

Cornish Crabber 26

Buying a gaffer usually means accepting compromises in the interests of traditional appeal – but Cornish Crabbers are hoping that their new Cornish Crabber 26 will change all that, as David Harding reports



CORNISH CRABBER 26: modern gaffer PRICE: from £82,450

Not everyone can see the point of a gaffer. Traditional working boats are one thing, but why compromise performance, accommodation and handling just to make a new boat look faintly like one from a bygone era?

It's a view often expressed by those who prefer a more modern approach to cruising yacht design. Traditionalists can be even more disparaging, maintaining that 'there's nothing naffer than a plastic gaffer'. For them, glassfibre hulls, high-peak gaffs and nylon blocks just don't cut it.

Whatever the views of these two groups, modern gaffers have established a strong following: there are plenty of people who like what the doubters might refer to as 'sanitised tradition'.

One feature many enthusiasts enjoy is the versatility of the gaff rig. It generates more drive downwind than a typical Bermudan rig, is easy to de-power by scandalising (dropping the peak), the gaff means less sail flapping over the deck when you lower it, and the spars are shorter. It might not go as well upwind but isn't necessarily bad, especially if it's a cutter when you can douse the yankee rather than resorting to a reefed headsail.

Gaffers usually have full-length, relatively shallow keels for toughness, directional stability and ease of drying out. Their stern gear is protected and the rudder hung on the transom for simplicity. They tend to be substantially built and reassuring to handle in heavy weather. In short, they're extremely practical in many respects – just not for those who want a boat that will spin on a sixpence, surf downwind, point into next week and provide an enormous double berth in the stern.

The new gaffer

As for the Cornish Crabber 26, whose development we've been following in PBO since the



The deep and well-protected cockpit is a good leg-bracing width between the seats. Deck hardware includes vents over the galley and heads

beginning of the year, the builders wanted a boat that would fit in with the existing Crabber range, hence the simulated lapstrake hull, traditional lines, long shallow keel and generous displacement. Full standing headroom was essential, to provide owners moving up from the Shrimper or Crabber 22 with appreciably more accommodation. Just as important was that the boat sailed well, and therein lay the greatest challenge: it's not easy to combine good performance and pleasing lines with shallow draught and 1.83m (6ft) of headroom in an 8m (26ft) boat.

The designer entrusted with this delicate balancing act was David Thomas, who drew a full-sectioned hull with plenty of freeboard and coachroof height, topped by a gaff cutter rig of generous proportions.

Below the waterline the profile looks unremarkable until you see the depth of the galvanised iron centreplate: its tip plunges to all of 1.98m (6ft 6in) below the waterline.

A less obvious feature is the shape of the keel, which tapers at the trailing edge to minimise disturbance over the rudder. The rudder blade itself is an efficient foil section and even the bilge-keel stubs are curved to follow the lines of the hull. Add several big lumps of

freeboard and sloping decks provide sitting headroom above the settee berths. That means the coachroof doesn't need to be taken outboard as far as possible, leading to plenty of deck width.

A teak tread in the recess in the cockpit coaming where the headsail winches sit makes a good threshold for stepping into the cockpit, which is deep and well protected yet at a height that allows good visibility forward.

First impressions, then, were positive on the day of the test sail, and the boat maintained her standards when we set off down Falmouth's Carrick Roads on a broad reach at a good 6 knots. Rounding the point under Pendennis Castle and heading across Falmouth Bay towards



A tabernacle allows the mast to be raised and lowered afloat

Helford brought us into a clearer breeze. Gusting to around 18 knots on the beam, it sent the log up to 6.8 knots at times. That was in flat water because we were still close to a windward shore.

Apart from the healthy speed, two points stood out about the new Crabber. One was her stiffness: even in the fresher patches we weren't over-powered. The second, not unrelated to the first, was the comfortable helm. The weight on the helm increases on a reach on most boats, especially gaffers with their long booms, but the Crabber remained notably light. The balance on her rudder blade helps, too.

The only problem was some juddering of the rudder once we

lead in the keel for a ballast ratio of around 44%, and a hull that's designed to slip through the water with minimal fuss, and you begin to realise that despite her modest appearance the new 26 was never conceived to be just another gaffer. In fact, if ever a gaffer was intended to appeal to those who might never have considered one as well as to those already committed to the breed, this is it.

A stiff test

Crabbers and David Thomas pushed the limits with the freeboard and coachroof height to maximise headroom. Nonetheless, while she could hardly be described as sylph-like, the 26 is not overly bulbous or top-heavy. The twin teak rubbing strakes, contrasting gel colour of the top 'plank', two-tone decks (with non-slip areas in grey) and thin teak coachroof strake disguise the height pretty well.

One quality she undoubtedly possesses in abundance is stiffness. Step aboard and she hardly moves underfoot. That will be a big plus for newcomers and the nervous.

