

TESTING THE WATER

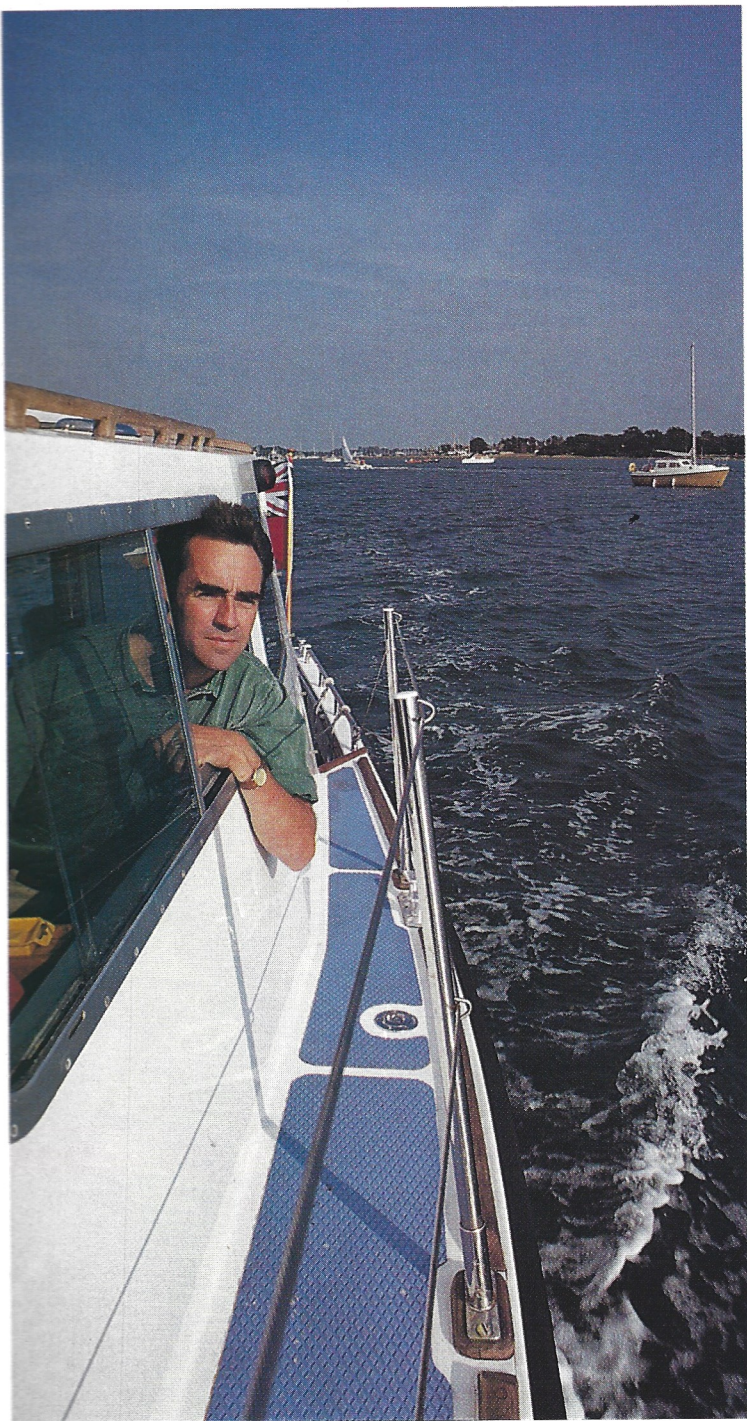
Older readers may recall the editor's Starfish *Fidget*, subject of a long series of articles (January 1996 to September 1997) while she was fitted out at the International Boatbuilding Training College.

Well, she's finally finished – almost

TEXT: ALAN HARPER







SHE'S TURNED OUT A BIT OVERWEIGHT. I KNEW SHE would, because as time went on it became clear that in the absence of detailed drawings – and boy, were they absent – the International Boatbuilding Training College tend to build everything to scantlings that would do justice to a 60ft classic yawl.

So when the day came, towards the end of last summer, to put her in the water for the first time and fire up the engine, I made sure the crane driver had fitted a load cell, and then crossed my fingers.

"Four point two," he said. Bugger, I thought.

The brief trials in the dock that day were not encouraging. Everything functioned perfectly, but the speed was down on what I wanted, the angle of trim was way up, and the engine was only managing 2,250rpm instead of 2,600. A two-way trial later with the GPS produced an average speed of 14.95 knots, with the bow waving about in the air. This made the helm seem rather vague, and probably looked a little silly as well.

