

The Contessa 26 is arguably the most successful Folkboat-inspired cruiser of all time. **Peter Poland** finds out why.



The humble Folkboat, most pundits will concede, is the father of some of the finest designs to be conceived in the latter part of the twentieth century and I've been lucky enough to sail several of its prolific progeny. Back in 1968, a rare and obscure variation on the Folkboat 'theme' (Alan Buchanan's Wind Elf Mark 2 design) carried me safely across the Atlantic – all the way from Emsworth to Barbados. Prior to that, several serendipitous teenage summers were spent pulling strings and practising hangovers on my father's Folkboat-influenced Nicholson designed SCOD. Then I jumped ship to an uncle's Nicholson 26 – effectively the GRP descendant of its tree wood ancestor, so I have enjoyed many a happy month sailing on 'sons of Folkboat'. Yet, despite this, I approach the challenge of assessing perhaps the most iconic of all the developments of this ubiquitous nordic classic with a mixture of excitement and trepidation. It is, after all, a tall order to do justice to the Contessa 26.

Like most great success stories, the Contessa saga started with the vision and determination of one man. The young Jeremy Rogers had always been a keen sailor, so it was no surprise that he should have signed up to an apprenticeship with a leading boat builder. Under the guidance of the legendary Jack Chippendale, he soon honed his skills on such state of the art creations as International 14s. And he built Folkboats.

Then, once Rogers reckoned he had learned the tricks of the trade, he started his own business in Lymington in the early 60s and built his first 'solo' yacht. Not surprisingly perhaps, it was another Folkboat. She was of carvel (as opposed to traditional clinker) construction,

and the impecunious young builder sourced (or maybe scrumped?) the oak for her timber frames in the nearby New Forest. She was built for David Carnegie, *Dysca* was her name, and her first journey was probably her most hazardous. Rogers could not afford a 'shed', so had built her in the garage attached to his Lymington house. Extricating the finished boat (at night so as not to antagonise the neighbours) was a tricky operation. Folkboats are not featherweights. But this was nothing compared to the road trip down to the Lymington town quay. Rogers just sat *Dysca* on an unbraked WW2 bomb trolley, hitched this to the back of his Morris Minor 1000, let out the clutch – and hoped for the best. Today's constabulary and health and safety storm troopers would have had a fit, but these were the swinging 60s.

However, the neighbours soon began to complain about having a temporary boatyard banging away next door, so Rogers bought a small orchard elsewhere in the town, erected a simple steel frame shed and set about boat building with a vengeance. It was now that the seeds of the Contessa saga were sown. Using the standard frames of the Folkboat hull, Rogers decided to forsake carvel planking and experiment with the newer, lighter and stronger cold moulding technique. With a tough and rigid triple skin hull made from two layers of 4mm ply and one of 4mm veneer, Rogers was able to save further weight by reducing the number of frames and stringers

within – to the relief, no doubt, of the New Forest oak population. The only drawback, his wife Fiona recalls, was the seemingly never-ending and nail breaking process of pulling out the thousands of staples that had held each layer in place as the glue hardened. Then Rogers added a standard Folkboat keel and rig, so the Folkboat Association accepted his new creation as being 'in class'. And the boat, named *Tricador*, immediately proved her prowess by finishing 2nd in the Round the Island Race.

FIRST THOUGHTS

The 'Rogers' cold moulded Folkboat soon attracted the attention of another enthusiastic sailor who promptly put in an order. His name was David Sadler and he called his new boat *Contessa of Parkstone*. Sadler (who worked on tanks in the defence industry) had considerable racing success with her in the Poole area and also enjoyed cruising, but both he and Rogers were aware of one drawback to the Folkboat design and wondered whether it could be rectified. Because of the angled (as opposed to straight) base to its keel, the Folkboat could not dry out upright. As the sea receded, so the boat settled on the aft tip of its keel, then pitched slowly forwards, adopting a precarious 'bow down' attitude. So why not modify the keel design to give it a horizontal base?

At around the same time, another Folkboat owner (Chippy Davey) stole a march on the opposition and was winning even more prizes

than the Rogers boats. The exquisite looking *Fenya* had a varnished carvel Folkboat hull, but a very different rig. It was masthead – as opposed to fractional – and boasted a smaller mainsail, a larger genoa and a monster masthead spinnaker. Her handicap was cool, but her performance was hot. She was a surefire winner.

