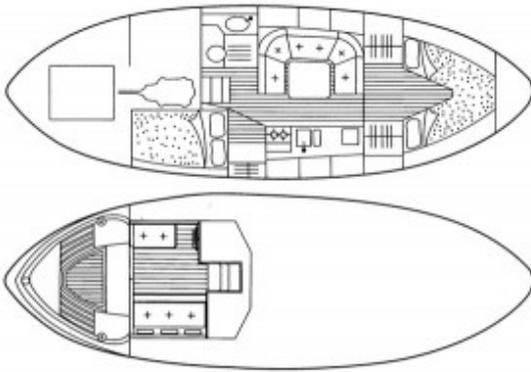


The Fisher Boat Test

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By JEFF HOWLETT, photography by RAY LITTLE

The Fisher seems to have been around for ever. In fact, the story of this classic motor-sailer began in 1969 when naval architects David Freeman and Gordon Wyatt set out to fill what they perceived as a gap in the market. Their aim was to design a motor-sailer with equal performance under either sail or motor.

The formula was the key to the Fisher's early success. In the Sixties many yachts were described as motor-sailers but most had large engines and small rigs. They motored well enough but the sailing characteristics left a great deal to be

desired.

The rest is history. Over 1,000 Fishers have been built and they can be seen all over the world, tucked up in harbour after a long passage or pottering along the coast.

With its traditional Colin Archer-inspired canoe stern, angular trawler style wheelhouse, and high, chunky, work-boat-derived bow the Fisher looks familiarly timeless, friendly and reassuring.

The 34 was launched in 1978 and was the fourth of the Fisher range, slotting in between the 30 and the 37, with the 25 on hand for those about to enter the market.



The lines of the Fisher haven't changed.

However, in 1988 the Mk II raised the side decks giving more room below; and the 1989 Mk III sloop has a full-length galley, improved heads and roomier forecabin.

It was to sail the Mark III 34 that I had come to Northshore's yard on Itchenor Reach in Chichester Harbour, West Sussex.

Pearl Fisher, a two-year-old 34 sloop owned by Melanie and Kerry Lloyd, had recently returned from a cruise of Brittany.

The first impression is one of strength. Bulwarks are sturdy and high, fittings seem over-sized and the lines muscular. It's not superficial: the lay-up is very heavy and becomes increasingly so beneath the waterline to culminate in nearly 5 tons of encapsulated cast-iron ballast in the keel.

The heavy-duty hand-laid-up hull is built in accordance with Northshore's Nordseal system, which provides a resin-rich outer laminate designed to prevent any risk of wicking – the usual forerunner of osmosis.

The deck is bonded to the hull in accessible areas and bolted

throughout the whole hull-to-deck joint. The bulkheads are laminated to the deck, resulting in a strong, integrated unit.

On deck

Stepping on board was easy, thanks to an upward-hinging section of the guardrail, and passage back aft was comfortable by way of the wide side decks. The cockpit is roomy, comfortable and enclosed by high surrounds. Storage is provided under the cockpit seats and a varnished teak tiller can be fitted to a sternpost for fresh-air helming. Two large bollards are sited aft.

Genoa sheets lead to two Lewmar 40 self-tailing winches on the cockpit coaming. There is a Spinlock rope clutch for the genoa furling line to port.

On Pearl Fisher, the mainsheet is attached to a stainless-steel horse on the pushpit. The standard

arrangement is for the main to be controlled from a point on the coachroof. This not only frees up space in the cockpit but also results in a more efficient angle of pull for the mainsheet.

Going forward – after first negotiating the inevitable awkward pull up from a deep cockpit and a swing around the wheelhouse corner – is a satisfying experience. Deck design is without compromise to modern fashion: sturdy teak grabrails, deep bulwarks, high guardrails, Treadmaster non-slip in profusion – including on the wheelhouse roof – and hefty deck fittings.

Two midship cleats, two large mooring cleats and a bollard on the foredeck serve warps fed over chafing plates fitted to the teak rail cappings in way of fairleads.

A 35lb (15.9kg) Delta anchor with 180ft (56m) of calibrated chain is controlled via a manual two-speed windlass, and is secured in a double anchor roller.

In port

Double opening doors – in the ketch these are replaced by a sliding door – lead into the wheelhouse, which serves as an internal helming position, navigation position and deck saloon. Pearl Fisher is trimmed throughout in maple, making a warm but exceptionally airy interior. Standard trim is teak, but Northshore is happy to accommodate owners' preferences.