Hugh Easton, the designer of the Starfish, immediately suggested having the propeller re-pitched, which would help the engine get up to its proper speed. Now knowing the actual weight of the boat, he

was able to calculate a new top speed of about 16 knots if the pitch was reduced from 19in x 21in (483mm x 533mm) to 19in x 19in. Hugh also said that trim tabs might be worth considering, as the weight of the fuel tank, right aft – which is where he told me to put it, incidentally – might be contributing to the boat's difficulties in getting fully up into semi-displacement mode.

By this time there were very few jobs left to do on the boat, but the college, who had already been working on this ten-month job for over two years, seemed to be running out of enthusiasm. Hugh was working at Bounty Boats at the time, owners of the Starfish moulds, and suggested that I move the boat up to them at Brundall, near Norwich, where he could work on the speed and trim for me. So on December 22 last year I drove the 140 miles from South London to Lowestoft for the last time, and spent my first night aboard *Fidget*.

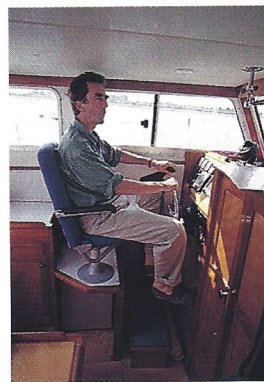
MAIDEN VOYAGE

It was not a particularly early start, but seven in the morning in late December seems an ungodly hour when you're searching the muddy slipways and sheds of the Lowestoft waterfront for a tap to fill the kettle. I was five minutes late for my 0830 appointment with the cheerful, grey-bearded keepers of Mutford Lock, operating helm and throttle gingerly and regretting not having taken the wheel during our earlier, brief trials in the dock.

But I was pleased with how easily *Fidget* handled. With plenty of prop thrust at low revs and her great big Broads-style rudder I found she could turn quite smartly, while her substantial displacement and long keel kept her on track. Solo, and doing my best to exude an air of calm competence, I was raised the few inches into Oulton Broad. Then the gates opened, and *Fidget's* first cruise began up the River Yare towards Norwich.

It was a low, grey and, to begin with, rather drizzly day, but I pottered along happily, making the odd cup of coffee, experimenting with the autopilot and peering at the flat landscape through misted windows. At Reedham I picked up a strong contrary current and progress slowed significantly, but I was still making better time than

I had expected. I arrived safely at Brundall at 1215 and secured alongside the wooden jetty at Bounty Boats, well satisfied. The yard was buzzing: people barely had time to say hello. With two days left before Christmas they had three boats to finish and ship to the London and Düsseldorf boat shows.



Left: view from the bridge – Fidget's new home is Chichester. Above: Alan at last gets his hands on the wheel.

In the new year, Hugh sent the propeller away for adjustment and reported back on February 19 after tests with the finer pitch. The engine speed had gone up to 2,450rpm and he'd seen a figure of "just over" 16 knots on the GPS during a two-way trial. But the angle of trim was still far too high, he said: tabs would still be necessary.

This was potentially awkward, because the 70gal (320-litre) fuel tank, mounted athwartships across the stern, was in the way: if there was any bolting-through to be done, it would have to come out.

Expensive. Thankfully, the people at Bounty had a better idea – glue. They made

a pair of simple hinged 18in (450mm) tabs in stainless steel with bottle-screw adjusters, which could be set at the optimum angle and then left alone. Self-tapping screws held them in place while the ITW Plexus MA550, a powerful methacrylate adhesive, cured.

Hugh took the boat out again on April 8 and worked out the best settings for the tabs. There were two: one that gave the best speed and one that gave the best angle of trim. With the latter, which is where they have stayed, the boat runs slightly bows-up, the engine manages 2,500rpm and the top speed is 16 knots. With the bottle screws three turns further down the speed was marginally greater, but the ride was wetter as the forefoot ploughed up more white water.

There were few jobs left to do now. Bounty soon had them finished:



DATA

Length overall	26ft 9in (8.15m)
Beam	9ft 6in (2.90m)
Draught	3ft 0in (0.91m)
Displacement (loaded)	4.5 tons
Fuel capacity	70 imp gal (320lt)
Water capacity	20 imp gal (120lt)
Engine	single Mermaid Turbo-Four II
	200hp @ 2,600rpm
	4cyl 5lt diesel
	3-bladed equipoise propeller
	19in diam, 19in pitch
	(483mm, 483mm)
	1.51:1 reduction ratio
Top speed	16 knots
Cruising speed	14 knots @ 2,300rpm



fit and wire the compass, investigate and cure a couple of rain leaks, and replace the bilge pumps' Whale float switches, one of which had already given up the ghost, with Rule mercury float switches as recommended by Bounty's engineer. There was also a limber hole to drill through, some gel-coat repairs to do in the cockpit – two years of heavy-footed students had taken their toll – and the boot-topping stripe to paint on. Almost six months to the day since her arrival at Brundall, *Fidget* was ready to move on.