As Rogers considered these developments, a further element entered the equation. He was already using GRP to build his OK dinghies, so why not use the same material to build 'plastic' Folkboats? Over many a midnight oil session around the Rogers family dining table, he and Sadler made plans. But there was one major problem. He didn't have the money to put his plans into effect. Fortunately, however, it was at this stage that one of the unsung heroes of the Contessa saga rode to the rescue. Vernon Sainsbury (of the grocery heirarchy) was an enthusiastic yachtsman and offered to fund the tooling to the tune of £2000. It was a great act of faith and Rogers is quick to stress that the Contessa could never have happened without this timely financial backing.

So, funding in place, Rogers set about tooling up his new toy. He tells me that there were never any 'design plans' as such. Nor was the boat ever lofted in the traditional way. He simply took one of his cold moulded Folkboat hulls, removed the transom to 'open it up', then inserted wedges and pushed the sides outwards. Hard. The hull slowly sprung apart and got wider – until it looked about right. At the same time, he levelled and raised the sheer a bit – including small bulwarks in the process – with the result that the increased freeboard gave the new boat a bit more overall length than its Folkboat forebear. Then he set about making a new 'plug' for the »

What makes the Contessa so special?



THE FOLKBOAT

Soon after the first clinker Folkboat hit the water, people started modifying the original design – some more successfully than others. This is a carvel version with a long coachroof and more headroom. Other builders added ungainly doghouses and big thumping diesels – all of which missed the point. Tord Sunden's creation was, and is, an object lesson in efficient simplicity. In essence, she's a classic thoroughbred with superb handling characteristics.

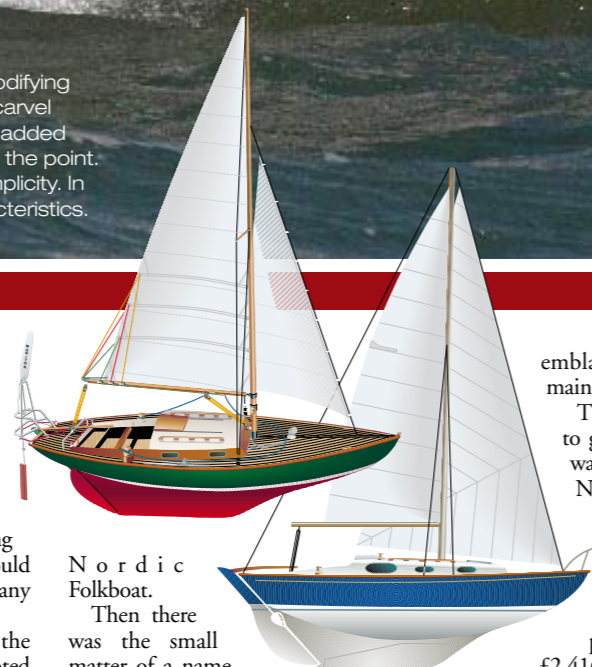


PHOTO: NICK DAY

deck moulding. "Who designed that then?" I asked. "It just evolved as we went along," said Rogers. "I liked the coachroof that van de Stadt put on his own Folkboat evolution, the Invicta – especially the trademark van de Stadt keyhole companionway opening with a raised blister on top. I also liked the general line, so there's quite a bit of Invicta in there, but by and large, we did it all by eye, using long bendy battens. There never were any dimensioned design plans that I worked from. When it finally looked right, we stopped." At this point, I was beginning to wonder just how much of David Sadler there actually was in this boat. "Jeremy has always been far too modest," quipped Rogers' supportive wife, Fiona. I could only agree.

