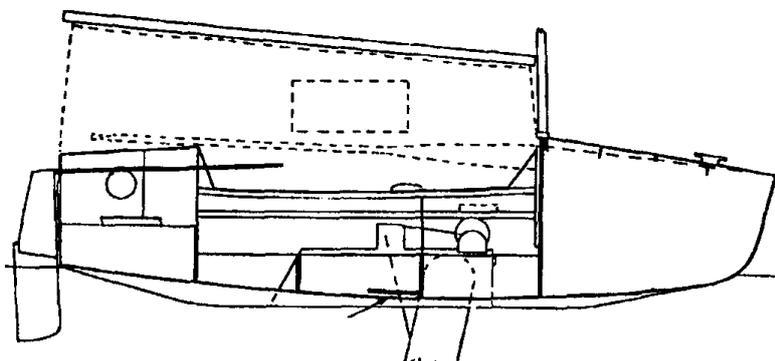


My Roamer by Peter Bick

- viewed in retrospect

It is very difficult to be absolutely objective when describing a boat which you own. Having parted with my Roamer a year or so ago after enjoying a dozen seasons, it would appear to be the better time for me to weigh up the attributes of this dinghy. Apart from the designer's description and two short reviews based on limited sailing trials, no analysis has appeared in the Bulletin by an owner with experience of this boat. Present and past owners of Roamers may well disagree in detail with some of my comments. However, it should be born in mind that very few of these boats have been built and rigged exactly as drawn.

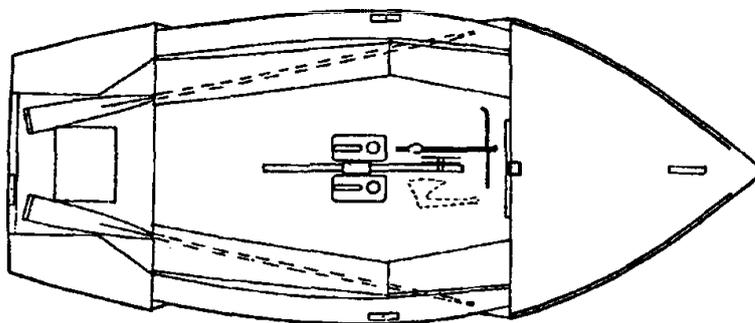


THE HULL

A 14 feet double chine hull with a shallow external keel and heavy centreboard of 80 lbs with 86 lbs of internal ballast. The topsides are carried above the sheerline forward forming a large buoyancy compartment that doubles as stowage. At the rear the buoyancy takes the

form of twin sterncastles. The high buoyancy has a strong self righting effect. This means that a comparatively small amount of ballast is needed to obtain self-righting, compared with a design that depends entirely on ballast for this purpose and this is still the principle adopted in the design of RNLI lifeboats - nevertheless the windage of such a hull is higher.

An advantage is that the amount of water taken on board when working to windward in rough water is less, and the crew is partially protected. There is also a vast amount of storage. By using oars suspended between the fore and aft buoyancy the boom tent can be spread sideways at higher level. There is



of course a fourth separate buoyancy chamber under the rear deck; also two buoyancy bags under each sidedeck. The main hatches which are large enough for easy access do not have to be hermetically sealed, as when the boat is flooded and capsized past 90° the resulting water level is below that of the hatches' edges. I never found any water leaked into any buoyancy compartment and I built the hatches as designed. I can vouch for the self-righting ability of the hull as I was once knocked down by a large sea on the Ore bar, the mast attaining an angle of about 100° from the vertical while on the forward face of a steep roller. Due to my subsequent confidence in the dinghy I am afraid that I often allowed water to spill over the sidedeck when hanging on in a squall!

In order to avoid a single compass on the centreline being affected by the steel centreboard, I fitted two Silva Type 70's, one of them with Betalite illumination, on the side decks just aft of the raised forward decking. Not only were they protected from spray in that position, but there was no parallax error when viewing each one from the weather gunwale.

Because the boat is designed for 'sitting up' toe straps are fitted, on floorboards which seem unnecessarily high. However this makes it very easy when a gust occurs, to transfer one's bottom from sidebench to sidedeck without moving one's feet. I always had a couple of Henri Lloyd buoyancy cushions knocking around the cockpit. These eased me considerably on long passages. An advantage of the sterncastles is that a length of shockcord stretched horizontally along their inner faces makes for easy stowage of charts in plastic cases. Also I could often read them from the helm. At anchor it was nice to sit with my back against the forward bulkhead with the aforesaid cushions to rest on. A good book and/or binoculars were to hand. If it were windy and rainy the drops used to flick over ones head.