SALT WATER

The trip back down the River Yare to the sea took place on a warm and sunny summer's day. Nothing broke, burst into flames or fell off, and just as I was beginning to get cocky and imagine that this boat ownership thing wasn't so difficult after all, Oulton Broad came round the bend and the first leg of *Fidget's* long delivery to the South Coast was over.

I came alongside the outer breakwater of the 'yacht station' – like a lot of things in these parts even the nautical terminology seems stuck

in 1953 – while a chap off the boat in front put down his fishing rod and took my lines.

The real test, of course, would be the sea. I had checked over everything thoroughly, so I checked it all again, and watched the weather forecast carefully for the next few days.

Tuesday, 30 June, finally, promised lessening winds and a swing round to the north, so with my friend Dave along as crew and moral support I bought a single ticket at Liverpool Street and headed up to Lowestoft for what I hoped would be the last time.

Escape was not straightforward. The 0630 train would have got us there in time to catch the 1100 lock, but the more realistic 0800 departure, with breakfast, meant that our first opportunity to renew *Fidget's* acquaintance with the cheerful lock-keepers was not until 1300. We were passed through without fuss, and then slipped under the railway bridge and past the familiar old jetties on the north shore, the college where she spent so long, the trim moorings of Lowestoft Cruising Club and the sad dereliction of the big shipyards.

Once through to the inner harbour, the bizarrely named Lake

Top: white water ride – 16 knots at full chat. Above: hanging in the balance – the launch at Lowestoft.

Nothing – which is like a lake the way Lowestoft is like Las Vegas – there was the road bridge to negotiate. At low water with the mast folded down we might have squeezed under, but the moon was playing for the opposition so we had three hours to eat our sandwiches, try out the new dinghy and discuss the day's pressing issue: World Cup football hooligans. Dave's theory was that to solve the problem overnight all we'd have to do was persuade the *Sun* to say that hooligans are in fact repressed homosexuals. After all, skinhead fashion is now gay fashion, and when was the last time you saw a proper skinhead? Exactly.

BIG MOMENT

To have a boat built is to sign yourself up to a succession of big moments: writing the first cheque, watching the hull pop out of the mould and seeing the engine go in. Then there's the launch day and the first trials. Each one seems more significant than the last as slowly the boat nears completion and the dream gets ever closer to fulfilment.

Fidget, though, had taken so long to complete, and was so comprehensively over budget, that I felt I'd had my fill of big moments. All I wanted to do was get her round to her home berth and start using her as a family cruiser before the family grew up and left home.

But I had reckoned without the power of boats to stir even the most careworn emotions. Our bridge was at 1600, and as the steel span swung open for us I realised that we were in for yet another big moment, perhaps the final one: pointing her bows out to sea for the first time.

Of course the term 'sea' is used loosely around these shores. It certainly looks the part, stretching away with some determination towards Holland, but a glance at the echo-sounder rapidly confirms that even several miles offshore what one is really cruising upon is a large expanse of mud covered, sometimes, by a few feet of water. It can be unnerving, and once under way and reasonably sure you're heading in the right direction it's best to ignore the echo-sounder and try and think about something else.

I had plenty of things on my mind, but nothing much, it seemed, to worry about. The forecast's promised northerlies never materialised, unfortunately; the breeze – about a three to four – stayed firmly in the west and as *Fidget* punched her starboard bow gamely through the 3ft chop I began to learn for the first time the true joys of semi-displacement cruising. Quite wet, isn't it? Those windscreen wipers earned their keep that day, and when I next meet the fellow who assembled the starboard sliding window so the drain hole in the rubber didn't align with the drain hole in the frame I'll pour a bucket of North Sea over his head, which was about how much water we wrung out of towels that afternoon as we attempted to stem the flow.

I was pleased to find that even in these lively conditions *Fidget* kept up a creditable 14 knots at 2,300rpm. The engine sounded content and the ride was cushioned by four tons of momentum. It was almost pleasant. Dave found a sheltered corner of the cockpit to smoke a cigarette, while I peered out the front and wondered why the radar seemed to have 5° squint to the left. Must ask Furuno about that.

Given time I would have lingered to explore the Suffolk rivers, moved on lazily into Essex and then crossed the estuary to investigate the Medway and the Swale. *Fidget* is a shoal-draught boat that can sit in the mud and was positively meant for such idle gunkholing. A month would have done the trick – July 1996, ideally – but unfortunately I had to make tracks.