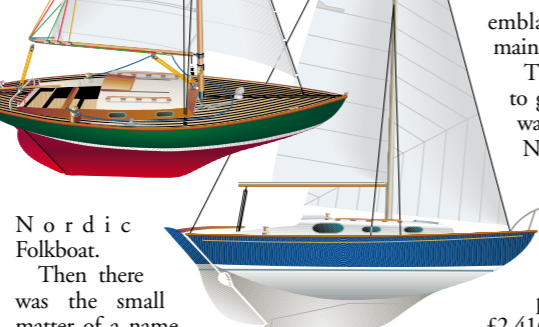
Then the keel had to be sorted. Given that the new boat was to be moulded in GRP, it seemed logical to encapsulate the ballast keel inside the hull rather than bolt it underneath, so the hull 'plug' was built to incorporate the keel shape and the lower leading edge was dropped about 6in (compared to the Folkboat) to make the keel base straight and flat rather than angled. Now the boat would be able to stand upright when dried out instead of tipping forwards. As an added

bonus, lowering the keel's leading edge would have the effect of moving the centre of gravity a fraction forward. This would help counteract the extra weight aft of the inboard engine that Rogers planned to install. He also already had plans to offer beaching legs to his customers, so they could dry their boats out on just about any sheltered shore.

The final ingredient was the rig. Rogers and Sadler had noted the impressive performance and beneficial RORC handicap rating enjoyed by masthead rigged boats (such as Chippy Davey's Folkboat *Fenya*), so it was decided to follow this route.

FIRST AFLOAT

And that – as they say – was about that. The first boat was moulded, and space was left in the bilge in order to be able to play around with trimming ballast so that the exact position of the internal keel could be optimised. A sensible prototype interior was mocked up, although subsequent production boats were offered with three slightly different layouts. The result was practical and – although hardly palatial – it was a vast improvement on the minimal hutch found inside the standard



Nordic Folkboat.

Then there was the small matter of a name for the new model. What to call her? "Our first idea", said Rogers "was to call her a Modified Folkboat, because that's what she is, but this seemed a bit of a mouthful. Besides which, the Folkboat Association refused to recognise her as a Folkboat. So then we thought that the name David had given to the earlier Folkboat he bought from us – *Contessa of Parkstone* – was nice. So we plumped for *Contessa*." "The only problem", added Fiona, "was that we put the class insignia CON on the first mainsail. It was only later that it dawned on me, to my horror, that this might raise a few smirks in the French market, so we quickly abbreviated it to CO." Well, that's a relief then. Who would have fancied cruising around Brittany with the word CON boldly

emblazoned on the mainsail above his head?

The first *Contessa* to go afloat (in 1966) was owned by T A Nicholson and named *Contessa of Lymington*. Fiona's archive records show that she cost the princely sum of £2,416 (and 10 shillings).

David Sadler had No 5 (*Contessa of Mell*) and Vernon Sainsbury sailed away in No 6 (*Grayling*) – both at knock down prices in recognition of their respective input and contributions to the project. The boat was an instant hit at her inaugural Boat Show and the order floodgates opened. On the water, the early boats made a big impact in racing circles, but racing was by no means the *Contessa's* sole selling point. Many sailors were on the lookout for a pretty and seaworthy small cruiser that could combine easy handling (including singlehanded), speed, stability and adequate accommodation with the economic convenience of GRP construction. And the *Contessa 26* achieved this magic mix in spades. In a Boat Show environment crowded out



PHOTO: PPL

THE MAN

Jeremy Rogers started building traditional carvel Folkboats in Lymington back in the 1960s. Then he developed his own triple skin cold moulded version, which raced with great success. The *Contessa 26* evolved directly from this and was enthusiastically raced and cruised across the oceans. Rogers' successful range soon expanded to include the *Contessa 32*, the larger Doug Peterson designed *One Tonner* (the *Contessa 35*) and Admirals' Cup Team winning models the *Contessa 39* and *43*.



THE CONTESSA 26

Take one cold moulded Folkboat hull, remove its transom, lever the sides apart (to make it wider), level up the sheer (to increase freeboard), lower the toe of the keel by 6in (to make the keel base horizontal), add a sleek new coachroof (to increase accommodation) and top it off with a masthead rig – and what do you have? The *Contessa 26*. This is *Sulali* pictured in the Solent.

PHOTO: NICK DAY

with bilge keel cruisers of pedestrian performance and cumbersome coachroofs, she stood out as the *Belle of the Ball* – elegant, fast and classy. In the ensuing 10 years, almost 400 *Contessa 26s* went on to be produced in the UK. Maclan Marine took over the moulds in 1976 and produced around 40. About six years later, Rogers' business sadly went into receivership. This was largely – I suspect – caused by a combination of the early 80s recession and the costs and problems resulting from the new-fangled double skin 'injection' moulding system (developed by Colin Chapman's Lotus) adopted to build the ill fated OOD34. Despite a full order book at the time, the Bankers pulled the plug.