The helm position, to port, is comfy but that high bow does limit the view somewhat. The instrument panel is large, with plenty of room for more kit, and to starboard is a large surface that acts as a chart table. To starboard, a comfortable settee, which has stowage below and lockers behind, runs the length of the wheelhouse.

There are slide-opening windows each side, a central drop-down window and a wiper fitted on the port forward screen.

The engine is accessed through the wheelhouse sole, and lifting up the floorplates reveals deep bilges and full access to all the workings back to the shaft and stern gland. Pearl Fisher is fitted with a 60hp Perkins Sabre diesel, but the standard engine is the more powerful four-cylinder Yanmar 4JH3-TE 75hp.

Going below, there is a distinct feeling of space. And from wheelhouse to forepeak there is at least 6ft 3in (1.9m) headroom.

At the foot of the companionway steps to port is the toilet/shower compartment. To starboard and tucked under the wheelhouse, there is a large quarter cabin with full-sized double berth, hanging locker with drawers under and a mirror.

The saloon has a U-shaped settee to port with lockers behind. The table is mounted on a pole so that it can be raised clear or lowered to form a double berth.

Opposite the sitting area is a fore-and-aft galley, which has stainless-steel sink and drainer, hot and cold water, top-opening ice box, and gimbaled two-burner cooker with grill and oven.



The forecabin, with a panelled door, has two full-length single berths that convert, with a drop-in infill, to a double. There is a hanging locker and storage locker aft of the berths on each side. Access to the deck is via a Perspex hatch.

The joinery throughout is excellent and the finish faultless. Although Pearl Fisher was at the end of two fairly hectic seasons, she looked new and will do, with good care, for many years. It is a shame the same cannot be said for so many production-line floating examples of built-in expendability that today crowd our marinas.

At sea

It was August – doing a convincing impression of December. The hangover from a Caribbean hurricane made for a wet, chilly day, topped off with a southwesterly between 28 and 30 knots. All in all, perfect conditions for an offshore cruiser.

We slipped our lines and edged away from the jetty under power and out into the channel. I was expecting her considerable weight and long keel to make her something of a handful at close-quarter manoeuvring.

I was pleasantly surprised.

Of course, she is not as nimble as a fin-keeler but, provided you give her a little more room and time, the 34 is predictable and steady, with a reassuring momentum to her progress. Many owners fit bow thrusters for



extra control, but provided you have basic boat-handling awareness and think ahead, I wouldn't think that necessary.

Her powerful engine and large, three-bladed prop provide more than enough grunt to point the bow anywhere you want to. And she'll cruise for day after day at 2,000 revs and an economical 61/ knots, with a maximum of 7 knots. Her power and punching weight make light work of motoring into a head sea.

The Fisher 34 is offered as either a ketch or a sloop, the sail area in each case being the same. The ketch is a versatile rig with many tricks up its sleeve. For instance, sailing under jib and mizzen in heavy weather makes the going easy.

Once away from the trots of moored craft, in clear water and nose to wind, we set about hoisting the 270sqft (25.1m²) main and unfurling the 360sqft (33.5m²) genoa. We tore off down Chichester Harbour, past

Bosham Channel and towards West Wittering. The Arun sails set beautifully and the 34 simply screamed along.

It was at this point I became surprised. I really hadn't expected, given her overall design concept, that the 34 would be particularly close-winded. However, as we hardened on the wind she could be pinched up to an impressive 40 degrees apparent to make a respectable 6.2 knots.

The leeway was, understandably, a little excessive on this point of sail and so I eased off to 50 degrees. Leeway dropped to an acceptable level and she picked up to 7 knots. She was responsive, light and balanced on the helm, tacking easily through 85 degrees or so. Coming off the wind, she reached happily at around 71/ knots.

Conclusion

Designers Wyatt and Freeman may be best known for their Fisher range, but in the commercial market hundreds of boats of their design operate – often in weather conditions the average yachtsman wisely does his best to avoid – throughout the world. And you can see this in the Fisher: seaworthiness comes first.

This is a yacht for the individual. A long-keeled, high-bowed double-ender that will see you safely across oceans and through rough conditions and keep you dry while she's at it.

The Fisher 34 is not cheap, but then quality never is. The comforting thing is that the money is spent where it matters, on uncompromisingly high-standard construction and the best quality hardware and furnishings.