A true legend

Peter Poland recounts the story of the Contessa 26, one of the most able, famous and popular compact long-keeled cruiser-racers

The ubiquitous Nordic Folkboat, designed in the 1940s, set a trend for sporty and compact long-keeled cruiser-racers (see last month’s PBO). Of the many derivatives, perhaps the most famous of all – especially in the UK – is the Contessa 26.

This grand little yacht has become part of sailing folklore since she was first launched in 1966, a date celebrated by a 45th anniversary bash in July this year. Coincidentally, her builder Jeremy Rogers has also just received the OCC Award of Merit, the highest award available from the Ocean Cruising Club. This is in recognition of his contribution to the world of yachting over 50 years.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

• Peter Poland crossed the Atlantic in a 7.6m (25ft) Wind Elf yacht in 1968 and later spent 30 years as co-owner of Hunter Boats. He is now a freelance journalist.
The Contessa story started in the imagination of two men: Jeremy Rogers and David Sadler. Rogers had always been a keen sailor, and in his early years he set about turning his passion into a way of life. Where better to serve his boatbuilding apprenticeship than under the wing of the great Jack Chippendale? Under his guidance, Rogers joined the team that produced such exotica as International 14 dinghies – and Folkboats.

Rogers then launched his own business in Lymington in the early 1960s. His first yacht was, surprise surprise, a Folkboat. Rogers built the hull with carvel instead of traditional clinker planking, having procured oak for the timber frames in the New Forest. Because he couldn’t afford a building shed, the boat took shape in the garage attached to his Lymington house. Once complete, it was slipped out in the dead of night on an unbraked WW2 bomb trolley, hitched up to Rogers’ Morris Minor and trundled – hazardously, no doubt – down the road to the harbour. Imagine trying that trick today!

Cold-moulding

To avoid getting the 1960s equivalent of an ASBO, Rogers figured it would be a good idea to find a proper shed instead of hammering and chiselling away in a residential area. It was now that the seeds of the Contessa saga were sown as Rogers experimented with the new cold-moulding methods. Thanks to this robust and rigid triple-skin hull, made up of two layers of 4mm ply and one of 4mm veneer, Rogers could also save weight by reducing the number of frames and stringers. His wife Fiona remembers with a grimace the brain-numbing and nail-breaking game of pulling out all the staples that had fixed each layer as the glue hardened. Because it had a standard Nordic Folkboat rig planted on top, Rogers’ new baby was then accepted by the Folkboat Association as being ‘in class’, and duly went on to finish second overall in the Round the Island Race.

Martin Sadler recalls that at around the same time his father David had been racing Serenus, a timber Folkboat. ‘Her hull was to the original lines, but carvel (rather than the original clinker) and she had an extended coachroof and a doghouse. After two seasons, it was clear that considerable improvements could be made to increase comfort and speed.’

So David Sadler visited Jeremy Rogers to discuss a ‘custom-built’ boat evolved from the Folkboat hull that he already cold-moulded. Martin Sadler explains that his father’s wooden Contessa of Parkstone was built on Rogers’ mould for standard Folkboats, but with increased freeboard. Sadler says the flexbility of the cold-moulded wooden hull meant the beam could be increased to 2.3m (7ft 6in) by jacking out the sides. Fiona Rogers tells me this was in fact the 17th cold-moulded Folkboat derivative built by Rogers, but the first to have a rating-friendly masthead rig. The coachroof was new, Sadler says, ‘and combined extra internal accommodation with a streamlined appearance.’ Martin Sadler adds that Contessa of Parkstone (named after his mother Tessa and owned by his father) proved to be a vast improvement on their previous Folkboat.

‘We achieved 42 firsts in two seasons, the most memorable winning the Woodbine Trophy, a night race around the Isle of Wight and Poole Bar Buoy, in a fleet that included a number of Admiral’s Cup boats. We did that two-handed, my father and I, and in those days there was prize money; 25 guineas for the class win and 100 guineas for the overall prize. I was allowed to keep the class win prize money – great for a young articled clerk earning £2 10s a week.’

At much the same time, another Folkboat aficionado, Chippy Davey, decided to go ‘out of class’ and cleaned up on the race circuit. His Fenya had a varnished carvel Folkboat hull but a masthead (as opposed to fractional) rig. With a small mainsail, large masthead genoa and far bigger spinnaker, Fenya benefitted from a low handicap, under the old RORC rule, and high performance. And she won, frequently.
A ‘plastic’ Folkboat

Meanwhile, Rogers was now using new-fangled GRP to build dinghies, so it was logical that his mind should turn to building a ‘plastic’ Folkboat. At the Rogers family home he and Sadler pondered the possibilities. Initially, there was no money to put these plans into effect and fund the GRP tooling. However, Vernon Sainsbury of the grocery clan was much taken by the idea and offered to lob in £2,000 to help fund the tooling. This act of faith made everything possible: without Sainsbury, there would have been no Contessa 26.