Moving around on deck is easy because of the outboard rigging and because the generous

We happily carried full sail on the wind with well over 20 knots across the deck



exceeded 6 knots. It was nothing to do with the propeller, because the boat had a feathering prop – without which we would have reached nothing like the speeds we did. A three-bladed fixed prop is standard and would act as an efficient hand-brake. The juddering stemmed from the rudder itself and was later eliminated by the addition of a third pintle and gudgeon.

Pushing harder

In conditions when many 26-footers would have been reefing, we happily carried full sail on the wind with well over 20 knots across the deck. As with most gaffers, it was important not to strap the mainsail in too hard; sailing a little freer and faster worked better than aiming for maximum height. A few basic tweaks like tensioning the peak and flattening the foot inevitably made a big difference.

The shifty offshore wind meant we couldn't measure our tacking angle with any accuracy, but it seemed to average not far off 80°. Between tacks we maintained 5.2 to 5.4 knots. On an earlier sail in lighter conditions, Crabbers' Peter Thomas reported matching a Contessa 26 upwind in both speed and pointing. In theory her principal weakness should be in light airs, given the sail area/displacement ratio of 14 and displacement/length ratio of 300.

Have to, we sat with the wind just forward of the beam, crabbing – appropriately – at about 1.5 knots. From there we managed to bear away, gybe round and carry on sailing without touching the sheets, which says a lot for the efficiency of the rudder at low speeds.

On every point of sailing the Crabber was swift, stiff, well balanced, pleasantly responsive, remarkably smooth and superbly reassuring. She's sensitive and rewarding for keen sailors who want to get the best from her, yet so stable and obedient that newcomers or those of a nervous disposition will soon feel at home.

Apart from the rudder blade, the only tweak that Crabbers needed to make was to the ballast distribution. While the flat water was kind to us – we weren't flying off crests and plunging the bow into deep troughs or the back of the next wave – there was a hint of bow-down trim, made more obvious from off the boat by a waterline that dipped slightly towards the bow. Following the test sail, some of the forward ballast casting was removed and the necessary adjustments made for future boats.

Otherwise everything worked well and the boat was ready to go straight into charter with Cornishblue Sailing, whose owner, Richard Picking, also runs a pair of Cornish Shrimpers.

The only niggle on deck was the tendency of the mainsheet to hook itself around the boarding ladder during a tack from starboard to port. The sheeting angle of the yankee will also need looking at to remove a little twist. As teething troubles go for the first of a new model launched only a few days earlier, it was a remarkably short list.

Fixtures and fittings

Lines led aft over the coachroof to a bank of Spinlock clutches are tensioned by a pair of Lewmar 16 self-tailers, and the headsail sheets

by single-speed Barton 8s. If you're feeling moderately energetic you will be able to lift the 140kg (310lb) galvanised steel plate on its 5:1 purchase without using the winch.

Harken furlers handle the free-flying headsails, both of which are set on wire luffs and hoisted by halyards without a purchase.

The bowsprit can be hinged up to minimise the boat's length for marina berthing. It's a two-minute job to lower it and tension the bobstay and sprit stays. There's ample working space on the foredeck, a substantial stainless Samson post and an anchor locker with windlass plinth.

Like the boom, gaff and bowsprit, the mast is Sitka spruce. It's supported by lower shrouds and by aft-swept caps over a pair of stainless steel spreaders.

Sails – cream on our test boat, also available in tan – are by Hyde and set nicely. Many traditional-style cutters have the tracks for the yankee and staysail in the same fore-and-aft line, so the two sails converge and choke the slot. As you would expect, David Thomas thought of this and the yankee's track is on the toerail while the staysail sheets to a track on the inboard edge of the deck. From both on and off the boat, the slot between all three sails looks good when they're sheeted correctly.

As on most cutters, the yankee is largely obscured by the staysail when you're at the helm. In this case, however, enough of the luff is visible and even helmsmen who normally perch on the coamings will probably be able to contain the urge and sit in the cockpit instead.

Beneath the cockpit seats each side is a full-depth locker, with the



Working space and stowage for small items in the galley are limited but there's scope to improve both. Lights beneath the deckhead might be a useful addition

fuel tank forward of a partial bulkhead to starboard. The battery switch is in the bottom of the port locker – not where I would choose given its vulnerability to damp and to being knocked.

Undoing a dozen or so screws and lifting the sole gives access to the aft end of the engine, the gearbox and stern gland. This should rarely be needed; for day-to-day checks you remove the companionway steps.

Sensible features in the cockpit include a stowage box with a watertight lid at the forward end. It owes its presence principally to the back of the engine box on the



The Crabber's saloon is bigger than on many larger boats because there's no aft cabin to push the companionway forward. A door to close off the forecabin would be impractical, so a simple curtain does the job

Crabber 22, on whose cockpit the 26's was based. A smaller detail is the use of lashings between the guardwires and stern rail instead of the more commonly-found bottlescrews. Cheaper and lighter, lashings can also be cut with a knife if you have to recover someone over the side.

