



Plane sailing

A planing gaffer inspired by an Essex smack? The Aussies love them. *Steffan Meyric Hughes* went for a sail. Photos by *Ray Little*

Testing boats built outside the main run of production can be a test of patience: you often have to wait years for the prototype to be built. In fact, the Secret has been popular for a decade or so in Australia, where over 40 have been sold, but there were none in the UK.

And so it was that every year at the Beale Park Boat Show, I'd wander over to find Max Campbell, trademark pipe in mouth, and ask impatiently when he'd finish his first 20ft (6m) Secret type gaffer, the boat that would act as demonstrator for his newly-formed company, Whisper Boats, the UK distributor for the Aussie firm Scuffie Marine owned by Essex ex-pat Derek Ellard, the boat's designer.

Trailer-gaffers have proliferated greatly since the success of the 19ft (5.8m) Cornish Shrimper, launched more than 30 years ago; but Secret sounded unique. Self-built (or built to order), a plywood trailer-sailer (with a 1.4 litre car, on a braked trailer), she's a planing gaffer with a trapeze if you want, based on the smacks that Derek admired in his youth, but with a modern

build method, and designed to fly. So many of us start off in planing dinghies, learning to love the thrill of flying across water, powered by the wind. That must be our greatest loss as we graduate to ever-larger vessels. Could the Secret provide the cure?

Finally, last September, photographer Ray Little and I arrived in Brightlingsea, Essex, and made our way through a still, rainy day to a little yellow yacht lying on the pontoon. Max, his brother Craig and a friend, Paul, had trailed the boat down from Cambridgeshire at the crack of dawn and were ready to go.

Miniaturised smack

First impressions were of a very pretty boat, an almost comically miniaturised yacht, perky and yellow in the shadow of the many dark smacks waiting at anchor nearby. Brightlingsea is the home of the smack and, half a world away from Australia, it seemed the ideal place to sail a Secret: Derek Ellard modelled her on the smacks he admired as a youth, and named the class after one of them.

Stepping aboard revealed no stability issues: the boat might be small, but she has a lead keel and weighs 650kg. The hull is around the same length as a Shrimper or Cape Cutter, but that gorgeous counter stern has to be paid for somewhere: and that tax has fallen on the cabin, which is small and basic in comparison.

There's room for two to sleep here on a V-berth, with a chemical loo under the cockpit sole. A simple bowl sink, water hand-pumped from a plastic jerry can and a camping-type gas stove comprise the galley. So, it's basic, but enough for the boat's most likely use, short cruises on summer weekends. A big bonus of the spartan arrangements is a complete lack of through-hull fittings.

The self-draining cockpit, by contrast, is large and uncluttered with the mainsheet horse tucked away at the aft end of the long counter. Dark green seat cushions provide comfort for daysailing and two extra berths. The lockers are up to the task of swallowing all the necessary warps, fenders and odds and sods (the anchor lives in a well on the foredeck) with a fair bit of space left over.

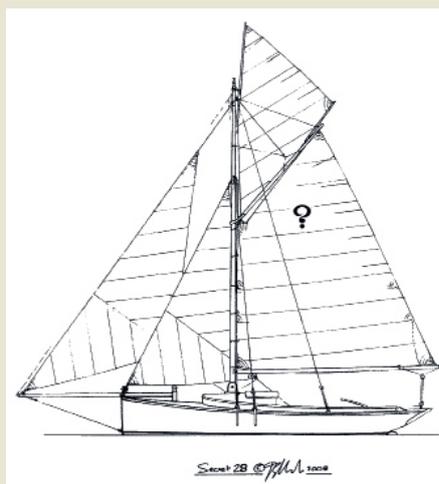


Opposite page:
The trapeze is optional - but fun
Above: Max at the helm with author
Left: Shallow, but long, lead keel
Right: V-berth will sleep two, just
Below: Long cockpit - and note the cutout for the outboard

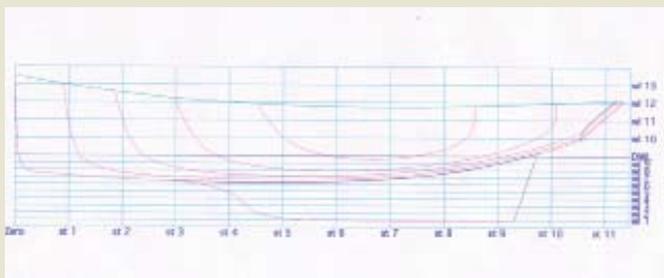
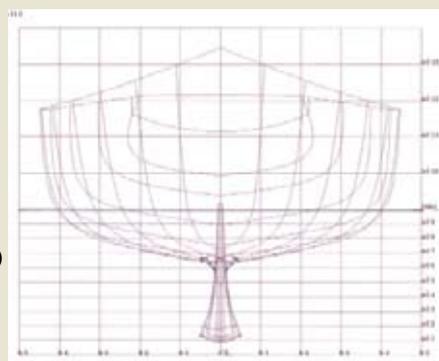




This and below left: Secret – cuddy version and full cabin. Right and below: The planned Secret 28. Lines are scaled up from the 20ft Secret



Specification
LOD: 20ft (6.5m)
Beam: 7ft (2.1m)
Draught: 2ft 3in (0.7m)
Sail area: 260sqft (24.1m²) + gennaker



The rain stopped and the sun came out as we motored out to sea. With a 4hp outboard, she steered as easily as a dinghy, and responded to throttle twists with knee-bending little surges of acceleration. The motor is always a pain on boats like this, even – as here – in a dedicated well.