At Walton-on-Naze's delightful Titchmarsh Marina – privately owned, friendly, snug, but not cheap – I lifted the engine hatch in search of problems and was rather crestfallen, after such a bracing first offshore passage, to find one: the Aquadrive flexible coupling had been losing oil, possibly through overheating.

This meant more delay, inevitably, but it was fixed simply enough after Halyard Marine sent up an expert to measure the angles. He recommended that the engine's back end was lowered and shunted over by a few millimetres to line up better with the shaft, and local engineers French Marine Motors were quick to oblige. There haven't been any problems with it since.

In fact there haven't been any problems with anything else either. It takes a little time to get used to a new boat, but after 500 miles I'm now quite confident with *Fidget*. I particularly recall a perfect solo crossing of the Thames Estuary from Walton down to Dover when I put her on autopilot and moved up to the foredeck to work on my sun tan. Her first public engagement was the Dover-Calais Shopping Hop (p110), where I christened the galley by making huge quantities of bacon sandwiches, and later in August she was my accommodation barge at the MBY Festival of Power. The roughest water we've encountered on passage was between Beachy Head and

Dover – steep 6ft seas – which she coped with remarkably well. As they were right on the nose we stayed fairly dry, too.

She handles well at marina speeds, and can turn almost in her own length if you're bold

enough with the throttle. In spite of her extra weight the Mermaid's torque makes her seem quite lively, and after a few long passages 14 knots has begun to seem a perfectly respectable cruising speed.

She's still not finished, of course – there's a carpet to cut and curtain rails to put up and hatch tape to put down – but she will be. Pretty soon. Honest. **MBY**

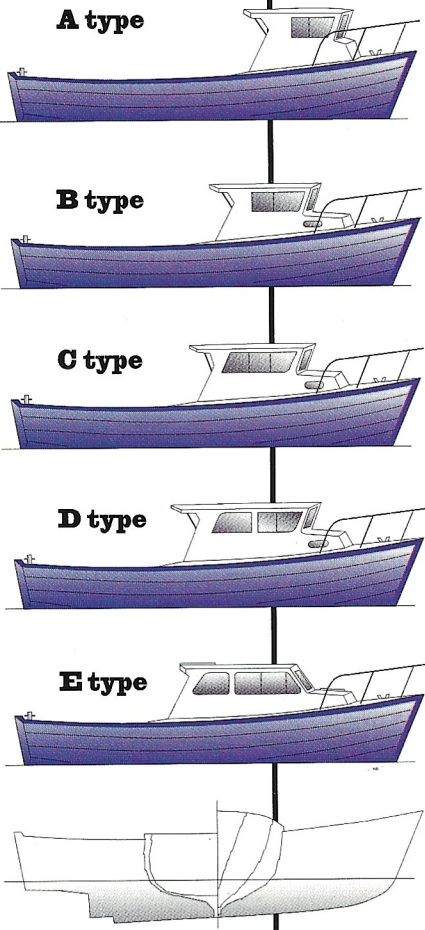
Starfish 8

The original 26ft (8m) Starfish hull was designed in 1980 by Hugh Easton. A client came to him with a photograph in his hand of a locally-built clinker fishing boat (right) and said he wanted one like it in GRP.

Hugh was glad to oblige, and although he opted for rather fewer clinker strakes than the original, the lines of the Starfish 8 do retain a marked family resemblance to that fishing boat, which can still be seen in Lowestoft. With an eye on future orders, though, Hugh was careful to design in one fundamental difference that the original boatbuilders would never have dreamt of. He flattened out the buttock lines as they ran aft, to provide the hull with some planing lift – effectively creating a hull capable of semi-displacement performance if given the right horsepower, or even full planing speeds if built light enough.

The design has proved an enduring success. Starfish 8s fish and cruise British waters from Shetland to Poole, and one owner took his to the US. Many are displacement versions, with small diesels of around 80hp, but more recently owners have taken to fitting Yanmar 230s, the big Perkins 225 and a variety of Ford-based six-cylinder engines, which can give speeds of over 20 knots.

Several wheelhouse options are available for fishermen, from the short 'A'-type cuddly to the longer 'D'. *Fidget*, hull number 83, is the first 'E'-type cruiser, with the extended wheelhouse and aft-sloping windows. For information about the Starfish 8, or its 32ft (10m) sister, telephone Bounty Boats on 01603 712070 or fax them on 01603 716406.



Copy Shop

Fidget's main fitting-out was described in ten four-page features in *MBY* between January 1996 and September 1997. They are available in black and white from the Copy Shop (Tel: 01929 407116) for the special price of £12.50.