Propeller power

One of the first extras I would choose on any boat that didn't have it as standard would be a folding or feathering prop. As well as leaving negligible drag under sail, the feathering three-blader driven by the 19hp Yanmar 3YM diesel on the Crabber drove her along at 6 knots with 3,000rpm on the tachometer.

Manoeuvrability was good for a long-keeler, especially with the centreplate as far down as depth would allow. Initially kicking to port in astern, she soon gained steerageway when the revs were reduced. In ahead she should theoretically have swung to port as well but demonstrated a marginal preference to go the other way. The engine installation was smooth and reasonably quiet.

Accommodation

Below decks the combination of varnished utile trim, painted tongue and groove-effect finish on the bulkheads, cedar slatting and vinyl coachroof lining creates a bright and appealing environment. Crabbers were originally

considering a moulded glassfibre headlining but the vinyl looks so much better as well as allowing easier access to the deckhead. Because the main bulkhead is laminated directly to the deck it has a capping around the top: always a reassuring sign and a nice, if labour-intensive, bit of trim. As we saw during the articles on the construction, the interior is formed by two mouldings – one either side of the main bulkhead. Interior mouldings can create a plasticky feel but in this case only a small area is visible above the cabin sole and it's not obtrusive.

Without an aft cabin to push it forward, the saloon is roomier than on many 26-footers. The berths are 2m (6ft 7in) long and at the widest part of the hull. A quarter berth and chart table to port in place of the separate heads compartment are available as an option, with the heads moving between the berths in the forecabin. Headroom is over 1.83m (6ft) throughout.

After a day aboard I found little to criticise. A hinge-up work-surface in the galley, forward of the sink, would be useful, as would a drawer or two for cutlery and oddments and some more hand-holds in the saloon, which Crabbers plan to fit. Although the saloon berths are of generous width, backrests that hinge up would allow more shoulder and rolling-over width. They could be made into partial-length pipe-cots to provide children's berths or extra stowage for kit bags.

PBO's verdict

Having followed the development and construction of the Crabber 26 for nearly a year, this is a boat I have got to know better than most. It would have been a huge disappointment, not to say a surprise, had she not come together and performed as expected.

Without a doubt this is the best-mannered gaffer I have sailed. She's one of the few that's more responsive and enjoyable to sail than many conventional modern cruisers as well as being stiffer, more predictable and more reassuring. A modicum of tweaking will make her even better and I fully expect to see keen owners leaving plenty of other 26-footers in their remarkably clean wake.

Her construction should make her as tough as a glassfibre yacht can be, the interior works well and looks good, the finish throughout is hard to fault and the standard specification more comprehensive than many. The thought and attention to detail that has gone into every aspect of the boat is clear. That there are very few boats with which she's directly comparable will stand her in even better stead: production gaffers in this size range are pretty rare.

Whether you're a gaffer enthusiast or just looking for a roomy, comfortable and versatile 7.9m (26ft) cruising yacht that comes complete with a whiff of wood-shavings and Stockholm tar, take a look at the new Crabber.

See how the Cornish Crabber 26 was built – turn to page 45

Other boats to look at



Norfolk Smuggler

PRICE: FROM £95,763

Slightly shorter than the Crabber, at 7.62m (25ft), the Norfolk Gypsy's big sister has a shallower centreplate that lives fully beneath the cabin sole. Large cockpit. Sails remarkably well in a breeze.

www.neilthompsonboats.co.uk



Frances/Victoria 26

PRICE: FROM £25,000

Chuck Paine's double-ender started life with an almost flush deck before growing a coachroof. Later the Victoria 26 provided more accommodation. Gaff and cutter rigs were options.

Available secondhand



Golant Yawl

PRICE (detailed plans): £900

This elegant design from Roger Dongray, designer of the Shrimper and earlier Crabbers, is a larger version of his successful 5.8m (19ft) Golant Gaffer and sold in the form of plans.

www.seashellboats.co.uk

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Cornish Crabber 26 data

LOA	8.00m (26ft 3in)
LWL	7.24m (23ft 9in)
Beam	2.77m (9ft 1in)
Draught – centreplate up	0.77m (2ft 6in)
– centreplate down	1.98m (6ft 6in)
Light displacement	4,000kg (8,818lb)
Ballast	1,722kg (3,796lb)
Sail area	34.74sq m (374sq ft)
Engine	Yanmar 3YM 19hp diesel
Headroom	1.85m (6ft 1in)
RCD category	B
Designer	David Thomas

Sails can be cream or tan

A feathering propeller is a worthwhile extra

The water tank is beneath the forward berth

The GZ curve shows the maximum righting moment at 65° and an angle of vanishing stability (AVS) of 129°

A deep centreplate helps manoeuvrability and upwind performance