

Continuing his series, takes an in-depth look at an elegant and popular

Mark Fishwick another Affordable Classic sloop of the sixties.



THE CHARISMATIC CONTESSA

Photographs by the author.

In the proliferation of high-sided, tub-like production boats that grew out of the mid-1960's obsession for 'berths at any cost', the diminutive *Contessa 26* firmly stood her ground: her clean, attractive lines were a testimony to designer David Sadler and builder Jeremy Roger's determination to cling to proven and additional values. With a generous long keel, low freeboard, delightfully sleek

profile and uncluttered decks she was a clear confirmation of the old adage 'if it looks right, it probably is right' and, her formidable reputation for fast sea-going performance aside, the inherent prettiness of the *Contessa 26* is something that still turns the head as she clips smartly by – always one of my fundamental requirements for any aspiring Affordable Classic.

As Sadler freely admitted, the *Contessa*

26's pedigree leads straight back to the *Folkboat*. He simply raised the topsides "an extra plank" to give her the characteristic straight sheerline, extended the coachroof, added mere inches to her overall dimensions, modified the keel and thus succeeded in turning a proven success into an even greater one, transforming the original dayboat/weekender concept of the Scandinavian craft into a roomier,

comfortable cruiser/racer with assured offshore capability.

In fact, the transition from Folkboat to GRP Contessa went through an intermediate stage: David Sadler's own *Contessa of Parkstone*. Built in 1964, *Contessa of Parkstone* was a development of the cold moulded Folkboats being built at Lymington by Jeremy Rogers who was then better known for his craftsmanship in building dinghies – like the *OK, Finn* and *Javelin* – than the string of well-known cruisers and racers that followed. Sadler was a keen dinghy racer who had moved up from *Merlin Rockets* to JOC and RORC events and, although trained as a chartered engineer, his consuming interest in boat design was later to lead to numerous highly successful designs such as the elegant *Contessa 32* – big sister of the 26 – and many popular performance family cruising boats such as the *Sadler 26*, 29, 32 and 34. Describing the evolution of *Contessa of Parkstone* at the time, he wrote: "...except for the basic Folkboat lines, she was designed by me with a straight sheer, masthead rig, improved cockpit and deck layout and accommodation for four. She has proved faster, drier and more roomy than a standard Folkboat and with the lower C of E sail plan, carries her canvas well. In addition to winning the Poole Yacht Racing Association's Cherbourg race at Whitsun, she has had the following successes: 1st Hagg Trophy, 1st RMYC Regatta, 1st Poole to Lymington, 1st Round the Wight by Night, 1st Poole to Cowes. All races being sailed under RORC ratings..."

Sadler's rig had been inspired by the racing success of another modified

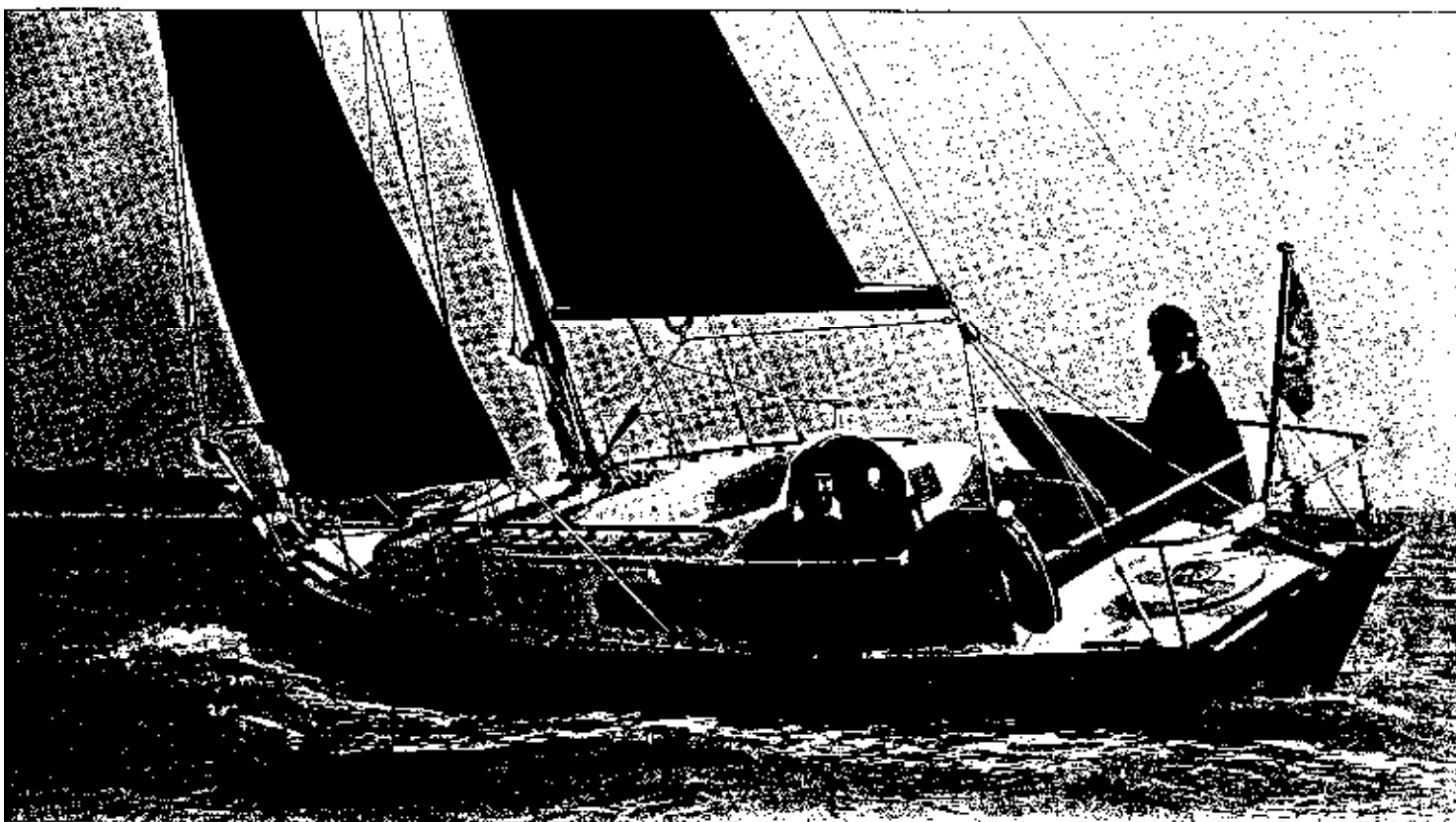
masthead Folkboat, *Penya*, and with his mast nearly 2' (0.61m) shorter than the traditional three-quarter Folkboat rig, the small high aspect ratio mainsail/big headsail configuration clearly reflected the racing trends at the time, and rated more favourably under the new IOR rule. When he and Rogers decided to go in for a GRP production boat in 1965, the arrangement was retained, giving her a working sail area of 224sq.ft (20.8 sq.m) compared with the Folkboat's 249sq.ft (23.1sq.m) but when the IOR genoa was brought into play, the sail area increased considerably and downwind she could carry a much larger spinnaker from the masthead.

