



The Lone Boatbuilder

As Roger Wilkinson achieves his goal of building his 50th Kittiwake dayboat, Alice Driscoll meets his Vice-Chairman. With photographs by Peter Chesworth

No-one ever says 'I wish I'd spent more time at work' and it's not often you meet someone who really does enjoy his job and has done so for the last 23 years. So it was a real pleasure to meet Roger Wilkinson of Kittiwake Boats to celebrate the launch of his 50th Kittiwake.

We meet at the gorgeous and historic Rudyard Lake in the Staffordshire Moorlands to test sail the Kittiwake 16. It's the big sister to the very popular Kittiwake 14, of which over 45 have been built since Roger produced his first boat in 1987. Seeing the two of them – the green 16 and the red 14 – tied to the pontoon, my initial impression is how pretty they are. The subtle sheer and the clinker-style GRP hull is complemented by the dark utile interior. With the gaff main, twin headsails and mizzen, the rig suggests these boats would look more at home in Carrick Roads than an inland reservoir. But the historic



charm of this dam – originally constructed in 1797 as a feeder for the Stoke on Trent canal with its restored boathouses around the water's edge – makes these beautiful traditional looking craft seem totally at home here.

Walking along the pontoon to take a closer look, I'm accosted by a small barking dog. "Don't worry," says Roger, "That's Lottie. She's the company Vice Chairman and she's more popular than I am." As Roger rigs the boat, he describes how he took the original hull shape for the Kittiwake 16 from a 1940s Hurst Castle One-Design, one of which is still sailing on Rudyard. As if planned, the boat hoves into view. You can see the likeness but the matt paintwork does little for her compared to the gleam from the GRP Kittiwakes.

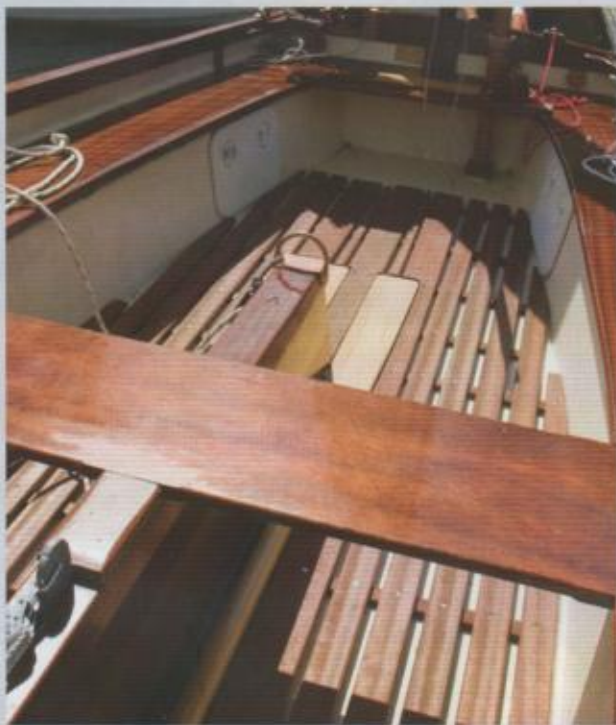
With the two boats now rigged, Roger and I get into the



Above: The stable Kittiwake 16 hull carries a long, low-aspect rig which provides plenty of strings for the crew to pull

Left: Generously fitted out in African mahogany, the Kittiwake has the traditional appeal of an Edwardian dayboat.

Facing: the Kittiwake 16's smaller sister.



Kittiwake 16. She's so new that even Roger hasn't tried the mainsheet option he's set up, which has the sheet led amidships to a useful mainsheet cleat at the aft end of the centreboard case. Even though it's quite gusty, we set off with her full sail so we can see how she handles. There's plenty of space and it's very comfortable with plenty of seating.

Ches the photographer is in the Kittiwake 14, which is being sailed by my husband, son William and accompanied by our dog Meg. As we set off from the pontoon, there's some yapping from Lottie, who makes a last minute dash into the Kittiwake 14. It's a glorious sunny day for sailing with some

nice sharp gusts hitting the water. The lake is long and thin, and there's a little steam train which chugs along the west bank. However, the peace is rudely shattered by the yapping from the Kittiwake 14; Lottie is clearly disgruntled that I've sailed off with her owner and Meg is howling at the hoots from the steam locomotive.