The Secret deals with the issue better than most with cockpit lockers big enough to swallow an outboard, a real blessing, and the boat is stable enough to perform the awkward cha-cha of heaving a heavy motor around afloat. On a boat as pretty as the Secret, you might well find this a preferable arrangement to having the motor tilted up when not in use. Under sail, an inset covers the well to reduce turbulence.

Under sail

We rig the boat quickly. The staysail is on a furler, so no problem there. The jib is a little more complex, needing to be hauled out and up on a wire luff that acts as its stay, then the main goes up between its two topping

lifts. The bowsprit is bowsable, and in fact is a vital element in tuning the rig, providing great luff tension for the jib when sailing upwind. The bowsing line, along with most of the other lines, runs along the coachroof into a jam cleat, and is readily accessible in the cockpit.

Moored, the bowsprit is also steevable, pivoting up through the bits for ease of manoeuvring, cheaper berthing fees – and that working-smack look. It's not a particularly hard boat to rig or handle, but it would be a bit of a handful for singlehanding.

Soon we are moving in virtually no wind, using the smoke from Max's pipe as a wind-vane and gradually sailing away from a Deben Lugger that seems completely becalmed. Later, we find a bit more wind near Bradwell power station and we are off again, touching five knots close on the wind which is blowing no more than a Force 2. We sail as far as Bradwell, swapping tacks with a modern 25-footer, and running neck-and-neck.

The Secret was just as happy running before the wind to return to our mooring, but on this sensitive point of sail it was impossible to gauge how she'd react under sterner conditions. Max has had her out in all weathers up to a Force 7 and explains that with two reefs in the main and the jib dropped, she'll sail through it happily.

At the helm, she is whisper-light and utterly neutral. There is not the slightest hint of weather helm and, while admiring the boat's balance, I did miss that slight pull of tiller in hand to brace against.

Trapeze

Later, conditions strengthened just enough to enjoy the surreal sensation of hanging out on a trapeze on a gaff-rigged boat. On a light-airs day like ours, it was still an affectation, and while it's strictly optional, it's obvious it would provide a lot of fun in racing, and delay the dreaded moment of the first reef.



The Secret comes with mainsail, staysail and jib, plus the option of a gennaker. As well as the cabin boat we tested, she can be built with a cuddy cabin, or open. As for planing at double-figure speeds: Max has not yet done this, but is convinced that in perfect conditions it would happen. He has, however, reached 7.5 knots – two knots higher than theoretical hull speed. Type ‘Sail Whisper Secret’ into YouTube for Max’s videos and judge for yourself.

This is clearly a boat that would be at or higher than hull speed most of the time. She might not be a replacement for the lift-off speed you get on a planing dinghy – but she’s fast. By the end of the day we’d covered a lot of ground and barely noticed it. She’ll take you weekend cruising like any trailer-sailer – Max has used his for everything from 10-hour North Sea passages to canal trips. The difference is that the Secret will do it that bit quicker than most. How much quicker remains to be seen: Max is hoping to find out in races this year.

Secret ghosting along in a zephyr

“Max has had her out in a Force 7 and explains that with two reefs in the main and the jib dropped, she’ll sail through it quite happily”



Clockwise from top left: Shimmy, Scruffie, Scintilla and Stornaway

The Whisper range

All Whisper boats have long keels – it’s a major part of their DNA. The advantages over a centreboarder are weatherliness in shallow water and simplicity. The 12ft (3.7m) Shimmy is the smallest of the range, but a lot of boat for its length, and, with its keel, weighs a hefty 110kg. The trade-off is that four can go for a daysail and two can overnight on the sole. Her rig is unstayed lug, she has built-in oar storage and can accommodate an outboard.

Next size up, 15ft 6in (4.7m), is the original Scruffie, designed as the ideal knockabout dayboat. Her designer claims she’ll accommodate eight for daysails; alternatively, she’s available with a cuddy cabin. She weighs 250-300kg. The Stornaway is an 18ft (5.5m) yawl weighing 300-400kg, with cabin, cuddy and open boat variants. With a more modest counter stern, she offers nearly as much space as the Secret. Finally, there is the 24ft (7.3m) Scintilla, “the biggest practical trailer-sailer,” a cruising yawl or gaff cutter with four berths and a displacement of 1,500kg.

BUILDING THE SECRET

Since setting up Whisper Boats in 2004, Max has built a cabined Stornaway and an open Shimmy, as well as the Secret which acts as Max’s demonstrator and has given him kit-building experience he can pass on to other builders. The kits are imported from Scruffie in Queensland and the Whisper Boats service starts at Tilbury, where Max collects the unwieldy kit with his car and trailer, drives it to the customer’s workshop and breaks it down into manageable parts.

The build starts with a ready-made keel with lead ballast built in. The marine ply frames, bulkheads, shelves and seats are located onto the keel and to each other by a series of precision pre-cut slots and tabs which lock to form a rigid skeleton, which becomes a series of watertight lockers and flotation compartments when the skin is screwed and glued on. Max reckons on about three months, full-time, to build the Secret though the boat’s shape is apparent after just a few days, giving a sense of progress early on. The cost is £14,500, which can be split into two roughly equal payments for hull and rig.

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