



Photos by David Harding

Form following function: the Fisher is both functional and pleasing to the eye

The biggest little ship on the ocean

Back in production more than four decades after she was first launched, the reborn Fisher 25 is a reminder of why traditional motor sailers were once so popular. David Harding reports



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If any boat deserves to be described as a timeless classic, it must surely be the Fisher 25. With her high bow, jaunty sheer, chunky rubbing strake, ketch rig and forward-raked wheelhouse, she's one of the most unmistakable and enduringly popular little boats afloat.

But apart from her engagingly purposeful appearance, what is it that makes this heavyweight motor sailer stand out? Perhaps her bulletproof construction, renowned seakeeping qualities, easy motion, competence under sail, roomy accommodation and ability to punch into almost any weather under power.


Then, of course, there's the pride that comes from owning a characterful craft that almost anyone could imagine pottering around in contentedly at some stage of their lives no matter what sort of

sailing they enjoy now.

And before anyone starts jumping up and down at the mention of 'pottering', let's establish that at least one Fisher 25 is believed to have sailed from the UK to New Zealand. On a more local scale, Geoff Brown, vice-commodore of the Fisher Owners' Association, covered nearly 1,700 miles during a circumnavigation of Britain in 2013. Given owners of a suitably adventurous disposition, this is a boat that's up to much more than just 'pottering'. Should pottering be your preference, on the other

hand – and, after all, it's what most sailors enjoy – the Fisher 25 is undoubtedly an excellent boat in which to practice it.

We know all this about the Fisher because it's now 45 years since this brave little ship from the pens of Gordon Wyatt and David Freeman first hit the water. Nearly 270 were built before Northshore called time on them in 2008, so it's fair to say that the Fisher 25 is a known quantity. It's also known that she was expensive to build, and that's one reason why production came to an end.

The good news for enthusiasts of 

'It's now 45 years since this brave little ship first hit the water'



ABOVE Deep bulwarks and plenty of handholds as you move forward along the side decks

pint-sized motor sailers is that she's now up and running again – in Sri Lanka. Now Sri Lanka might not be the first country you'd think of when it comes to production cruising yachts, but that's where the Fisher 25 was built for a time in the late 1970s. She was designed by Wyatt and Freeman, with construction shared between Northshore Yachts and David Skellon's Fairways Marine. Neil Marine in Sri Lanka, headed by Freeman's good friend Neil Fernando, later built 20 or so in a number of batches. Having been involved in various capacities from the start, Northshore then took both production and sales under their wing in 1981.

History repeating

Building such a labour-intensive boat as the Fisher in the UK – or anywhere in western Europe, for that matter – would be prohibitively expensive these days, so Sri Lanka makes sense economically. Neil Marine builds under contract for other European companies and has produced more than 40,000 boats of various types since the 1970s. So, like the Fisher, the yard is not an unknown quantity. In fact Neil Marine now owns the rights to Wyatt and Freeman designs including the Cromarty 36 and Yarmouth 22 and 23, all of which I have tested for PBO.

While building in Sri Lanka keeps the cost down, she could still hardly be described as inexpensive. She'll set you back well over £100,000 by the time you have included shipping and a few extras.

That, you might think, is a lot of money for a 25-footer. By some standards it is. As with sporty trimarans, however, you have to get away from thinking in terms of pounds (money) per foot. She's much better value if you think 'pounds per pound'. After all, weighing nearly 4.5 tonnes (or 9,500lb in the currency in which she was designed), she's heavier than a good number of modern 32-footers.

Most important, of course, is to consider what sort of boat you want, and there simply aren't many others that do what the Fisher does. If you want something that's small in terms of overall length, yet with the feel and comfort of a substantially larger boat (in the context of a motor sailer, of



ABOVE The tiller is stowed on the aft side of the wheelhouse, ready to be shipped if you need or want to helm from the cockpit



LEFT Dorade and tannoy vents in the coachroof encourage circulation down below

course), the Fisher has little competition.

Such is her reputation that almost every cruising sailor knows what she is and what she stands for. This is a motor sailer in the traditional sense. Neither a motorboat with a token rig nor a sailing yacht with a deck saloon, she's a true 50/50, as I had the opportunity to see for myself when I tested the first Fisher 25 to be built by Neil Marine in over 40 years.

She's now sold in the UK by Calibra Marine, who showed her at the Southampton Boat Show in 2018, when she was externally finished but far from ready to sail, and again in 2019. Finally she was good to go, so I headed out from the Hamble one breezy spring day to see for myself what she was really made of.

