarters, but with no land in sight, the benefits are lost. As for the flat-floored yacht whose sections become so distorted when she heels that her rudder can no longer control her, say no more. I have sailed boats marketed as serious cruisers which tack themselves when hit by a sharp gust if nobody is on hand to dump the mainsheet. Why anyone tolerates this is beyond me.

Finally, we come to the matter of stores. Most of us like a substantial stock-up before casting our fate to the wind. We need food, fuel, water, bosun's stores and goodness knows what else. For me, it's a library. Others prefer a wind-surfer board or a bicycle, but whatever your pleasure, it will all pile on the weight. If your 38ft boat displaces eleven tons, a couple of tons of gear will put her down an inch or two and you'll have altered her design displacement by about 18 percent. Should you have opted for a six-ton flier, the same stores will disturb your displacement by 33 per cent, apparently far beyond safety. Unless the boat is comparatively long, the lightweight cruiser must therefore have a weight-conscious crew.





Above: Westernman, designed by Nigel Irens and commissioned by the author

Right: Constance hove to



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Roz and I kept the 22-ton, 40ft gaff cutter designed by Nigel Irens that inspired this article for thirteen years. As our early 60s approached, we decided that it was time to go for a GRP hull that we'd use for mainly continental shelf cruising. Some compromise was in the air, yet we still ended up with a long-keeled, relatively heavy boat.

*Constance* is 44 feet on deck and displaces around 12 tons. She has an underwater profile like a Folkboat that is somewhat cut away forward. This assists close-in manoeuvring which is handy because we go into a lot of marinas. It also helps downwind steering on passage. There's always a price to pay, though, and while she heaves to a lot better than most boats designed after 1945, she doesn't do it like a pilot cutter. When it comes to comfort of motion, however, she is a world-beating champion. Being at sea in her is like settling into a favourite armchair. She looks like a yacht too, rather than some sort of flashy car with a sharp end, so, all in all, she's doing us well. We've had her twelve years now, and no plans to change.

Despite all these points in favour of tradition, the latest ultra-light cruiser will definitely get you there quicker than any of my boats, but the price of speed must be clearly understood. We aren't racing, after all, and having spent all our savings on a yacht in order to go to sea, it seems perverse that we should sacrifice many of the lessons learned from history in order to slash our time spent out there. Could it be that we have lost our way as a result of the growing insulation from reality brought about by modern instruments and seaborne home comforts? Perhaps some of us no longer feel comfortable out of sight of land, where, as Joseph Conrad remarked, the true peace of God begins...

*For more on the question of seaworthiness in light and heavy displacement yachts, I recommend reading fuller analyses in:*

*Seaworthiness, the Forgotten Factor* by C. A. Marchaj (International Marine Publishing Co)

*Offshore Yachts, Desirable and Undesirable Characteristics* by the Technical Committee of the Cruising Club of America (W W Norton)

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