Rogers says that he never lofted the boat in the traditional way, but basically butched one of his cold-moulded Folkboat hulls to make the plug. He whipped out the transom, inserted wedges into the open hull and shoved the sides outwards. The hull creaked and widened, and when it looked right, he stopped. Then he levelled and lifted the sheer slightly, also making allowance for small moulded bulwarks, thereby raising the freeboard and increasing the overall length.

What about the pretty roof? ‘It evolved,’ he says. ‘I liked the coachroof that van de Stadt put on the Invicta, especially the keyhole companionway with a raised blister on top, and I also liked its general line. But by and large, we did it by eye, using long, bendy battens.’

Keel design

The Contessa’s GRP construction also dictated the keel design. A ‘bolt-on’ casting was not practical, so the hull ‘plug’ took in the whole keel shape. At the same time, Rogers sensibly lowered the leading edge by about 150mm (6in). This way, the keel base became straight and level. As a result, the Contessa can stand upright when dried out.

The keel’s lower leading edge would also move the centre of gravity forward, thereby counteracting the added weight of an inboard engine at the back of the boat.

When it came to the rig, Rogers and Sadler reckoned the performance and beneficial RORC handicap rating enjoyed by the masthead-rigged Fenya and Contessa of Parkstone made this no a-boainer, so masthead it was.

A prototype interior was then mocked up, but in the end production boats were offered with three slightly different layouts. The results might look a bit minimalist now, but offered practical comfort in the 1960s when compared to a Nordic Folkboat.

So how did the Contessa 26’s vital statistics finally measure up against her Folkboat forebear? The Contessa is a smidge longer overall and around 100mm (4in) longer on the waterline at 6.1m (20ft). When it comes to beam, Rogers’ widening exercise added 75mm (3in) to the Folkboat’s 2.2m (7ft 3in) and the keel developments added 25mm (1in), giving the Contessa a draught of 1.2m (4ft). The extra freeboard and longer roof of course also piled on some weight, so the Contessa – at a typical 2,540kg (5,600lb) – is around 500kg (1,100lb) heavier than the Folkboat, but the extra sail area afforded by her masthead rig compensated.

When it comes to the Displacement/Length (D/L) ratio, the Contessa’s extra weight and longer waterline give her a ratio of 301, which is higher than the typical Folkboat’s 267.

A new name

Now the new baby needed a name. It could not include the word ‘Folkboat’ because the International Class refused to recognise it as such. Rogers says: ‘We thought the name David had given to Contessa of Parkstone was nice, so we went for Contessa.’

The first Contessa 26, Contessa of Lymington, cost her owner the princely sum of £2,416 and 10 shillings. David Sadler took No5 and called her Contessa of Mell while Vernon Sainsbury, the business angel who funded the project in the first place, bought No6, named Grayling.

At its first boat show, the Contessa was an instant hit, and orders flooded in. On the water, the early boats made their presence felt in racing circles as indeed they still do – Contessa 26 Sundowner won the Round the Island Race Gold Roman Bowl in June this year.

However, the Contessa’s appeal stretched way beyond a race course. Many sailors wanted a pretty, seaworthy small cruiser offering easy handling, ample speed and outstanding stability. And much as a varnished hull might appeal, they wanted the economic and low-maintenance convenience of GRP.

The Contessa 26 hit the spot perfectly. In a market bursting with bulky bilge keelers, she had star appeal. In the years that followed, almost 400 MkI and MkII Contessa 26s were built in the United Kingdom. A similar number were also built under licence by JJ Taylor in Canada under the name of Taylor 26s.

Thereafter Jeremy Rogers went on to build a whole range of Contessas. David Sadler set up Sadler Yachts, which over many years produced the perennially popular Sadler and Starlight marques.
Contessa 26 – a boat for our times

Many years passed before I finally got to grab the helm of a Contessa 26: indeed, I had to wait until the 21st century. Viewed from the pontoon, the Contessa is undeniably pretty: stepping aboard, first impressions are that she is small but stable, and the interior is cozy but compact. No surprises there, then.