The 4-sail rig is more than ample to get a good speed up and the jib and fore sail combination makes it interesting for both crew and helm. It was one of the design features, says Roger, to give the crew plenty to do and alleviate boredom. It certainly works for William who loves sailing this boat. I'm always surprised at how effective a mizzen is; I tend to forget it's there, until Roger points out that I should change its set, and I see the difference it makes. The Kittiwakes are also incredibly stable, making it easy to move around inside. So when, we decide to heave to and reef – normally an exercise which can be a little fraught, especially amongst moored boats and lots of hire craft on the water – simply by pulling in the mizzen, we can weathercock the boat until she sits steadily head to wind while the reefs are set.

At this point Ches decides to jump ship and join us – followed swiftly by Lottie. After she gives Roger a hard time about leaving her, she is happy running around the boat. The sail up the lake gives me a chance to ask Roger more about how he got into boatbuilding, and about his early boats. As a child he was introduced to rowing but he really wanted a boat with sails, so as soon as he could, he bought a classic

1930s baby Falmouth Quay Punt. "In fact," Roger says, "that's her over there," pointing to a half refurbished boat under an awning. He's only recently sold her to a friend and she's now being restored – "Slowly," he adds.

Having sailed up past the lovely stone boathouse – the Lady of the Lake – which sits prominently out on the lake, we turn both boats downwind and enjoy the sheer pleasure of sailing. It's the combination of traditional and practical that I like. Little features show the boat's pedigree, like the oars which are located neatly into the sole; and the combination of soft traditional style ropes with sensible main and jib sheets. There's a roller furler for the jib and the boom sits high enough to avoid having to duck every time we gybe. I can tell Roger has a real love for getting the best out of a boat and is happy to combine traditional features with technology to produce the ultimate performance.

Every Kittiwake is built to order and it becomes apparent that each is a work of love for Roger. His aim, right from the start, was to build beautiful boats that would last. "You certainly don't go into boatbuilding for the money," he laughs. He built his first boat in 1987 while still employed full-time as a dispatcher at Manchester Airport. The hull was GRP and he gained a name for himself by exhibiting her at the Wooden Boat Show – an irony which was pointed out to him. Working on a part-time basis, he enlisted help from friends and the key to success, he says, is to learn to build boats the right way and at the right speed to make it pay.

But it doesn't take long to calculate that – some 23 years later – building his 50th boat means he's averaged only about two boats per year. For the first four years, Roger continued to work part-time, spending three days at the airport and three days boatbuilding but his heart was so firmly set on

the Kittiwakes that he promised himself if he could sell three boats in one year, then he'd go into the boat business full time. In 1991 he achieved that goal and left the airport. "And I've never sold three boats in one year again!" he laughs. But while many people would be stressing about the financial implications, I feel Roger doesn't worry too much about that. In between boats, he's in demand carrying out maintenance on the hire boats at Rudyard and he also says he enjoys the free time to work on other projects.

As we sit chatting, Roger comes across as a relaxed person who genuinely loves creating beautiful boats and who certainly isn't looking to boatbuilding to make his fortune or build up a big company. I start asking about his business intentions and see a big frown go across his face. Worried that I've hit a nerve, I ask him what's wrong. "Just look at that!" he says, pointing to the lake, where a hired rowing boat is being driven onto the dam wall by the youngster rowing it. "I've just spent all winter repairing those!" We wince as the family, oblivious to the damage, bash their way off the rocky shore.

The first few Kittiwakes were built in a rented shed in the grounds of Capesthorpe Hall. Obviously liking rural seclusion, Roger has recently moved to an old shippen – a milking parlour – at a local farm where he has plenty of room to store boats and equipment and space to move boats around. Tucked off the beaten track, he likes the fact that this minimises disruption from passers-by, with the exception of the geese which waddle through the sheds. With just Lottie for company, he also avoids the phone during the day, enjoying being able to focus on the task in hand. And he certainly doesn't take short cuts. We admire, for example, the rope fendering around the Kittiwake 16 which we reckon took several days to fix in place.



