

Our boat reviewer, Judy Brickhill, is a firm believer in the Keep It Simple school of boat design, which is why she's particularly...

Stuck on the Limpet



With photographs
by Peter Chesworth

To me, there is something very appealing about simplicity, nowhere more so than in a small boat. So it was a delight to discover Roger Dongray's latest design, the Limpet dinghy, which is the most straightforward and user-friendly little craft I have come across for a long time, not only for the sailor but also for the home builder.

She is now being produced at Seashell Boats in Lostwithiel, Cornwall, by Rob Rainsford, who in a former life was an engineer at Bentley Motors; obviously a young man with an eye for a quality product, so his partnership with Roger Dongray is an ideal match. Roger is the designer of the Cornish Crabber range of GRP craft and creator of the strip-planked Golant Gaffer for amateur building. With the Limpet, Roger's aim was to create a dinghy small and light enough to be carried on the roofrack of a family car but one which could "sail well, row easily and have space for a small outboard... but above all the boat should look graceful when sailing and be strong and simple to build in a garage."

The Limpet is 9'10" long, with a beam of 4'3" and a draught of 2'4" with the daggerboard down (3 x 1.3 x 0.7m), decreasing to just 7" (175mm) with the board raised. She has a straight stem and her wide lapstrake plywood planking draws the eye along her lovely jaunty sheer. Her weight is 121lbs (55kg) which allows her to be towed by the smallest car or carried on a roof rack.

She comes in kit form, with a comprehensive instruction manual, complete with clear, simple diagrams of every stage of the build. With the exception of paint and polystyrene, virtually everything is included in the kit and everything, including the packaging, is intended to be used, from the wood from the packing case which becomes part of the building frame to the cardboard which can help protect your floor! She is of glued – and occasionally screwed – plywood construction, using epoxy resin, built upside-down on a frame in Roger's preferred 'eggbox' style, where the strength and rigidity of the hull is significantly increased by the plywood bulkheads which

compartmentalise the interior space.

Most of the parts are finished and ready to slot together, though some have been supplied oversize to allow for any slight variations during construction. The backbone, bulkheads and transom are 3/8" (9mm) marine ply, with 1/4" (6mm) for the bottom and side panels. Douglas Fir is used for the keel band, gunwales and seat slats. Rob and Roger feel that the construction of the basic hull can be accomplished in three or four weekends and suggest that it should take between 60 and 70 hours to get the entire boat completed and ready for finishing. So you've still got time to catch the 2007 season!

The Limpet's layout is clear and uncluttered, which I consider fairly essential in such a small boat. There is a central thwart across the aft end of the daggerboard casing which itself has a wide top for use as a rowing position. Slatted side benches connect the thwart and the after deck, creating a seating arrangement which allows a singlehander to slide easily forward or backwards to trim the boat. Buoyancy is provided in the form of a double layer of 2" (50mm) polystyrene attached to the underside of both fore and aft decks where there is also adequate stowage space.

For the sailing version, a ready-made spruce mast and yard and ash tiller are supplied with pre-cut marine ply for home assembly of the daggerboard and rudder. The mast is stepped in a tabernacle built through the foredeck, supported on the keelson or spine which keeps the foot clear of the bilge.

The Limpet sports a high peaked, loose-footed, standing lugsail with an area of 45 square feet (4.2m²). Rigging is minimal, with just a halyard attached to the yard a third of the distance along its length, the downhaul to secure and tension the tack and the sheet which leads from a block on the rope horse across the transom, up to the clew, back to the block and forward to the helmsman. There are two handy horn cleats inside the gunwales amidships that can be used to take the strain and give a more directional pull to the sheet as the block tends to want to stay in the centre of a rope horse when the tension comes on it. There are reef points but given that the sail has to be lowered to tie them in, I feel that if I was caught out by a rising wind out on the water, the simplest and safest thing to do would be to drop the sail and row. The 7' (2.13m) long oars are stowed along the bottom boards, neatly kept in place resting in two grooves in the central bulkhead

just aft of the daggerboard casing, secure yet not too awkward to get out.

March had come in like a lion and there was no sign yet of any lamb tendencies when I met up with Rob and Roger at Chesie's Mylor Boat Hire pontoon at Mylor Harbour. There was a chilly Northerly gusting down Carrick Roads with the ebbing tide but the diminutive Limpet was straining at her leash and eager to be out there, so off we went. As soon as I had her underway, I was aware of what a willing little craft she is. Despite her small size, she was reassuringly stable, allowing me to go forward without a qualm to make adjustments to the tack downhaul. As I put her through her windward paces outside the moorings, we were punching into an awkward head sea, the kind that makes you feel as if you're getting nowhere, when I realised that, while I might be finding the conditions uncomfortable, the Limpet was bouncing along like a good 'un, making plenty of headway against wind and sea. Manoeuvring was easy and straightforward, with no hesitation getting through the eye of the wind in spite of the chop trying to knock her back. Gybing was no problem, even in the gusty conditions, though, having hauled the sheet in as I brought her round, to keep control of the gybe, when I eased it out

on the other tack the block tended to stay central on the rope horse, holding in the foot and affecting the set of the sail on the run. This is always a hazard with a rope sheethorse

and a loose-footed sail and was easily remedied by reaching back and manually sliding the block along the rope.

I had almost forgotten that I wasn't on holiday when Ches suggested we make for St Just in Roseland, on the other side of the estuary, so that I could try out the oars in the quieter water under the lee of the land. I would normally have hesitated to take a small dinghy such a distance in relatively open water but it was well within the Limpet's range and capability, and at no time did I feel in the least bit unsafe. Once in flat water, I stowed the sail, extricated the oars and rowlocks and pitted myself and Limpet against the power of the spring ebb in the narrows. She was a delight to row, comfortable, light and easily propelled and my only complaint was the lack of a sculling notch – which I'm assured will be incorporated as an option. Sculling is a really useful alternative to rowing, good in confined spaces, handy if you lose an oar and of course, it's much, much quieter than the average outboard.

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A superb little craft that will afford you as much enjoyment and sailing pleasure as you can stand



After an exhilarating sail back, we went to Ches' office for a cup of coffee and a look at the figures. The rowing version of Limpet is £900; a price which also includes everything needed to build her, all fittings and oars. The sailing model has all this and all the sailing gear for £1,700. In my view, it's an extremely reasonable price to pay for such a package; not only do you experience the satisfaction of building your own boat with professional guidance but you end up with a superb little craft that will afford you as much enjoyment and sailing pleasure as you can stand. I think this will be one limpet that will definitely stick around!

CONTACT

Seashell Boats, Unit 1D Restormel Industrial Estate,
Liddicoat Road, Lostwithiel, Cornwall PL22 0HG
Tel/fax: +44 (0)1726 833815
www.seashellboats.co.uk