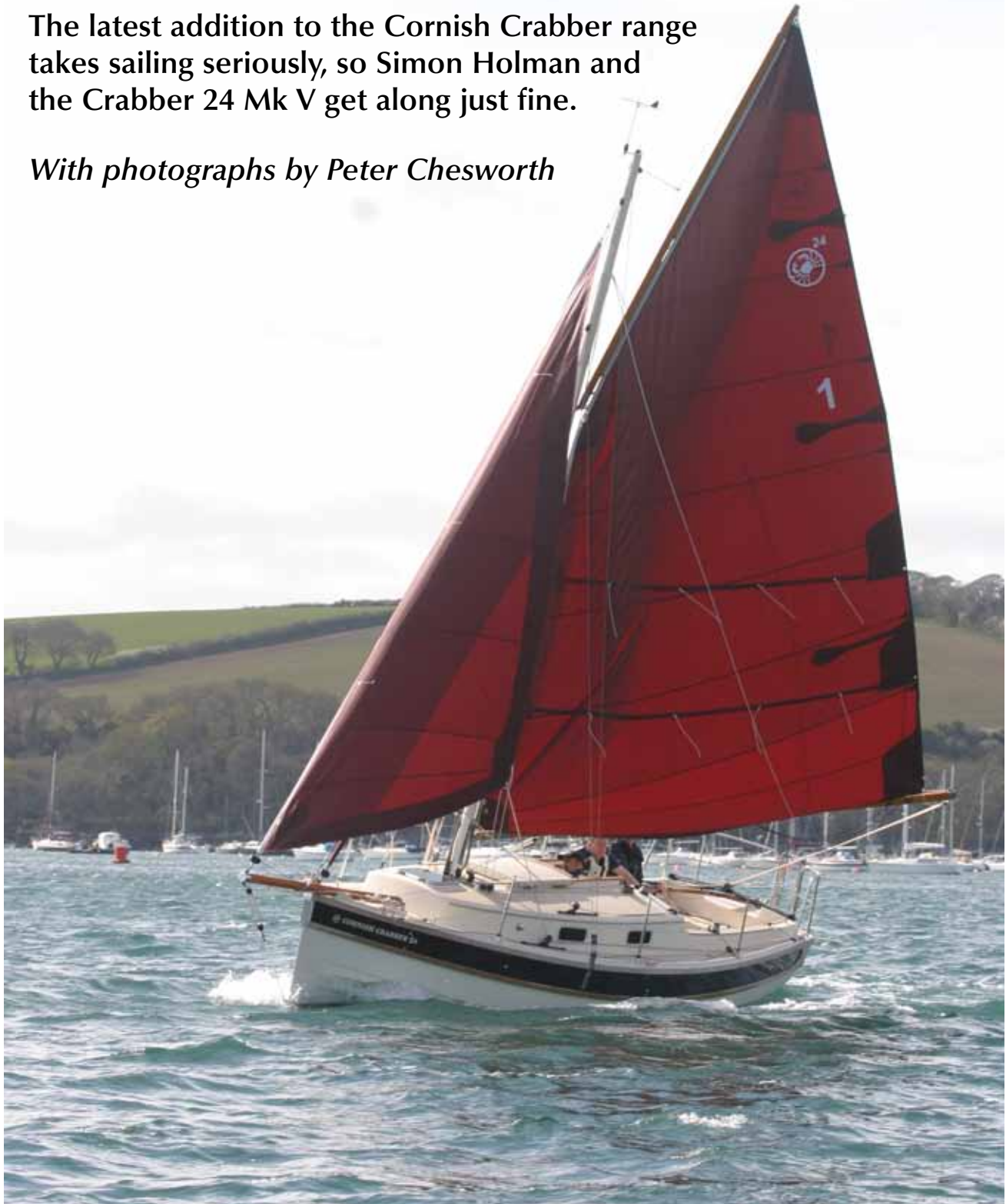


# Leading Light

The latest addition to the Cornish Crabber range takes sailing seriously, so Simon Holman and the Crabber 24 Mk V get along just fine.

*With photographs by Peter Chesworth*





**B**eating out of Mylor Harbour on a grey and blustery spring day, we pass an elegant Sigma 33 lying to her mooring. Pressing on in the drizzle, we tack past a Cornish Yawl, a Crabber 26, several of the ever-popular Shrimpers and finally one of Cockwell's Duchy launches. You could be forgiven for thinking this had all been planned, given our crew. We are sailing Cornish Crabbers' new Crabber 24 Mk V, joined by Peter Thomas, managing director of Cornish Crabbers and her designer, Andrew Wolstenholme.

It's a rare treat to meet a designer whose work I've long admired but happily this is not the first time it has happened. At university, I was fortunate to meet the late David Thomas, who generously lent me some designs for a project I was working on. Designer of the Sigma 33, the Crabber 26 and of course, Peter Thomas's father, he was responsible for many design classics over his extensive career. Similarly prolific, Andrew Wolstenholme needs no introduction to *Water Craft* readers; his varied designs encompass many genres from workboats to dinghies but he is perhaps best known for his many launches including the Duchy range and cruising yachts including his own trailer sailer, *Kite*.