But – to revert to the happier 60s – the coastal and Channel hopping fraternity was soon proving the *Contessa 26's* speed, seaworthiness and tractability, while other bolder sailors were eyeing her up for bigger challenges. *Binkie* was the smallest entrant in the 1970 Observer/Daily Express Round Britain Race and then proceeded to carry off the Handicap Trophy. Another 26, *Shamaal*, completed the storm tossed 1972 Observer Singlehanded Transatlantic Race in 38 days, finishing 25th out of 55 starters. Then *Shamaal II* came

14th out of 61 starters in the 1974 Round Britain Race. And so it went on. As the *Contessa 26's* reputation as a 'go anywhere' boat grew, so she became established near the top of the 'must have' list for anyone looking for a small boat in which to undertake a big voyage. If she'd been within my puny budget back in 1968, she'd have been the first choice for my own transatlantic trip. But – since she was a brand new model and I was financially challenged – it wasn't to be, so I had to opt for something older and cheaper – albeit another Folkboat derivative.

SOLO SAILOR

Others were more fortunate. As a young girl, Tania Aebi cruised the Atlantic and Caribbean aboard her father's 38-footer. Then, when her family finally settled down in the USA again, she did not find it easy to fit into the disciplined rigours of school then university. Wondering how to encourage his daughter to get a grip on her life, Tania's father suggested – when she had reached the tender age of 18 – that she might like to consider sailing around the world in a yacht. Singlehanded. He would buy a suitable yacht and lend it to her. After her initial reaction, along the lines of 'you must be

joking', Tania took a long hard look at herself and said OK. There then followed a frantic search for the right boat, which did not prove easy. As any honest boat buyer will admit, the final decision of 'what to buy' always proves to be a lot more difficult than one might imagine. No matter how many 'Which Report' style checklists one might make, there is always an element of 'gut feeling' and impulse involved when one finally comes to sign the deposit cheque.

When Tania and her father eventually came upon a *Contessa 26* lurking in a corner of the 1984 Annapolis Boat Show, they both instinctively knew that they had finally found the right boat for the job. It was one of those 'Road to Damascus' moments, but then the *Contessa 26* is that sort of boat. Tania wrote: "My father thumped around up on deck, checking to be sure the superstructure wouldn't flex under pressure. Christian knocked away from the hull, feeling the thickness of the fibreglass. I sat down below in the compact cocoon of the cabin, looked around and heard myself say, 'I think this is the one'. She felt more right than any other boat had until that point..." And it's true. Whether standing on the concrete at a Boat Show or hanging off an

anchor in a quiet bay, the *Contessa 26* just looks 'right'. She might not win the accommodation stakes, but she shines like the star that she is in every other respect. This particular *Contessa 26* was one of the 400 or so built under licence in Canada by JJ Taylor under the name of a Taylor 26. The last of these was launched in 1990 and an active USA/Canada Association still holds the class together, offering advice, stories and secondhand sales services.

THE BIG TEST

Tania's account (in her book *Maiden Voyage*, ISBN 0-345-41012-2) of her adventures as she girdled the globe is a great read. On the first leg from New York to Bermuda, she fumbled her unfamiliar and frequently frightened way through all the traumas that beset the inexperienced sailor at sea. During her first encounter with stormy conditions, she wrote: "violently seasick, I just clung on and fervently prayed... After retching my guts over the side, I crawled across the cockpit and headed below... I couldn't believe my eyes. There was six inches of water above the floorboards." Then the manual bilge pump seized. Familiar? Buckling her harness to a jackstay, she crawled around the deck »



PHOTO: JO MOORING-ALDRIDGE



Left Jo Mooring-Aldridge's *Sulali* dries out, showing the Contessa's deep and long keel with its horizontal base, which many believe is a marked improvement on the Folkboat. Top Jeremy Rogers built his first Folkboat in a garage beside his house in Lymington. Extracting it was tricky. Above The first Contessa 26 hull emerges from Rogers' first Lymington factory.



