



The Real Crabber 26

In the artwork, she appeared a little... well... homely but in reality, the new Cornish Crabber is both jaunty and quick – even in light airs – as Peter Goad discovered.

With photographs by Peter Chesworth

The latest design from Cornish Crabber's yard in north Cornwall has had good coverage in the boating press. David Thomas's design brief was simple but a pretty tall order: a 26' (8m) cruising yacht with standing headroom throughout the accommodation, retaining the successful Crabber theme of gaff rig and traditional looks but with an emphasis on performance.

Having caddged a few sails on the Crabber 22, I was delighted to get the opportunity to review the 26 but I must admit I wasn't expecting lively sailing as I arrived at Falmouth Marina at 8am on a chilly mid October morning. The clear sky was still a rosy pink and there was hardly a breath of wind. The Crabber 26 is no lightweight at 4 tons (tonnes) displacement and the rendered drawing in Crabber's advertising gave her a top-heavy look which together with a low aspect rig and light

airs in the Carrick Roads did not bode well.

Peter Thomas, Crabber's Sales Manager and Richard Picking of Cornish Blue Sailing, the owner, may well have caught a relieved smile on my face as she came into view on the pontoons. The Crabber 26 is far more attractive when you see her for real. From any angle, the camber of the coach roof combines with an elliptical radius down to the sides to take away the visual bulk of the superstructure. Contrasting deck paint and teak trim also help and a painted top 'strake' above a teak rubbing rail reduces the apparent height of the topsides and makes her instantly recognizable as one of the Crabber family.

The overall impression is of a pretty, functional cruiser with a rather jaunty look whose wide sidedecks and teak inserts in the cockpit coamings seem to invite you to step on board.



When you do, it is immediately apparent that she is a stiff boat; her trim hardly altered with the three of us standing on one side bench. The cockpit seemed familiar which is unsurprising since it is based on the moulds from the Crabber 22 which I used as a model when building my 21' (6.3m) gaffer. One improvement was the siting of the cockpit drains which have been moved to the aft end so that there is no residual puddle when the boat takes the ground. Crew sitting in the cockpit are high enough to get a good view forward but still retain a sense of security from the raised coamings.

Letting the sails do the work

We fired up the smooth 3 cylinder 19hp Yanmar and went off to find Chessy waiting around the corner in his rib, cameras at the ready. In a flat sea, the boat ran comfortably at 4 knots at around half throttle and at 6 knots she appeared to have some in reserve to cope with a stiff headwind chop. Windage is reduced because the wide sidedecks sweep forward, narrowing the coachroof over the fore cabin and presenting less resistance.

However, we had very little wind to resist, a ghost of a north-westerly, just enough to keep the Falmouth working boats dredging in the distance with all sail set. No winch was needed when Richard hoisted the main, which went up easily with peak and throat halyards led back to the cockpit through turning blocks and clutches. With single line reefing set up for the first two reefs, it's reassuring to know that no crew would need to be despatched on deck to reef or dip the peak of the main if ever caught in a squall. With both foresails unfurled we headed off the wind, gently building up to around 3 knots boat speed at less than 45° off the wind which was at most 5 knots. She tacked easily with no snags on the foresail sheets, carrying

her way through the wind as might be expected and with barely perceptible weather helm she virtually sailed herself. From close hauled to a broad reach, the slot between the jib, staysail and main worked very well as long as the sheets were tended accordingly. On a run, as with most gaffers, the main benefited from an easing of the peak halyard, letting the big sail do the work and unless either of them can be persuaded to goose-wing, the foresails may as well be furled. The boom is high enough to fit a functional kicking strap.

Eventually, with Chessy's appetite for pictures satisfied we drifted back home with a dying breath behind us and no wind showing on the instrument. With the main hanging slack, we still slipped through the tide. Even in flat water it is surprising that a boat of this type should perform so well in light weather: David Thomas must be delighted!

Keeping her going in the lulls

I think several factors combine with a little serendipity to explain the magic...

- The hull shape below the waterline has moved on from the Crabber 22; she has a much finer entry which, together with a keel which is tapered aft and foil sections on the centreplate, rudder and bilge runners produce an almost non-existent wake.
- A hull draft of only 2'6" (0.8m) combined with the deep, narrow centreboard taking it down to 6'6" (2m) are not normally associated with cruising boats of this genre and the comparatively heavy displacement on a slippery hull keeps her going in the lulls and also converts potential leeway into hull speed in windier conditions.
- Then there is the secret weapon. A feathering 3-bladed Darglow prop was fitted to this boat and Peter Thomas is very keen that it should be included in the potential owner's specification. After all, he says, why go to all this trouble to get everything right and then hang a bucket over the stern?