Eric Coleman claimed that the hull shape was inspired by racing dinghy design, and that the hull could plane when lightly loaded. There are two features that make this latter capability unlikely in anything but very strong winds; the extra wetted surface resistance of the shallow keel, but mainly the deadrise of the bottom aft where a flat run is normally considered necessary for planing ability. There is also of course the weight. When I weighed my boat after completion it weighed about 540 lbs including spars and sails but without other gear. Although this is not particularly heavy - many traditional designs of the same length both in ply and GRP weigh two or three times this - it puts it over the limit for proper planing with the standard sail area; i.e. when reaching in smooth water. It undoubtedly surfs on suitable waves downwind and even this can prove too exciting at times as I know to my cost. Nevertheless, the increased deadrise has an advantage in that the hull can stand a moderate amount of heel without becoming unbalanced and inducing strong weather helm. This means that one can relax a bit when tired and it is not so necessary to sit out to keep the hull upright as with dinghies intended for racing. Notwithstanding the above the dinghy initially heels quickly when one steps aboard. This latter is an advantage when returning to the boat from a swim or pulling someone aboard from the water as the gunwale is brought nearer the water level. The secondary stability is so great however that one need have no fear of water flooding in.

Eric very neatly solved the problem of stowing the nine foot oars which fit under the side benches, the rear parts of which are removeable. The dinghy could not be called lively under oars but was comparatively easy to row because of its good directional stability. After the first year I carried a 4hp long shaft engine.

THE RIG

The rig is Bermudan sloop with a comparatively low aspect ratio mainsail with battens. Three jibs are specified. The original design was for a built up hollow wooden mast carrying a track for the Tuff slides and a solid boom. The mast, stepped on deck and measuring 17'6" in length, was to be stayed with a forestay, lower shrouds and topmast shrouds over spreaders, all tensioned by separate rigging screws. Being unconvinced that such a short mast needed so much staying, even though it was supposed to be able to survive a knockdown, I went to Racing Sailboats, agents for Proctor Spars. They designed me a metal mast of much slimmer section, well tapered above the foresail sheave, with single shrouds over short spreaders; these last are intended to act both in compression and tension. I used adjustable rigging links on the shrouds with a substantial rigging screw on the forestay. This made erecting the mast comparatively easy as I could attach the

shrouds before lifting the mast into position while standing on the foredeck. My sails were made by Bruce Banks. I installed roller furling gear on the jibs. When changing jibs I removed one rolled up sausage and replaced it with another out of the bag. I had to reach out over the foredeck, but in rough conditions used a safety harness clipped onto the centreplate wire. The storm jib was equipped with slides however in case of gear failure. Reefing the main was accomplished by slab reefing, with the lines led through the boom internally. I normally changed to working jib at force 3+ and put in the first reef when about force 4 came up. The second reef went in at about the top end of 5. I only used the storm jib once when I was beating up the Crouch - could have been force 7. If I had been at sea without land to windward I would certainly have had to run for it. Maybe not so with a crew. I had a cruising chute built, ostensibly for ghosting conditions. I expected it to be made of 3/4 ounce nylon but it was 1½ ounce so didn't fill in ultra-light airs as I expected. When I complained to Bruce Banks he was unrepentant. 'But you can keep it up in force 6,' he gloated! I am afraid that I considered it a waste of money. A very light ghosting genoa would probably make more sense.

A big advantage of the Proctor mast from the windage point of view was that all three halyards ran internally. Although the spinnaker halyard was only used a few times with the chute, it was nice to feel that I had a spare. I did not fit a topping lift and never missed it. The boom could be lowered into the oar socket on top of the sterncastle for short stops. The halyard could be transferred to the end of the boom when erecting the tent for overnight stops. The top of the mast was so slim that there was little room for burgee halyards; in any case I preferred a wind indicator. The burgee was hoisted at the spreaders.

I had hoped to use a jib halyard of pre-stretched polyester. However the jibs were cut by the sailmaker on the normal assumption that the luff would be as straight as one could get it. A characteristic of polyester is that it continues to stretch as more and more tension is put on it until it finally reaches breaking point. No doubt other fibres are now available which may do the job but at the time I gave in and fitted wire with a rope tail. I also fitted a tensioning lever and the result was a greatly improved windward performance.