PHOTO: JO MOORING-ALDRIDGE



PHOTO: JO MOORING-ALDRIDGE



PHOTO: PETER HOLLAND



PHOTO: JO MOORING-ALDRIDGE



Clockwise from Left Tania Aebi (who started her circumnavigation at the age of 18) and *Varuna* in light airs; Class Association Secretary, David Houlton's Contessa, *Elinor*, moored alongside the pontoon in Lymington; Tania Aebi meets Jo Jo on *Sulali* when she attended the Contessa 26's 40th birthday party last year; Fiona and Jeremy Rogers and Tania Aebi in *Rosina*; *Quixota* in the Solent, July 2006, pretty as a picture with her tan sails; Brian 'BJ' Caldwell brings *Mai Miti Vavau* home (with most of her red paint job now missing) after his record breaking solo circumnavigation.

to look for the problem. It turned out to be simple enough. She had forgotten about the open-mouthed anchor chain hawse pipe in the bow. In her own words Tania says: "I had been so damned ignorant that I had never thought of blocking up this artery now pumping the sea into the bowels of my boat."

As the voyage (and the book) progresses, the reader can watch as the young sailor comes to terms with the ways of her small floating home (called *Varuna*), the mysteries of navigation and the changing challenges of the sea. Her route across the Pacific, over the top of Australia, up to the Red Sea, through the Med then home across the Atlantic covered 27,000 miles and took two and a half years. Along the way, she fell in with many a fellow ocean traveller and her interaction with this motley mob of live-aboards makes as interesting reading as the adventurous 'boaty' bits. And there are plenty of these, including bumping into a ship in the Mediterranean. Tania writes: "A blaring horn and the rumbling churn of a ship's propellers blasted me out of my reverie and on deck in a flash. Pupils dilating to adjust in the

darkness, I looked up and there it was, every sailor's worst nightmare. Twenty feet away, the towering hulk of an immense cargo carrier was barreling down on us. 'Oh my God,' I gasped, frozen in shock. 'This is it.' The moment had finally arrived." If you want to know what happened next, buy the book! Suffice to say that it was only after this episode that she got round to equipping *Varuna* with a liferaft.

Varuna survived all the dramas, storms, calms and a knockdown and took good care of young Tania. What's more, there's even a romantic side to the story. The *Los Angeles Times* summed up Tania's book by saying: "Her romantic adventure is told ... straightforwardly and with broad appeal ... It is a story of fresh eyes on faraway places. And a story of discovery as Tania finds those two priceless treasures, love and self-confidence."

They could also have added that it's a testament to the strong and forgiving nature of the Contessa 26, but even though Tania was the youngest person to complete a circumnavigation, she lost out on the official solo record, because she had a

friend on board for a mere 80 miles on one Pacific leg.

MEMORIES

What of Tania now, a couple of decades later? She emailed me saying: "Nowadays, the walls of my house bear pictures of *Varuna* swinging at anchor in idyllic coves, getting knocked about by waves and gracefully soaring over crests under sail. These pictures serve as a reminder of how we once worked together and how often I felt this little uncomplicated dynamo was protecting my entire world and existence, a stolid companion capably plugging across the undulating, watery vastness."

"As a post script, Tarzoon, the cat I picked up in Vanuatu and who sailed half way around the world with me on *Varuna* is still alive. He'll be twenty-one this year." As Tania says, how time flies.

The honour of being the youngest solo world girdler goes to an equally youthful sailor by the name of Brian (BJ) Caldwell. His boat was called *Mai Miti Vavau*. Like Tania's *Varuna*, she had to be small and tough. It's no surprise, therefore,

that she's another Contessa 26 from J J Taylor in Canada. When I asked Caldwell why he chose a Contessa 26, he replied: "... Because it was the best value for a solo boat for the budget I had at the time. I was looking at an Albin Vega 27, but it was more expensive and didn't come with as much equipment, such as a windvane and solar panels etc. The Contessa is proportionate for her size, so from a distance she looks like a much larger boat and this shows in her sea-handling, except perhaps when I was capsized in the Indian Ocean... I had a top day of 186 nautical miles northwest of the Galapagos Islands and my next best days were across the Indian Ocean when I had consecutive 140-146 nautical mile days. Currently I am planning for next year's Mini [-transat Class] race season and then the premier around the world race for the Mini. The Race 650 (www.race650.com) starts and finishes in Brazil." Streuth - around the world in a 6.50m skimming dish. He's not resting on his laurels. You can learn more about B J Caldwell on www.liquidflight.net.