The gaff is fitted with a shoe around the mast which I've found on the 22 has a tendency to jam but for us, dropping the main was a very smooth operation from the cockpit. If she was my boat, I would be tempted to use a sail stacking system with multiple lazyjacks so that the sail put itself to bed – particularly as in every other respect, she is ideal for single or short-handed sailing and it would also save having to dig out the mainsail cover when packing up.

As for her performance in a blow, I have to rely on Richard's experience to date but with her low aspect rig, deep set lead ballast and that deep centreboard, she should be in her element. Richard, who charters the boat and is an instructor at Cornish Cruising, says he has sailed the boat several times in over 20 knots of wind, under full sail without her seeming at all hard pressed. That first reef looks as though it would make a good flattener, taking the fullness out without sacrificing much area. It's nice to know that a very deep third reef is there but I don't imagine it will see much use! Although both foresails are set flying with furlers rather than roller reefing, furling the yankee jib and then the staysail as the main is progressively reefed should keep the rig balanced, although Richard reckons to furl the staysail first with a full main when initially reducing sail.

CRABBER 26 SPECIFICATION

LOD: 26'3" (8.00m)

LWL: 23'9" (7.24 m)

Beam: 9'1" (2.77m)

Draft – centreplate up: 2'6" (0.8m)

 centreplate down: 6'6" (2m)

Sail Area: 374 sq.ft (34.7m²)

Unladen Displ: 4 tons (tonnes)





up

In the new Crabber's light, airy interior, there's over 6' (1.9m) headroom from the galley by the companion to the double berth up forward.

On the way back to the marina we tried a couple of figure of eight turns. Without the centreplate, she turned in around two and a half lengths, slightly tighter to starboard; with the plate down, she spun round, almost in her own length. Bringing her back into the berth I was caught out by the efficiency of the prop going astern, she stopped dead about 2' (0.6m) out!

You don't have to duck

The new Crabber is light, spacious and airy with a heads/shower compartment to port of the companionway and compact galley to starboard. Two settee berths flank the centreplate case which has folding table leaves. Anyone of average height would normally expect to duck when moving around the accommodation of a 26-footer but here you'll find over 6' (1.9m) headroom right the way forward to the double berth in the fo'c'sle. For serious cruising you might want a few more dedicated handholds – a grab rail is now fitted both sides of the companionway – and stowage might be a bit restricted as there are no quarter-berths to use as dumping grounds but she looks quite capable of making a comfortable home for a crew of four. The heads are generously proportioned and practical with plenty of room for climbing out of wet weather gear and space to hang it afterwards.

Although a chart table can be fitted to hinge down from the forward saloon bulkhead, in practice a plotter in the cockpit and a chart on the saloon table while on passage would be more functional. There is also an alternative layout with a quarter-berth and chart table replacing the heads compartment; the wc is then fitted under the infill between the vee-berths forward. Subsequent boats have more stowage around the galley and better engine access with a removeable moulding exposing the complete front of the engine. The cockpit sole can be removed to give access to the gearbox and stern gear. To maximise headroom, there are no bilges other than a sump forward of the companionway which neatly houses all the seacocks on the boat making them readily accessible. The headlining panels in the deckhead are a great idea as they enable retro fitting and replacement of electronics and subsequent cable runs.

Back on deck, the bowsprit pivots in a heel on the foredeck

where the samson post and covered anchor locker are situated. Cleats are let into the bulwarks each side and a Lewmar hatch is fitted forward of the mast. Sitka spruce has been used for all the spars which although expensive, keeps the weight down, improving stability and making the gaff much easier to handle.

Pre-stretched wire standing rigging consists of the two forestays and a pair of shrouds each side which leads to another example of the designer's attention to detail. He has devised a deceptively simple hounds fitting which not only performs the traditional role of providing an anchorage for the lower shrouds, staysail halyard and throat halyard but also forms an elegant solution to an age old problem associated with a long-boomed gaff rig like this. The fabrication also incorporates a set of spreaders sited completely aft of the mast so that the swept back cap shrouds provide support for the top of the mast without the need for running backstays. These are temporary backstays; the leeward one is slackened off on each tack which makes short-handed sailing to windward a rather taxing affair. The fitting also takes the blocks for the doubled topping lifts which act as lazyjacks. Then we are back to the cockpit where we started.

At well over £80,000 in the water, the 26 isn't cheap but that Crabber magic has always kept resale values almost artificially high and I think that is going to be even more likely with this boat.

So all in all, I'd recommend anyone searching for a comfortable, surefooted sailing cruiser under 30' (9m) with good build quality and enviable pedigree, should take a close look the new Crabber 26. She is a joy to sail with a surprisingly good performance to satisfy experienced gaffer skippers but so totally re-assuring and well mannered that she would make an excellent first boat for anyone.

Don't take my word for it though, treat yourself to a day's charter from Richard at Cornish Blue Sailing for £170 a day and experience the pleasure of sailing her for yourself!

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