Andrew joined us with his wife Rosemary part way through their holiday in Cornwall, having had the chance to try the boat for the first time the day before when the rain held off long enough for Ches to get some shots of her in action.

It was along the Westcountry coast that the original

crabbers worked out of coves and porths under sail and oar. These versatile open boats, typically around 20' (6m), were primarily inshore potting boats, light enough to be worked by one or two men from a beach but robust enough in construction to handle a range of conditions and fishing activities. A hundred years ago most small Cornish harbours would have had a dozen or more crabbers.

With the advent of power the boats got bigger and their ports and usage changed. But by the 1970s modern leisure interpretations of traditional working craft were appearing on the market. In his 1983 book *Working Boats of Britain*, Eric McKee wrote: "To give some recent examples...Westerly Boats are building a 24' topsail gaff cutter... Following the established tradition of naming boats in a misleading way, this boat is called a Cornish crabber." He was referring to Roger Dongray's design for the original Cornish Crabber, which first came on the market over 40 years ago and whose ensuing popularity cemented the reputation of Cornish Crabbers – as Westerly Boats of Rock was re-named – as builders of capable, traditionally styled yachts.

Although the later Crabbers have edged towards fixed draft long keelers, Andrew Wolstenholme's new version has a shallow draft – like the Mk 1 she has a lifting centreplate – and in keeping with all her Cornish Crabber sisters she is set up for single or short-handed sailing. Importantly, the Mk V is designed to be light, both for performance afloat and the



**This page:** A cockpit large enough for a family crew and comfortable accommodation, sleeping and dining, for them below.

**Facing page:** A useful feature more frequently seen in the Netherlands than in the UK: the 24's bowsprit can be raised to save on mooring charges usually based on boat length.

ability to be towed home at the end of the season. Talking to Andrew and Peter, it was clear the design brief focussed around light displacement, while retaining the weatherliness and manoeuvrability of older models.

### SO HOW WOULD SHE PERFORM?

We didn't have to wait long to find out. The time it took for Peter to lower the steering bowsprit – which will save on marina fees – remove sail covers, drop the centreplate and get ready to leave was just enough for us to discuss the chances of getting any fair weather that day. With a forecast of Force 6 and fog patches, that was a pretty short conversation.

We motored out of the berth and got sails up as we entered the moorings outside the marina. Even within the shelter of the inlet, the wind was giving the flags onshore a good workout so we decided on a first reef in the main and jib as a reasonable sail plan. Both headsails are on a new reefing/furling system, which allows the jib foil to bend when the bowsprit is raised for convenience.

We beat out towards the mouth of the estuary, making several tacks into the swell rolling into Carrick Roads. It is difficult to make honest estimates of genuine tacking angles in a sea in gusty conditions but the sail plan felt balanced and she pointed up eagerly, without any hint of stalling in the shifty squalls. I was glad to be able to make use of the full-width mainsheet traveller at the aft end of the cockpit to lose some power at times but the kicking strap kept the leech flat and controlled the mainsail shape nicely. The thing that really struck me was the acceleration as she powered up; she felt alive and responsive, without being over-pressed.

Bearing away between St Mawes and Falmouth onto a beam reach, we again experienced this acceleration, catching intermittent waves and surfing at speeds that I wouldn't have expected from a 24-footer. The helm picked up some weight in gusts, as would be expected from any boat in these conditions but the effect of the partial balance on the rudder blade made



this sporty, rather than arduous. The high peaked gaff showed no tendency to squander power over waves, which can be frustrating in more traditional gaffers.

We put a gybe in off St. Mawes and ran back up the Carrick Roads to find some shelter to play with the boat in closer quarters. After a few token tacks and gybes to get the feel of the boat in less wobbly conditions, I was able to admire her practical, well led, headsail sheeting arrangements. In common with all the designs in the Cornish Crabber range, the new 24 has no running backstays, which makes handling under sail a composed activity short-handed, while offering plenty of activity for crew with headsail sheets if required. It is soon clear how spacious the cockpit is; an Andrew Wolstenholme trademark feature. With four adults on board, we were able to do everything without climbing over each other and without the indignity of having to sit to leeward.

You would not mistake the new Crabber for a keel boat; her small angle stability is adequate but she stiffens up impressively at around 15° as her impressive form stability takes effect. The combination of a low rig weight from her carbon mast and well-placed ballast meant that she was only once close to putting the deck edge under in conditions



which would have been sporty for any modern lightweight design. She is also surprisingly dry in the cockpit. I had the prime position aft, steering with a windward thigh and a hand on the traveller but the fact that we all managed to hold an interesting conversation which lasted the whole of the sail says much for her weatherliness.

