

# DUCHY original

Hand-crafted in Cornwall, the Duchy 27 is Cockwells' new luxury GRP launch. *Peter Poland* went for a trip with her builder



PHOTOS BY PETER POLAND



Left, from top: Dave Cockwell demonstrates fingertip steering; spacious cockpit; planing if you want

It's not often that a traditional boatbuilder with wood shavings in his hair decides to add a GRP craft to his range. So when Dave Cockwell of Cockwells Modern & Classic Boatbuilding invited me to test his new Duchy 27 motor launch for *Classic Boat*, I jumped at the opportunity.

Readers of *CB* will of course already be familiar with Cockwells' woodworking and shipwrighting skills. Exquisite new pilot cutters such as *Merlin* and *Polly Agatha*, distinctive bespoke motor boats such as the Andrew Wolstenholme-designed *LIIT* and the Burnett-designed *Ocean Fauna* – not to mention restorations – all vouch for their respected position in the market.

This new design – the GRP Duchy 27 – started life as the *Aquila* (CB199). So when Dave Cockwell bought the mould tools for this Andrew Wolstenholme-designed launch, he already knew how well it performed. However, he has incorporated numerous modifications and some of his own woodworking magic to add the finishing touch of quality. And he persuaded the Princess Royal to officiate at the launch last July of the first one.

I was due to be picked up by Dave Cockwell on the Royal Southern Yacht Club's pontoon on the River Hamble. As I waited in the sunshine, I watched a procession of modern gin palaces churn down the river – some of which (in the immortal words of a chum who used to own a classic 12-Metre) looked like a cross between a training shoe and a suppository. No surprise, therefore, that the Duchy 27's shapely retro outline stood



out amongst this lot and was immediately recognisable. The elegant looks of this boat are undoubtedly part of its appeal and I noted how some of my fellow club members soon took note and asked what it was.

As Dave flicked the bow thruster, spun the Duchy around and backed her aft platform towards the pontoon, I got a clear view of one of the defining characteristics of a classic motor yacht hull: the generous tumblehome on the aft topsides. Whether on a Riva launch driven (backwards) by Tony Curtis in *Some Like It Hot*, or here on a 2011 vintage Duchy 27, tumblehome is part of the classic charm. Even though it is more difficult (and thus expensive) to extract a GRP hull with tumblehome from a mould, it is a 'must' on any class act.

### ONTO THE PLANE

Once under way, I set about noting speeds at different engine revolutions. The single 200hp Toyota Landcruiser-based Nanni diesel will push the boat up to around 24 knots, but most owners will prefer to drive this tractable semi-displacement hull at lower and more economical speeds. At a sedate 1,000rpm, she trundled down river at 5.3 knots. Once out into Southampton Water, 1,500 brought up 7.5 knots and then she lifted seamlessly onto the plane at around 2,300rpm and 13 knots. At 3,000 rpm we made 18.5 knots and 3,500 rpm saw 23 knots. Noise levels were pleasingly low. Dave considers the ideal cruising speed – the 'sweet spot' – to be 18 knots at around 2,800 rpm.

Steering the Duchy 27 is a delight. Visibility all round is good (on or off the plane) and response to the controls is precise and predictable.

As designer Andrew Wolstenholme told me, "She has a warped-bottom planing hull with a moderately deep and fine bow which runs into the keel. The keel is deep enough to fully protect the prop, and the tunnel is there to keep the draught down to a sensible 85cm (2ft 10in). This combines to give her excellent all round handling and a civilised soft ride." He confirmed her best cruising at around 18 knots.

On autopilot, she continued to steer straight and true – even at full speed. Travelling in the Duchy 27 is a pleasurable experience. In many ways, she is a small boat but with a steady, big-boat feel.

Closer inspection of the engine compartment revealed part of the reason for our comfortable and low-noise progress. The hinging engine box is comprehensively insulated and the engine itself sits on free-floating mounts while a Python constant-velocity joint flexible coupling with a thrust bearing transfers the poke from engine to shaft. And the teak decking on the cockpit sole acts as an extra sound deadener.

And what about Cockwells' GRP work? Has a yard more accustomed to fairing, finishing and buffing a painted timber hull produced a fine finish on its first 'plastic' hull and superstructure? The answer is an unequivocal yes. It was a bright sunny day, and the Duchy positively gleamed. As far as the GRP structure is

“The cockpit is a pleasant place to relax”



**DUCHY 27**

LOA  
27ft (8.2m)

LWL  
25ft 7ins (7.8m)

BEAM  
9ft 2in (2.8m)

DRAUGHT  
2ft 9in (0.85m)

AIR DRAUGHT  
7ft 4ins (2.25m)

DISPLACEMENT  
3.25tons

ENGINE  
Toyota-based  
Nanni 200hp

BUILDER  
Cockwells, Mylor  
Creek, Cornwall

*Above, from left:* Solid oak fittings; generous V-berths; teak deck and immaculate finish  
*Below:* The built-in tool drawer

concerned, designer Andrew Wolstenholme told me, “The mouldings are conventional polyester laminates with a mixture of chopped strand mat and woven rovings. The topsides are 2.9kg/m<sup>2</sup> (just under 10oz/sqft) and the bottom is 4.15kg/m<sup>2</sup> (14oz/sqft). The superstructure is 2.1kg/m<sup>2</sup> with 12mm balsa core on horizontal deck surfaces.”

The real USP of this launch, however, is the level and quality of its finish and fit-out. Everywhere you look, you see class and attention to detail. The Duchy 27 is designed for those who appreciate the finer things and know what they want. As Dave enigmatically said, “Either people want one (and several do); or they don’t. Nobody needs one.”

**TWO... OR A CROWD**

This is a craft in which two can sleep down below and a crowd can congregate in the cockpit (though possibly not at the same time). The interior features twin V settee berths in soft white leather, with an infill, a very spacious and well-finished heads and a generous-sized galley unit.

The cockpit is also spacious and comfortable: quality upholstery, a folding table, and a cunning fold-down gate aft that gives easy access to the stern platform, all work well. This is a pleasant place to relax, and of course to acknowledge the admiring glances of passers-by.

And there are the numerous little ‘touches’ that set the Duchy 27 apart from the crowd. All the cups, plates and glasses, for example, are hand-made specifically for the

boat by Cornish craftsmen. No Tupperware or plastic here. What’s more, they all stow neatly in specially shaped drawers and racks. There’s also a drawer under the helmsman’s seat housing the most comprehensive set of tools I have ever seen on a boat, with each item sitting snugly in its own tailored and padded recess.

Then take a close look at the woodwork. The meaty heads door and locker fronts are made from solid oak with traditional joints. Another pleasing cockpit detail is the discreet little LED light on the step. And there are mini spots recessed into the underside of the aft coachroof. These ensure that no one should take a purler when coming aboard in the dark after a run ashore; and they mean you can then tarry a while in the cockpit (enjoying a final malt perhaps) before hitting the sack.

Of course all this quality and attention to detail does not come cheap. With the standard specification, the Duchy 27 comes in at £120,000 plus VAT; and some of the optional extras on offer might be considered essential. But she is special. I was amused to watch a married couple I know eye up the Duchy 27 as she lay alongside the club pontoon. They are retired and enjoy sailing their 37ft yacht. They told us – as we took lunch on the club balcony – that a day would come when a Duchy 27 could be just the ticket. But not just yet. “That’s fine,” said Dave with a smile, “there’s no hurry. I play a long game.”