The other significant difference was the increase in displacement due to the remodelling of the forward end of the keel to make it longer and flatter for drying out. This new shape added 300lbs (136kg) which also balanced the weight of the engine aft – something not anticipated in the original Folkboat design. All told, she ended up about 600 lbs (272.1 kg) heavier and a much stiffer boat with improved performance to windward. The first GRP demonstration boat, *Contessa of Lymington* was launched in early 1966 and, in David's hands, produced an immediate win in the Poole-Swanage race: a success which was repeated many times in his own boat, *Contessa of Mell* which appeared next.

The basic dimensions of the *Contessa 26* were LOA 25'6" (7.77m) x LWL 20' (6.08m) x beam 7'6" (2.28m) x draught 4' (1.21m) x displacement 5,400lbs (2,449.4kg) and, built under Lloyds supervision, complete with 6hp Vire petrol engine, Proctor spars and Lucas sails, the price was just over £2,000. Such was the interest in the new boat that

six more were ordered by local enthusiasts. By the end of 1966 Rogers was churning out finished boats at the rate of one a month and, including all the hull and deck mouldings sold for home completion, by the time he finished building them in 1976, the total was nearly 500! In fact his were not the last to be built – for a short while in 1978/79 the Lymington yard of Maclean acquired the moulds and began to build them under licence from Jeremy Rogers, producing a further ten or so and more recently, the *Contessa 26* has re-emerged in Canada where it is built by J.J. Taylor & Sons.

Apart from inshore racing successes, the *Contessa 26*'s growing reputation was considerably enhanced by some of the major longer distance events, notably the outstanding performance of *Binkie*, the smallest boat in the 1970 *Observer/Daily Express Round Britain Race* which Royal Marine Lieutenants Mike McMullen and Martin Read sailed to first place in the Handicap Class. I say sailed but in the calms prevailing at the beginning and end of the race it also involved a lot of rowing, not least the final 17 miles between Salcombe and Plymouth! However, there was weather foul as well as fair particularly on the leg from Crosshaven in southern Ireland to Castle Bay on the Hebridean island of Barra via the Atlantic coast of Ireland with gale force conditions most of the way. At one point, *Binkie* broached completely but recovered without damage and on the next leg between Castle Bay and Lerwick she averaged an impressive 5.6 knots. As McMullen later wrote of his boat "...she is surprisingly fast, a comfortable sea-boat and easy to handle when it comes to sail



anges and sailing in confined waters."

The 1972 *Observer Singlehanded Transatlantic Race* from Plymouth to Newport saw the Contessa 26 really proving its serious ocean going capabilities with Richard Clifford's *Shamaal* completing this marathon in 38 days, most of which were considerably larger. Two years later, in another Contessa 26, *Shamaal II*, Clifford and David Barrie managed 14th place out of the 61 starters in the 1974 *Round Britain Race* - her sistership, *Contessa Caroline*, belonging to the Royal Engineers Sailing Club, was forced to retire at Barra after

the particularly gruelling weather.

But it was not purely in the racing arena that the Contessa 26 excelled herself: the boat was highly commended in the popular *Yachting World One-of-a-Kind Cruising Rallies* in 1966 and 1989. Her good-mannered performance soon earned her the reputation as a fast but comfortable small cruising boat and many trouble-free miles were quietly tucked away under her belt over the ensuing years, including several Atlantic and Pacific crossings. However, the boat's most impressive performance by far was in the hands of an 18 year old American girl, Tania Aebi, who completed a remarkable two and a half year, 27,000 mile (43,451km) solo circumnavigation between 1985 and 1987 in *Varuna*, one of the slightly modified Canadian versions.

Starting in New York, Tania's voyage followed a classic route via the Panama Canal, Galapagos, the Marquesas, Tahiti, Samoa, north-eastern Australia, Thursday Island, Bali, Indian Ocean, Red Sea, Mediterranean and finally across the north

Atlantic back to New York, earning her the *American Cruising World* magazine's 1987 annual medal for 'superlative cruising achievement'.