

# BRISTOL FASHION

Equally at home picnicking or ploughing through the briny, the Bristol 27 gets the once-over from *Peter Willis*; photos by *Gary Blake*



Our first view of the Bristol 27 catches her moored under the trees opposite the Swan Inn at Pangbourne on the River Thames. With her navy-blue hull, her varnished mahogany superstructure and her dramatic stepped sheerline, she looks something of a swan herself among the shabby, duckling-like, plastic Thames cruiserettes.

Win Cnoops, who built her at his Star Yachts yard in Bristol's Underfall centre, drives her across for us to get on board – deep, welcoming cockpit, handy little ladder – and go to take some photographs and have a nice lunch on the river, which looks as if it might be one of the things she does best.

Actually, this Bristol 27 – she's so far the only one in existence, and is called *Eskdale* – is destined for a double life. Her owner, Dudley Fishburn, commissioned the

design from naval architect Andrew Wolstenholme after seeing his smaller Bristol 22 at the 2010 Southampton Boat Show. He wanted a longer boat and plans to use her both for messing about on the river here, near to where he lives, and for summer boating in the Solent.

Dudley comes from a Whitby shipbuilding family – they built Captain Cook's *Endeavour*. And the new *Eskdale* manages, by accident or symbiosis, to echo the design of a boat his father had, *Nigella*, a J-Class tender, which “went to Dunkirk but didn't come back”. Dudley never saw her – he was little more than a toddler at the time – but treasures a photograph.

The fact that Win was building these boats in wood was one of the first things that attracted Dudley, who is full of praise for his work: “A professional and an expert, a master craftsman who delivered what he said he'd deliver – and a guy you never fall out with.”

Dutchman Win came to Britain for a course at the International Boatbuilding Training College in Lowestoft, then stayed to work at Underfall, which he'd helped set up in 1997. As well as the Bristol 22 and 27, he also offers 18ft (5.5m) and 24ft (7.3m) versions. You could say Win is a boatbuilder who will go to any lengths to meet his customers' needs.

## MORE THAN JUST A BIG SISTER

Though the 27 is an adaptation of the 22, any temptation to title this review ‘A Fine Pair of Bristols’ was quickly scuppered by the fact that they are not in any sense a pair. Not only are the ships of two different sizes, but they also look very different. The 22 has an altogether more modest appearance, and a part-painted, part-varnished hull with a single, unobtrusive oval porthole beneath the foredeck on each side.

The 27, on the other hand, not only has its fixed windscreen and sidescreens, but its bow has a distinct flare. With its three chrome-trimmed portholes on each side, and the care with which the curve of the sidescreen's top edge has been made to harmonise with that of the sheerstep, this is a boat that sets out to impress.

And she does. It's gratifying to note how the dog-walkers on the bank pause and aim their cameras or smartphones as we pass by. Dudley says he's grown used to people blowing kisses at the boat.

Both designs feature narrow hulls. The 22's owner initially specified a 6ft 10in (2.1m) beam to permit use on canals, but later raised it to 7ft 6in (2.3m) to allow a bit more room. The 27, though 5ft 4in (1.6m) longer is only 4in (10cm) beamier. “You can't beat a long thin hull with a nice fine entry,” says Andrew. And in terms of comfort, this seems ample.

*Above: Eskdale's stepped sheer is clear as she cruises along the Thames*



“Dog-walkers on the bank pause and aim their cameras as we pass”



Below the waterline, the Bristol 27 has a round-bilge hull, like its smaller sister, but with a little kick in the buttock lines aft, to stop the stern sinking down as speed increases and the bow rises up.

And speed will increase – at least once she gets on the Solent. *Eskdale* is designed to produce up to 12 knots, without planing, thanks to a Vetus 52hp turbo-diesel engine. Other options are available, from 38hp with a smaller propeller for purely river use, up to 100hp and a maximum speed of 20 knots.

Here on the upper Thames, and respectful of the 4.3 knot (8kmh) speed limit, it's not something we could get anywhere near putting to the test. We don't try.

#### OVERNIGHT ACCOMMODATION

There are also bilge keels, to dampen rolling and provide some protection in the event of grounding. They are longer and less deep than those on the 22, which were provided at the owner's request to enable her to dry out.

On board, the benefit of the stepped-sheer style becomes immediately apparent. The raised foredeck allows for some simple accommodation, with a couple of bench seats and a generous heads in the forepeak. Not full standing headroom, admittedly, but comfortable enough to provide shelter from fickle weather, or to spend the odd night in (the seats convert to a double berth).

There is a little sink incorporating a single gas burner under its hinged draining board. Win says he sourced it from a caravan supplier. No built-in fridge though – the owner reckons a plug-in coolbox is much more practical.

The Bristol 27 is foremost a day launch, and greets the arriving visitor with a commodious cockpit accounting for just over half the boat's overall length. In the middle of it sits the engine box (amply sound-insulated), and at the stern is a bench seat, just ahead of the short 12in (31cm) after-deck. Farther for'ard, either side of the companionway, are the two seats for the driver and companion/co-pilot.