Unlike Tania, however, Caldwell

set sail on his solo epic with a wealth of experience under his young belt. In his own words: "After growing up cruising in the South Pacific with my family, we returned to our home port in Honolulu when I was 15 years old. My dream was to keep sailing, so I set my sights on the record for the 'World's Youngest Solo Circumnavigation'. I spent summer breaks from high school

sailing over 10,000 miles on yacht deliveries and to raise funding for my circumnavigation. In 1995, exactly one hundred years after Joshua Slocum's departure (on the first ever solo circumnavigation) I departed. Sixteen months and 27,000 miles later, I became the youngest solo circumnavigator. The first step of my dream was reality."

The most extraordinary aspect of

Caldwell's voyage was the speed with which he achieved it. He didn't hang about. He covered the first 3,400 miles leg in 34 days. Then he rolled off the next 4,400 miles in 40 days. He also experienced his fair share of storms, mountainous seas and scary knockdowns. Some wondered whether the Stoway roller reefing mainsail and headsail roller resulted in a small loss of initial stability,

due to the extra weight aloft, but, be that as it may, Caldwell and *Mai Miti Vavau* went into the record books and added another chapter to the saga of the Contessa 26's extraordinary seaworthiness.

Since then, it seems that there has always been at least one Contessa 26 in oceanic orbit. Those wanting to learn more about long distance cruising could do a lot worse than »

CONTESSA 26



Left Jeremy Rogers and family crew with the prestigious Round the Island Gold Roman Bowl that his Contessa 26 *Rosina of Beaulieu* won on three separate occasions! **Above** Jo Mooring-Aldridge and Jo Jo (who declined to trim the sheets) enjoying the security of her Contessa 26's cockpit.

seek out Peter Hancock's three books (*Sailing out of Silence*, *Sailing into Sunshine* and *Sailing Home*) about his travels in his Contessa 26 *Kylie*. But beware. It's insidious stuff and can lead to sudden and dramatic life changes. Hancock was a major inspiration to one of the latest crews to chuck everything in and set sail for distant horizons in a Contessa 26.

Henrik Nor-Hansen was a novelist and poet living in Stavanger. There he met Nina Kristin Nilsen. They decided to cut their ties with the land and set sail in search of sunny climes and seafaring adventure. A Rogers built Contessa 26 *Bika* (hull no 279, built in 1976) became their new floating home. Preparations were extensive through 2004-5 and a month before setting sail, Nina wrote: "We have tossed out the inboard engine, replacing it with a small outboard. This opens up lots of storing space and will hopefully give us less mechanical headache and expenses than the old inboard. Our new windvane (Windpilot Pacific Light) just arrived from Germany, so we won't have to handsteer around the world. The ever increasing to-do list is sometimes giving us sleepless nights, but we still think we'll leave on 15 May." And they did.

PASSAGE MAKER

As 2006 ended, they could be found on the other side of the Atlantic, where they have already visited large chunks of the Caribbean. Their entertaining and beautifully illustrated website (www.freewebs.com/sybika-eng) lists their planned passages for 2007 as: "San Blas, Honduras, Guatemala, Cuba, USA (ICW, New York, canals to the Great Lakes), Canada (where *Bika* will take to the road and travel on a trailer from Lake Superior to Vancouver), then back to the south towards Panama, the Galapagos and on across the Pacific". When I asked the intrepid couple why they selected a Contessa 26 for their world cruise, they replied: "We chose the Contessa

because it was affordable, strong, seaworthy and pretty, and also well proven by others (Tania Aebi, Peter Hancock etc). We sometimes have to defend our proud little cruiser's size to landlubbers, but most sailors we meet in harbours know a good boat when they see one." Amen to that – and long may they continue to enjoy their globe girdling adventures.

It was therefore a shame that after studying all these stories of deep sea derring-do, I could not test sail the Contessa 26 on some dark blue distant ocean, wafted along by a warm, boisterous trade wind and with a rum and tonic in my hand, but *ST's* budget does not stretch to that. Instead, I was happy to accept an invitation for a spin in Class Association Secretary David Houlton's *Elinor* – even if it was on a chilly mid December day in a windy West Solent.