Once through the keyhole companionway I found two settee berths extending aft under the cockpit seats, a galley to port, a chart table area to starboard, a fairly small heads compartment between two amidships bulkheads, and a twin-berth forepeak. All in all, the space and headroom are spectacularly less than on the similar-length Wind Elf MkII that took me across the Atlantic in 1968, and the 7.9m (26ft) SCOD and Nicholson 26 yachts I crewed as a teenager. The Contessa’s maximum headroom is 1.7m (5ft 8in), but only under the companionway blister, so if you want full standing headroom, she is not for you.

The boat I sailed had been in the same ownership for a quarter of a century: the Contessa 26 attracts that sort of loyalty. Over the years, the owner had replaced the original engine with a Volvo, added a mid-saloon hatch, slotted on a headsail roller and fitted a sprayhood. When it comes to general maintenance, owners and new buyers alike can and do get great advice from the Class Association website (www.contessa26.net).

To get an idea of the many current upgrades available from Jeremy Rogers’ new Contessa business in Lymington Yacht Haven, I also cast an eye over Rosina of Beaulieu, a slightly tired Contessa 26 Rogers had bought a few years ago and restored and modified. Her modifications included clever weight-saving and storage-improving hinged pipe cots in the forepeak, attractive ‘tongue and groove’ veneering on the bulkheads, elegant wood inlays on the locker fronts and a brand-new Beta diesel inboard, complete with feathering prop. What’s more, she added more

A floating home

If you too harbour a dream and want to learn more about long-distance cruising, you should seek out Peter Hancock’s three books, Sailing out of Silence, Sailing into Sunshine and Sailing Home. These describe his travels in his Contessa 26, Kylie. Indeed, Hancock was a major inspiration to another crew who sold up and set sail in a Contessa 26, Henrik Nor-Hansen was a novelist and poet living in Stavanger, Norway, where he met Nina Kristin Nilsen, and a Rogers-built Contessa 26, Bika – hull No279, built in 1976 – became their new floating home. They decided to chuck in their well-paid jobs and set sail to see the world. The major modification they made to Bika was to jettison her inboard engine and rely on an outboard instead for the odd occasion when motoring might be necessary. This freed up a large amount of interior space for stowing extra gear – and space is at a premium inside a Contessa 26, especially when the boat becomes a self-contained, world-girdling home. Nina said: ‘We left Norway in the spring of 2005, and haven’t looked back. After sailing for a year in the Caribbean, we hungered for seasons and colder weather and sailed up to New York City instead of going through the Panama Canal. From NYC the route went to the Great Lakes, Chicago and down the Mississippi to New Orleans.

We did a major refit of the boat in Texas, before trucking her to San Francisco. ‘After spending half a year in the San Francisco Bay area – truly a sailor’s Mecca – we sailed down the Californian coast, on to Mexico’s Baja Peninsula and into the Sea of Cortez, where the boat is now. Sailing a Contessa 26 so far away from home really gives you tons of ‘cred’. She is a well-known jewel, a classic beauty, and sailors all over the world recognize her and come over to show their admiration. ‘Sailing the Californian coast, and then along the Baja peninsula in Mexico, has been spectacular. We have never seen so much wildlife, so many whales, otters, seals and rays: the sea has just been boiling with life. We are presently spending some time on land, but the next leg will be to sail into the South Pacific.’

You can read about Henrik and Nina’s adventures on their website, www.freewebs.com/sybika, but beware: it’s bewitching stuff. When I asked why they selected a Contessa 26 for their world cruise, Nina replied: ‘We chose the Contessa because it was affordable, strong, seaworthy and pretty’

LEFT Bika sailed in to New York City
ABOVE Henrik Nor-Hansen and Nina Kristin Nilsen
ABOVE LEFT Bika on the water: ‘strong, seaworthy and pretty’
nothing was unpredictable. Even in the strongest gusts and when bounding into and over steep waves, she was smooth and oozed effortless power. The Contessa 26 is a joy to sail, whether you are pottering around Poole Harbour or rolling down the trades: you just have to learn to live with occasional spray chucked back into the cockpit and an interior that is pokey by modern standards.

World-girdling voyages

Unlike myself in the late 1960s, the young Tania Aebi did manage to buy one in the 1980s, with help from her father. This particular Contessa 26 was one of many built under licence in Canada by JJ Taylor, under the name of a Taylor 26. The last of these was launched in 1990, and an active USA/Canada association still holds the class together, offering advice, stories and second-hand sales services.