It's only when we stop for lunch that one of the compromises inherent in the split-sheer design becomes apparent. The engine box has a fold-out table on its top, which hinges aft, supported by a tubular steel leg, and reaches to the bench seat in the stern. However, the two driving seats, to achieve their clear view ahead, are raised up on plinths, and once turned to face into the cockpit are too high to allow their occupants to easily reach the table or feel part of the company around it.

There is another drawback to the split-sheer, and that is access to the foredeck – at least on this version of the design, with its fixed screens. They make scrambling up from the side decks (themselves rather narrow for a proper foothold) difficult and potentially unsafe.

*Clockwise from top left: The main hatch and its garage is a thing of beauty; Eskdale draws admiring glances; handheld shower; there's a chirpy chestnut finish below; the cockpit seats offer great for'ard visibility*

## BRISTOL 27

DESIGNER

Andrew  
Wolstenholme

LOA

27ft 4in (8.3m)

BEAM

7ft 10in (2.4m)

DRAUGHT

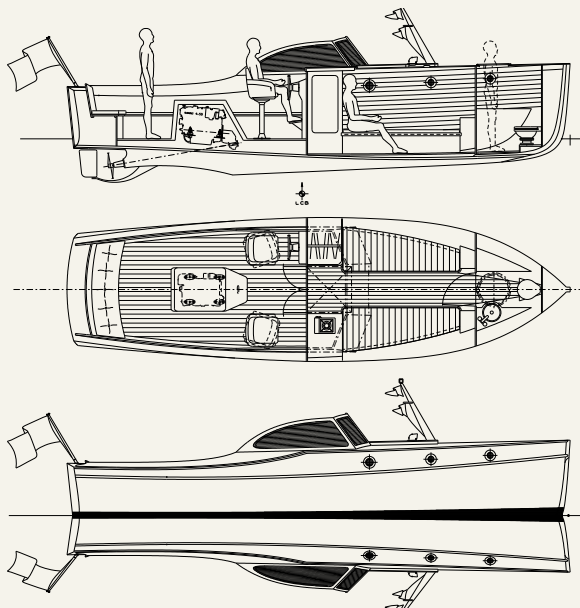
2ft 4in (0.7m)

DISPLACEMENT

5,500lb (2,500kg)

PRICE

£127,000



**Top right:** A round hatch gives access to the foredeck  
**Above right:** A double berth can be made up from the seats below

The Bristol 27 does, in fact, have a designed-in solution to the problem – an ‘escape hatch’ in the heads. Built-in steps either side of the compartment enable the foredeck crew to scramble up and be ready with boathook, line or anchor, as the occasion demands.

One other niggle: the lack of small shelves handy to the captain’s chairs for sunglasses, mobile phone and the like (and perhaps cup holders, while we’re about it). But these are the sort of things it’s easy enough to retrofit (or to remember to specify when ordering the next one), and they’re easily outweighed by Win’s thoughtful design notions.

The main hatch and its garage is also a construction of great beauty and ingenuity. The hatch itself slides between, rather than over, its runners, which makes for a neat, low-profile look. But that’s not all – the cover itself extends forward to incorporate a Dorade box for the twin ventilators.

A three-way cover system provides for partial or full protection from the elements – or, of course, privacy when using the shower. There is a tonneau canopy to protect the steering position, a pram hood which comes up from the stern to protect the cockpit, and a zip-in middle section to provide complete rainproofing.



**Right:** The original Bristol 22 inspired Eskdale’s elegant split-sheer

But, as Win says, every boat is built to order and fitted out to the specific requirements of the future owner. This includes the option of fold-out side seats in addition to the aft bench, or a full horseshoe bench in the cockpit, extras such as a swimming platform, bow thruster or electric windlass, or adjustments to the layout.

The wood used is chosen for its aesthetic, as well as its practical, qualities: mahogany, solid or laminated, for the structural members;  $\frac{3}{4}$ in (18mm) western red or yellow cedar strip-planking, epoxy-glued and glass-sheathed (800gsm outside, 400gsm inside). The deck is  $\frac{1}{4}$ in (6mm) teak over  $\frac{1}{2}$ in (12mm) plywood inside varnished mahogany covering boards and on oak beams.

The elegant, slightly curved transom, in this case carved with *Eskdale*’s name, consists of three layers of solid oak; the cockpit floor is oak and the side decks varnished mahogany. Inside the cabin, the seat backs are yellow cedar, to provide a light, cheerful effect in contrast with the dark, dignified woods outside.

One unexpected benefit of the design is portability. *Eskdale* won’t be commuting between the upper Thames and the Solent on her own keel. Why should she, when it’s quicker and quite probably cheaper to load her onto a flatbed lorry and drive her there?

In September, *Eskdale* is at the Southampton Boat Show, and she’s worth a look. If you are the sort of boat owner that appreciates style and craftsmanship, and enjoys attracting admiring glances then – assuming that a relaxing and convivial day (or occasional overnight) boat with a hint (or more) of dash is what you’re after – it would be very easy to get carried away by the Bristol 27.

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