The mainsheet was the standard four part tackle running on a rope horse with toggles. I brought the tail forward to cam cleats on the forward faces of the sterncastles. I used an endless jib sheet (sheets) as when single-handed one could then always be certain of reaching the line whichever side of the boat one found oneself. There were originally two sets of jib sheet leads. Forward and inside the shrouds for the working jib and outside the shrouds and adjustable for the genoa. As far as the set of the sails was concerned this was best arrangement but it made changing jibs a bit of a fiddle so I altered it to a single lead on a longer track working inside the shrouds. It then went to a turning block to a fixed position cam cleat. Although this was on the lee deck I could release it with a quick tug from shoulder height. This was not the most efficient lead from a performance point of view and a better answer would have been to bring the shroud anchorages inboard. Still, there are limits!

PERFORMANCE

Comparing the Roamer with other craft can be very difficult, not only because helmsmanship is by far the most important factor but also because the cut and condition of the sails has a much greater effect than the average cruising sailor realises. Nevertheless I sailed many times in company on the East Coast and also to a more limited extent in the Solent with boats as far apart in type as Leaders, Drascombes and traditional types and was able to make some speculative assessments.

With light airs and smooth water, general purpose racing type dinghies of the same size, such as GP14's and Leaders were considerably faster on all points of sailing. This was true in stronger winds with the wind free. However, as soon as a bit of popple occurred and when beating the Roamer often had the edge. This was particularly true when the sails were new and the genoa had good flow. It was noticeable that up to force 3, the Roamer got slower over the years. Once one had changed to working jib which coincided with stronger wind and rougher water then it kept up its end as before. Confirmation of the stretching of the genoa came when I sent the sail back to its makers to be altered for roller reefing before I sold the dinghy. Apart from changing the Tuff rope they said that no modification was required as the sail had become so much flatter. Against other types of dinghies which didn't require sitting out the Roamer seemed always to be faster and was also true of the sailing dinghies' traditional victims, small cruising boats. This was undoubtedly due to the extra power that sitting out gives and in conditions when the modest quantity of ballast was also helping not hindering its performance. The rougher the water the better it compared. As the Roamer was designed for a crew of two, it really came into its own with another body on the side deck when in a fresh breeze.

PASSAGE MAKING

For longer passages fine comparisons of speed are pretty valueless. The main thing is that the crew should not become fatigued. I always sailed single-handed so the ability of the Roamer in this respect was most valuable. For self steering I tried the usual shockcord across the stern which engaged with the tiller, but the elasticity meant that the helm still needed tending. Accordingly I changed to a firmer control system designed by John Huntingford which appeared in Bulletins 86 and 137. Strangely I never got the Roamer to sail to windward to my complete satisfaction, perhaps I was too fussy; however, on a reach and often on a run he could be very docile. My longest period without touching the tiller was a stretch of an hour and a half. In rougher water it was much less reliable and in any case I was not too keen on the self steering in case I popped overboard even though I wore a safety harness. A big asset of the Roamer is that the boat's motion is kindly; the jerky motion that one usually finds in double chine designs is modified by the keel and greater deadrise. Also the response to the tiller due to its length, is not too sensitive.

This kindness made time spent on board comparatively comfortable. On one June morning I set off for Ramsgate from the Medway, found the conditions so pleasant that I carried on past. I had a nap at anchor after passing Sandwich, and in the dawn set off on impulse across the Channel for Calais in a steady one-reef breeze; but 'with an ear to the forecasts and an eye to the sky'. Visibility was not too good but the pale sandy beaches of France turned up on cue. Once the unmistakable silhouette of Calais town hall appeared I immediately turned tail and set off back for England. I finally anchored under the shelter of Margate Sands for a sleep before returning up the north Kent coast. I spent over 60 hours on board without entering any harbour. The feeling I had through the whole trip was that the Roamer was looking after me. I remembered Eric Coleman saying that a seaworthy dinghy could be a good and companionable friend; and so he proved.

MODIFICATIONS

The Hull - I originally completed the dinghy as close to the designer's plans as I could, the bare hull was built for me by McNalties of South Shields, but a modification I made soon afterwards was to the rudder. The lifting handle on the rudder was made of ply on the drawings. It broke on the maiden voyage and I duly replaced it with a stainless steel strap let into the rudder's surface. This has lasted to the present day. I feel that there should be a way of making the rudder easier to raise and lower; nevertheless the big advantage of Eric's friction controlled system is that there is no lost motion between hand and water.