Initial impressions on stepping aboard are, not surprisingly, that the boat is small but stable and the interior is, as one might expect, cosy but compact. This is no lightweight, high volume, wide-bodied AWB, but a slinky, seagoing yacht. Having negotiated my way through the keyhole companionway, I was met by two settee berths (extending aft under the cockpit seats), a simple galley to port, a chart table area to starboard, a tight heads compartment between two amidships bulkheads, and a twin berth forepeak. And that's about your lot. Maximum headroom aft (under the 'blister') is 5ft 8in, so if you insist on full standing headroom throughout, she may not be for you. But how much time does one have to spend standing up in a small yacht?

Elinor has been David's pride and joy for 26 years. Over that period he has replaced the original Yanmar engine with a Volvo, fitted a new mid-saloon hatch, changed the forehatch, added headsail roller furling and put a sprayhood above the companionway 'blister'. He has also attended to routine annual maintenance and

sorted out the occasional glitches to which ageing Contessas are prone. Anyone considering buying their own boat will find an invaluable section on the Association website showing 'things to look out for'. And a survey is advisable.

Hard working Association stalwart Jo Mooring-Aldridge also came along for the sail and later showed me the modifications and improvements she has made to her own Contessa 26, *Sulali*. These include fitting a neat new galley moulding (supplied by Jeremy Rogers), adding new lockers around the galley and fitting a Rogers inspired sliding chef's/navigator's seat. *Sulali* had also gone back to Rogers' factory to have a new self-venting gas bottle locker surgically installed into her stern deck. Also, while on the subject of upgrades, I went over Jeremy Rogers' own 26, *Rosina of Beaulieu*. Jeremy had bought her a few years ago and restored her to (indeed beyond) her original glory. Neat hinging pipe cots in the forepeak, warm tongue and groove veneering on the bulkheads, attractive light wood inlays on the locker fronts and a brand new Beta diesel inboard are just a few of her salient features. What's more, she has reinforced the 26's reputation as a potent performer, with no fewer than three Round the Island Gold Roman Bowl overall victories in recent years.

And how did the Contessa 26 sail? Fortuitously perhaps, it was honking. We recorded 30kn of cold, damp and heavy winter wind. With one tuck in the mainsail and a couple of rolls in the genoa, *Elinor* just did what all 26s do naturally. With a minimum of fuss and no inclination whatever to round up or misbehave, she just put her shoulder to the task and took off – touching 7kn. Of course none of this should come as a surprise, because around 800 owners and heaven knows how many thousands of deep sea miles can't be wrong, but that doesn't

detract from the fact that steering this boat in a heavy wind and a lumpy sea is not a penance but pure pleasure. The helm felt firm yet responsive. The cockpit was secure and a comfortable 'fit'. The motion as she surged ahead was predictable and reassuring. No sudden twitches or lurches, just smooth, easy and effortless power. As I sat, tiller in hand, and felt the way she carved through the sea, it was easy to nod off and imagine myself winging along under a star studded sky somewhere in the middle of nowhere, with a trade wind in the sails and a palm fringed shore a thousand or so miles ahead. Then, coming back to reality with a bang as a dollop of cold Solent spray slipped over the sprayhood and slapped me in the face, it was equally easy to see how this boat makes a perfect daysailer or coastal cruiser. She's a sailing boat pure and simple – and a delight, no matter what use you choose to put her to. Provided you can live with a less than palatial interior.

What of the creator of this sailing icon – Jeremy Rogers himself? He still lives in Lymington, refurbishing old boats, building new ones and supplying spare parts for existing ones. He also manufactures and supplies the elegant (and very high tech) Atlas carbon fibre davits (designed by his son). Amongst his growing client base are superyacht owners and the Royal Navy. In his factory there's currently a brand new Contessa 32 under construction. She's for an American owner who previously owned a 32, sold her, realised his mistake and has now ordered the same again. Beside her is *Gi Gi*, an elderly 32 that has already rounded the Horn and sailed many a league. Jeremy has stripped her bare and is now re-fitting her. So now the Contessa 32 class had better look out, because I'll wager my next bottle of Muscadet that *Gi Gi* will soon be up at the front of the fleet. You can't keep a good man down.