Back in 1970, Binkie was the smallest entrant in the 1970 Round Britain Race, winning the Handicap Trophy. Another 26, Shamaal, completed the tempestuous 1972 Observer Single-handed Transatlantic Race in 38 days, finishing 25th out of 55 starters. Then she took 14th place out of 61 starters in the 1974 Round Britain Race. As the Contessa 26’s reputation grew, so she climbed up the league table of small boats for big voyages. If she’d been within my budget back in 1968, she would have been high on my wish list.

Minimal fuss

So how did the Contessa 26 sail? It was blowing old boots – ideal testing weather for an ocean-crossing small yacht – as we set forth into a cold, damp and heavy winter wind that touched 30 knots in the gusts. We put one tuck in the mainsail and a couple of rolls in the genoa, and the yacht proceeded to take it all in her nonchalant stride. With minimal fuss and showing no inclination to round up or misbehave, she settled into a long-legged groove and took off, touching 7 knots on occasions.

Of course, this did not come as a surprise: hundreds of owners and thousands of deep sea miles can’t be wrong. Suffice to say that steering this boat in a strong wind and an unpleasant sea lived up to all my expectations. The helm was just firm enough and responded quickly when asked. The MKII self-draining cockpit was comfortable and secure, and
The youngest solo world girdler in those days was Brian (BJ) Caldwell. His boat, Maimitivavau, was yet another Contessa 26 from JJ Taylor in Canada. When I asked Caldwell why he chose a Contessa 26, he replied: ‘It was the best value for a solo boat for the budget I had at the time. I was looking at an Albin Vega 27 but it was more expensive and didn’t come with as much equipment, such as a windvane and solar panels, etc.’

Unlike Tania, Caldwell was already an experienced sailor. He had started ocean voyaging when he was just nine, cruising to the south Pacific on his father’s yacht. He said: ‘After growing up cruising in the south Pacific with my family, we returned to our home port in Honolulu when I was 15 years old. My dream was to keep sailing, so I set my sights on the record for the world’s youngest solo circumnavigation. In 1995, exactly 100 years after Joshua Slocum set off on the first ever solo circumnavigation, I departed. Sixteen months and 27,000 miles later, I became the youngest solo circumnavigator.’

Caldwell’s voyage stands out because of the speed with which he achieved it, a testimony to his own determination and the Contessa’s extraordinary performance. He covered the first 3,400-mile leg in 34 days. The next 4,400 miles took just 40 days, so he and his Contessa 26 sped into the record books.

‘I had a top day of 186 nautical miles north-west of the Galapagos Islands, and my next best days were across the Indian Ocean when I had consecutive 140-146 nautical mile days,’ he said.

Young adventurer

Nick Jaffe is another young adventurer who recently took off into the blue in a Contessa 26. On his blogging website he introduces his small yacht to his readers as ‘a floating island, built like a tank and designed to be all alone on long stretches of deep blue water. She is a Contessa 26 from 1972: old, yet strong and reputable.’

Having quit work and bought his ‘floating island’, Nick found an interesting way of helping fund his intrepid voyage back to Melbourne – now successfully completed. Instead of seeking sponsorship he went a-blogging, and explained: ‘For those who have watched my journey since this blog began in 2006, you may remember that I had a PayPal donate button (controversial for some, apparently!). I had asked people who enjoyed my writing, videos and photos to make a contribution to keep me going. I figured it was like a voluntary donation for reading a free book.

‘Some months ago… I was surprised to see that over my sailing and blogging heyday, I had raised close to $10,000.

‘It only ever trickled in: a few dollars here and there (with a few notable exceptions), but it really added up, and my trip probably wouldn’t have happened without it.’

Prolonged sabbatical

Of course, you do not have to cross an ocean to enjoy a Contessa 26. As regular PBO readers will know, many people have just as much voyaging fun closer to home. PBO contributor David Rainsbury has been sailing for more than 20 years and cruised his Contessa 26, Piper, around the entire coastlines of Britain, Ireland and western Europe from Bergen to the Loire. His writing combines useful pilotage information with practical sailing tips and entertaining local knowledge of the many ports visited.

Another PBO insight into this great little boat’s versatility came in a series of articles by journalist Sebastian Smith, who took off with his young family on a prolonged sabbatical to explore the Med – Spain, Portugal, Biscay crossings. Once again, these articles explained how a 7.9m (26ft) boat with restricted accommodation by modern standards can make a safe and practical cruiser.

Does the Contessa 26 still exert pulling power over 21st century sailors? One owner succinctly sums her up as being: ‘crowded with four, comfy with two, small enough for one yet large enough to go anywhere. Second-hand, a lot of solid boat for the money.’ I am sure sailors will be seeking out classified ads for Contessa 26s for many years to come.