Cabin - When cruising you often have to put up the boom tent long before dark, to keep your sleeping quarters from being soaked by the dew. However even the best tents obstruct the view. After several years I felt that a small cabin would be an improvement, allowing me to enjoy the evening in the cockpit and yet I could quickly slip into my sleeping bag, already laid out below. Eric had in fact designed a cabin version of the Roamer which sleeps four! I didn't like it because the cabin front was built up 9" higher than the rear edge of the foredeck which I thought would cause an unacceptable amount of windage. As my cabin only had to hold one person I was able to make it shorter. By designing it with a lifting top I was able to keep the height down to only a couple of inches above the foredeck. It hinged at the top and with it raised I just had sitting headroom. I cut away one side of the forward bulkhead to form a single berth and my feet went under the foredeck. I built a galley shelf on the other side with fixed stove and basin in a recess. Water was supplied by a jerrycan with integral pump. This building work enforced a change in the centreboard hoisting gear which became a six part tackle behind the cabin instead of a winch forward. A sliding hatch allowed me to attend to the halyards etc. while standing in the cabin. By building a bridge deck I was able to ensure that the cabin should not be flooded in the event of a knock down, however I included a pair of buoyancy bags under the cabin sole forward, just in case. I felt that the dinghy went to windward better with the cabin as it filled in a large section of the cockpit causing less windage. Another advantage was that if you saw a gob of water being thrown up forward from a wave you could duck below the cabin top to dodge it. There was still room on the sidedeck for two to sit when beating to windward. I was able to make effective backrests by fitting adjustable lengths of toe strap material between the cabin sides and the sterncastles - luxury on long trips.

FURTHER CONSIDERATIONS

Although the cabin was a great success as a cabin, there were certain disadvantages. The mast was somewhat more awkward to step. More important however was that changing headsails became a bit of a chore and it seemed that a roller reefing genoa would be the best option. I didn't fit one during my ownership as I was concerned about the added difficulty of stepping the mast with the long aluminium foil dangling from it. I had to do away with the kicking strap; however I screwed eye plates to the deck each side and was able to hook the tackle into those when on a long run in strong winds.

I believe that the robust seakeeping ability of the standard design is reduced by the cabin as far as ultimate survivability is concerned. I do not think this matters unless you are determined to sit out a gale at sea. For dinghy cruising it is still more seaworthy than is normally required. My cabin Roamer suits the member who now owns it as he keeps it on a mooring and the difficulty of stepping the mast with roller reefing gear attached is of less importance. Nevertheless, I trailed, rigged, launched and recovered, every time I sailed. If I owned a Roamer again I would not build a cabin but would settle for a much more elaborate boom tent with openable flaps on both sides and also an abbreviated canvas cuddy for use at anchor. I would then build a galley which could be slid in and out of the forward buoyancy compartment. In fact, Eric drew a tent on the plans which would be permanently fastened at the front bulkhead and folded against it when not in use. I considered that it looked a bit untidy as drawn however and thought that it would get in the way when handling sails or anchor.

The designer saw the existing rig as experimental. Personally I think that it is satisfactory if one sails with a crew. I would not fit a roller reefing jib as if the gear is damaged in severe conditions it could leave you with a full sized genoa you couldn't furl or lower. However for single-handed work, particularly if one has to rig and launch for every sail, then some alternative would be worthwhile. In order to make the mast shorter and easier

to step, a gunter rig with short yard would be the simplest alteration although I always see this rig as a complicated way to obtain a triangular mainsail which also limits the size of the jib. However, after experiencing the pleasure of owning two cat yawls i.e., without headsails, one lug rigged and one Bermudan, I would settle for either of these rigs with unstayed masts. The ease of mast stepping: the simple method of heaving to by hauling the mizzen boom amidships: the lack of headsail sheets to tend: having only one sail that needs to be reefed: all these are great advantages regardless of being single handed. It can also be argued that a better performance would result than having a roller reefing genoa and getting the main mast further forward is a good thing for the accommodation. The extra weight forward would be mitigated by using a carbon fibre mast. My Finn Association friends tell me that building these spars can now be considered a low-tech, DIY project.

SUMMING UP

The traditional concept of an ideal cruising dinghy is one which is seaworthy, forgiving, weatherly, has lots of stowage space and shelter, is robust and easy to handle. If you are prepared to settle for the conventional then in my view the Roamer is the tops. The biggest disadvantage is the building of it. It is not difficult, but no design that has four separate buoyancy compartments, provision for stowing long oars and sophisticated storage and tentage systems can ever be quick to build. If it were not for this then there would be many more in existence. It should also be said that other things being equal, a larger boat is both faster and more seaworthy. But how large do you go before it ceases to be a dinghy?

Notwithstanding the above, there are different ways to cruise small boats. You may like some combination of ultra light weight, blinding speed, cheapness and ease of building. Again if open sea passages are not within your brief then simple craft have a lot to offer. Only one thing is certain; no boat can do everything. The joy of it all is that 'the choice is yours'.

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