Taking her off the pontoon, the first thing



ABOVE No skimping: thick, hand-laid teak and chunky stainless cleats

I noticed is that she's far more manoeuvrable under power than I had expected of a boat with a full-length keel. Give her full lock and a good burst of throttle from the 30hp Yanmar and she spins remarkably quickly, the prop in its aperture at the aft end of the keel sending its wash straight over the large rudder. In astern you have to employ the usual tricks to gain steerageway, though a bow-thruster is now included in the standard specification to make manoeuvring easier.

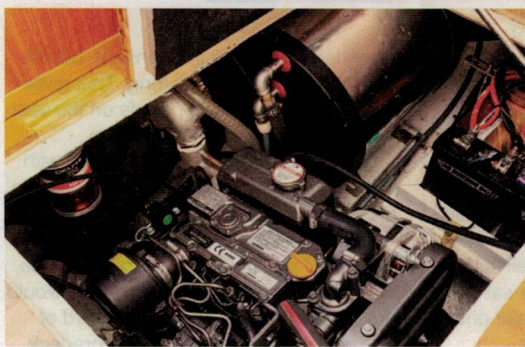
Once out of the river, we were greeted by a good 25 knots of south-easterly blowing straight up Southampton Water and producing waves of a respectable size. The Fisher comes into her own in conditions like this, demonstrating a capability that belies her modest size.

With 2,200rpm showing on the tachometer, she punched straight into the seas at between 4.5 and 5.5 knots, not pitching excessively, only being slowed marginally by the steepest of waves and with the high, flared bow sending most of the spray aside. When you're steering from inside the wheelhouse, a little water hitting the windscreen now and again doesn't matter too much anyway.

There was never a hint of slamming, banging or wallowing: she just plugged on. She could have kept going like this all



The baby of the Fisher family is the only one with a transom stern



'The Fisher demonstrates a capability that belies her modest size'

ABOVE Access to the engine beneath the sole of the wheelhouse. Reaching the fuel tank or stern gland would be tricky

day – and, importantly, so could her crew. Beam-on to the seas, there was far less rolling than you might imagine. Another positive trait was her ability to maintain steerageway at minimal speeds. Opening the throttle to 2,500rpm in flat water took her to an unstressed 6 knots or so; beyond that it's a case of diminishing returns.

Steady as she goes

Whatever your opinion of ketch rigs, they have their advantages on a boat like this. Then again, the Fisher 25 was derived from the sloop-rigged Freeward 25, for which the hull was originally designed. A few years later the Fisher came along with her wheelhouse and raised superstructure, ➔



In the wheelhouse you have the helm, engine controls, switch panel, an overhead hatch and opening windows forward and both sides

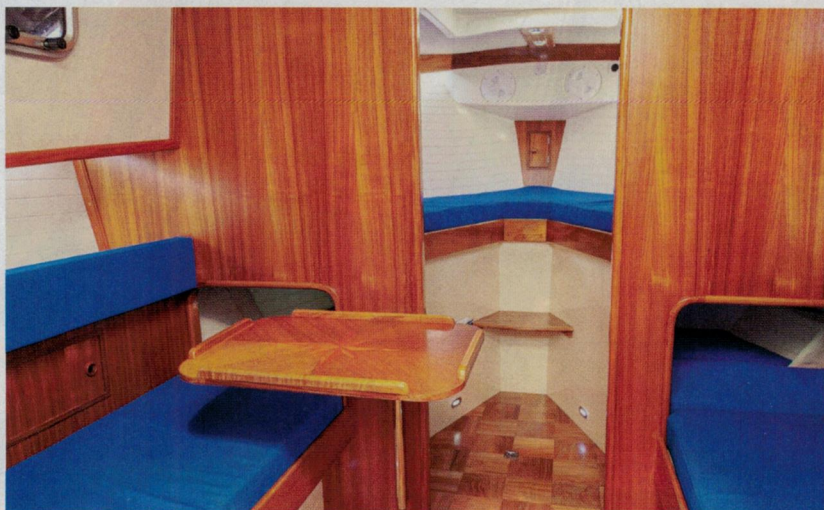
going on to out-live and out-sell her coachroof-and-doghouse hullmate.

Fisher 25s have traditionally been ketches and, while a sloop alternative is offered, I suspect the ketch is a tradition that will be maintained by future Fisher owners. A mizzen is a great steadying sail and it's so small that, most of the time, you can hoist it and forget about it. Some gentle mountaineering is called for to unzip the sail cover and attach the halyard, as the boom has to be well above head-level in the cockpit. I found it simplest to hop up on the wheelhouse roof, though owners will no doubt have devised ways to avoid this.