#### 'STOP AND GO ABILITY'

Back at Mylor, I took the opportunity to try sailing up to a couple of moorings to get a feel for her 'stop and go ability'. Despite the crackly breeze, she performed entirely predictably and without any apparent vices. If anything, I was surprised how far she carried her way, no doubt due to her modern underwater body and low windage from the rig. It had occurred to me beforehand that with her pronounced cut away sections aft she might not like manoeuvres such as fore-reaching and heaving-to, so we gave that a go as well. Not a problem. Tacked over with the headsail left sheeted she dropped her speed and jogged along at just over a knot. With a minimum of juggling of the tiller and traveller, the speed dropped to a crawl, our flattened wake letting us know where we'd been.

Time was getting on and I wanted to get a better idea of her behaviour under power. With sails away and with the Yanmar 2YM15 gently ticking over, we found an open portion of wave break and made a few approaches, both with and without the benefit of the prop kick, finally reversing up to the pontoon with the wind on the quarter, just for fun. The throttle is well placed in the wall of the cockpit well, so that a foot or

knee can be used, which avoids the terrible business of having to look away when concentrating. It took me a little while to get used to the feathering prop, being unused to the slight delay in drive, followed by a burst of power as the pitch takes control. But like every other element of this design, the effect was repeatable and predictable and the ample propwash going astern could be used to spin her clockwise in a short turn in just a fraction over a boat length. We even made a figure eight backwards around two conveniently moored boats without any recourse to a correction in forward gear. The engine is well sound-insulated, which meant conversation could continue during the play.

For a little more fun, we reversed into the marina to see the effect of raising and lowering the plate on manoeuvrability under power. As might be expected, her bows tend to fall off a little more quickly without the plate but I didn't notice any appreciable difference in the size of her short-turning circle. What I did notice was how quickly she picked up speed astern and how easy she is to drive backwards, so I reversed her right back around the marina and into her – rather tight – berth; I can't think of many boats I would try this with under those conditions. Those used to heavier keel-boats might notice she starts to drift downwind when stationary but with water flowing over the rudder she was easy to handle and with the engine in tick-over in astern she sat still in the water with the wind over the quarter while we made the necessary preparations for parking.

#### THE AESTHETIC IS MODERN

Once secure, I had a good look around on deck. Unusually for a production boat, hardware is generously sized and many of the stainless fittings are designed and manufactured in house. This attention to detail is continued with the hand laid GRP in the deck, hull and internal mouldings. The plugs for hull and deck were CNC-machined from foam, once the design had been finalised. The result is very crisp and beautifully executed; the mouldings are precise and the aesthetic is modern.

The standout feature for me is her Selden carbon mast, fitted as standard. The difference this makes is huge; the whole boat is stiffer and less inclined to roll thanks to the vastly reduced weight aloft and rigging and unrigging is greatly expedited. This, along with the feathering prop,

## CRABBER 24 MKV SPECIFICATION

Total length: 28'3" (8.60m)  
LOD: 24' (7.32m)  
LWL: 21'10" (6.66m)  
Beam: 8'9" (2.66m)  
Draft – plate raised: 2'4" (0.72m)  
plate down: 4'7" (1.40m)  
Weight: 5732 lbs (2600kg)  
Sail area: 351 sq.ft (32.62m<sup>2</sup>)  
RCD Cat B



headsail tracks and mainsail traveller, is a departure from traditional design which favours performance under sail.

Traditionalists will be relieved to know there is some wood on show, both inside and out but never for the sake of it. Wood in modern traditional boats is often only a nod to the past and it is nice to see a stylish restraint.

Down below she's surprisingly light and airy. Given her size, Crabbers have done well to keep the interior uncluttered and practical, while maintaining a classic feel with a painted finish and hardwood trim. There are also some neat solutions to the perennial small living space conundrum, with the aft portion of the double vee-berth hinging to form a backrest for a U-shaped seating arrangement using the two single side berths. Thanks to this, four adults could comfortably spend a wet evening at anchor below decks with ample sitting headroom and elbow room.

The basic boat is fitted as standard with calorifier and pressurised hot and cold water. She also carries a holding tank. The heads module is compact but perfectly functional, placed by the companionway where it can double as a wet locker. The boat is well appointed without feeling over-stuffed and there

is ample locker space for a tender and outboard and all the accoutrements of family cruising.

It's obvious that much thought has gone into making the Crabber 24 Mk V as light as possible, with priority given to her sailing performance. Reducing boat weight is far more onerous than increasing it but doing so seemingly effortlessly even more so. Clearly, every individual element of the boat has been closely examined and quantified and while this must have meant some compromises, they do not show. It's impressive that when I ask about any modifications that will be made to the second of these boats – currently in build – the answer is minor details only.

So, is she worthy of her name? Well, she's altogether too smart and shiny to take out crabbing but in terms of performance and ability, I'd say so. Versatile, handy and manageable ashore or afloat short-handed, this impressively efficient design has all the hallmarks of a contemporary classic.

### CONTACT

[www.cornishcrabbers.co.uk](http://www.cornishcrabbers.co.uk)