But with even the mundane tasks, Roger prefers to do the work himself as it avoids a lot of the bureaucracy he would face if he employed people. Did he always think it would be like this, I ask? "No, I guess like most boatbuilders I started off with the idea that I would build up the business, with a yard and staff. But I really don't enjoy stress: I want to have fun and do something I love, which is creating beautiful boats. I've had apprentices, and used retired people who are keen to do woodworking and sub-contract work but the quality has never been as good as the work I can do."

Roger asks his customers to pay a deposit, which secures them a delivery date. When their boat comes up as the next on the build list, Roger asks for 50% payment with the rest to be paid on completion. Each boat takes around three months to build. Over the years the workflow has been steady and when there has been a lull he has usually taken the opportunity to build a boat for display, knowing it's important to have a demo boat available. With Kittiwakes spread all over the world, from Switzerland to Mexico, this seems a sensible plan. Does he ever worry about where the next order is coming from, I ask. "Oh, something always comes up" says Roger.

If it doesn't, then Roger also makes a living customising boat trailers, doing bespoke carpentry projects and making battleships. No, not real ones, but three scaled replicas of a King George V Battleship, an HMS Plymouth Type 12 Frigate and a Hunter Killer submarine. Roger has the three originals that he built, which he displays at various shows. The 24' (7.3m) two-man battleship was also part of the 200th Anniversary of the Battle of Trafalgar, where Roger caused a bit of a media storm by firing at a Russian battleship. Just as we're laughing at this memory, our attention is drawn away again by the family in the hire boat, who are once again banging the boat into the rocks. If Roger had a battleship here, I know where it would be heading.

Despite his fairly laid-back attitude to business, Roger does do some marketing, through his website and exhibiting at the Southampton and Beale Park boat shows. Last year the Kittiwake was included as a part of the British Marine Federation's Try a Boat scheme, and Roger obviously enjoys getting people who have never sailed before out in a Kittiwake. "The boat is incredibly stable," he points out, "making it ideal for beginners." Even before the RCD was introduced, Roger had built-in buoyancy, and this has now been increased further on the new Kittiwake 16 with the sole completely glassed in as a separate chamber. We witness just how stable the boat is when we come to rig her for a sail later that evening and even with my extra-large sized husband standing on the gunwale, the boat barely lists.

My concern is that people wouldn't really know that it is a Kittiwake. The boat's beautifully cut and stylish cream Mouse Sails carry no insignia, and there's only a very small Kittiwake Boats builder's plate on the stern, so discreet I didn't see it. "They just know," he says: "People fall for a particular boat, and that's the one they want. My task then is to build the boat that they will enjoy the most and to ensure they have it set up with the right equipment for their needs, whether they're sailing it single handed or with a crew, going for daysails or planning longer cruises and sleeping overnight on the



boat." I realise this is a very good argument, when you look at the range of beautiful boats available and that's Roger's differentiation for the Kittiwakes. Roger likes to keep in touch with past and present owners: "It's true what people say, nice boats attract nice people." While Roger obviously enjoys his seclusion building boats with Vice Chairman Lottie and the odd goose on the farm, he is so personable and enthusiastic about his craft, you know that anyone would put their trust in him to build their special boat.

You can't interview someone about business without asking what the low points have been. "The first fifty boats," laughs Roger. And the highlights? "All the fun I've had sailing in fantastic places at traditional boat rallies and events such as Douarnenez and on cruises with beer festivals alongside. Being able to spend the winter months building boats and the summer out sailing. Of course, that's in an ideal world." Actually, this seems pretty ideal, sitting in the sun by Rudyard Lake, with his friends and family here, Lottie at his feet.

Getting people out sailing, and passing on his obvious love of the water, is one of Roger's passions. He'd love to spend more time outdoors teaching sailing, for example or taking people on mini sea safaris in Kittiwakes, around some of the beautiful British coastline. His business aim, he says, when he built his first boat, was to achieve the magic number of 50 Kittiwakes. He's decided he'll continue to run the business, alone with the help of Vice Chairman Lottie, avoiding all the administrative issues that come with employing staff. It seems like a pretty good life to me. I can't see Roger ever really getting stressed, except maybe with people who don't look after boats. We see the family come in, and they're all smiling. "Well, they've had a good time and I can always repair the boat again" says Roger.

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