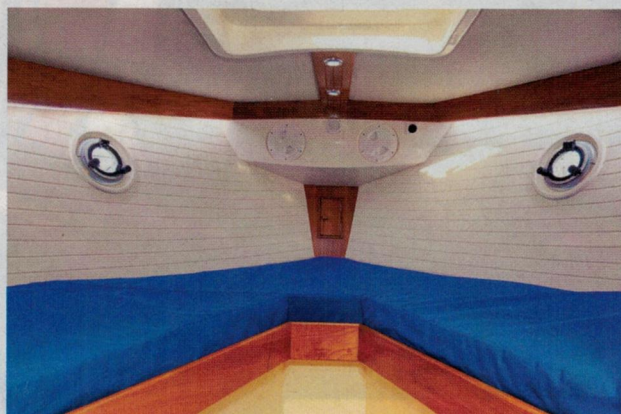
Given the strength of the wind during our test, it seemed sensible to leave the mainsail on the boom and take advantage of the ketch configuration to sail under jib and jigger (or headsail and mizzen for those who don't speak ketch). Even given the Fisher's modest sail area and 50% ballast ratio, full sail would have been more than we wanted. Under our reduced sail plan she trammed along happily on a close reach at up to 4.5 knots. Sometimes she was happy to tack, providing we built up a head of steam first, put the helm down smartly and managed not to hit any big waves before the bow came through the wind. On other occasions we weren't so lucky and needed a nudge from the engine, which we left ticking over in neutral the rest of the time on our relatively busy stretch of water.

It was encouraging to see that, despite not being an upwind flyer and with no tide to help, the Fisher did manage to gain ground to windward. She stayed at a comfortable angle of heel most of the time, picked up to a good 5.5 knots with the wind on the beam and was always happy to carry on in a straight line if we needed to leave her to her own devices.

In short it was a highly creditable performance, and would have been even



ABOVE The saloon is short but surprisingly roomy, with a swivelling table that can be swung away into the port trotter-box
LEFT A remarkably spacious forecabin for a 25-footer, with a tongue and groove-effect hullside lining



ABOVE Tucked away at the bottom of the companionway is the galley, providing the essentials as long as the cook doesn't mind people squeezing past

better had the genoa's tracks extended sufficiently far aft to allow the sail to set properly on the wind.

Steering is hydraulic in the wheelhouse, from where it's reassuring to be able to see the rudder head when you glance astern. Under sail we shipped the tiller and helmed from the cockpit so as to be closer to the headsail winches (Anderson 12 self-tailers – nice but too small) and the other sail controls. Handling will be a lot easier once the hardware has been sorted out.

No clutches were specified on the boom (spars by Seldén) for the reefing pennants, no halyard winches fitted to either mast, the headsail and mainsail halyards are (unnecessarily) led aft via so many (unavoidable) blocks and leads that a good deal of friction is an inevitable result, the mizzen sheet is taken to a horn cleat instead of a cam or a clutch, and so it goes on. The inclusion of in-mast reefing as standard on future boats should resolve mainsail-handling challenges providing the leads aft can be smooth.

If you want to use the tiller under power, you can have duplicate engine controls in the cockpit.

Exterior comforts

You're nicely sheltered in the cockpit, while still having a good view forward through and around the wheelhouse. There's only just over 5ft (1.5m) between

the wheelhouse and the transom, but the cockpit is wider than it is long. That gives space for at least three people on the seat across the stern – tiller permitting.

The sunken side decks, combined with stanchions mounted on the high bulwarks, provide security as you move forward. Teak handrails run the length of the coachroof and the top of the wheelhouse, though the mountaineers among us would like a non-slip finish as well. Forward of the mast is the raised, teak-laid foredeck with the forehatch set into a plinth. An electric anchor windlass comes with the boat and it's good to see four vents further aft in the coachroof – two tannoys and a pair of dorades.

Accommodation

A notable feature of the Fisher is how quiet she feels below decks. In fact noise levels drop appreciably when you just step inside the wheelhouse. Here you find the wheel and engine controls to port of the companionway, headroom that allows you to stand if you're less than 1.75m (5ft 9in) tall, a fold-up helmsman's seat (marginally too low) and another seat to starboard. A large hatch slides open overhead and windows open both sides and in the windscreen.

Underfoot, lifting a hatch in the sole with its parquet-style finish reveals the engine, calorifier, batteries and stainless steel fuel



SPECIFICATIONS

Price	from £88,000
LOA	7.95m (26ft 1in)
LWL	6.40m (21ft 0in)
Beam	2.85m (9ft 4in)
Draught	1.14m (3ft 9in)
Displacement	4,294kg (9,467lb)
Ballast	2,300kg (5,071lb)
Sail area	29.13m ² (320ft ²)
Sail area/displacement ratio	11.43
Displacement/length ratio	455
Engine	Yanmar 30hp diesel
RCD category	B
Designer	Wyatt & Freeman
Builder	Neil Marine, Sri Lanka
UK dealer	Calibra Marine calibramarine.com
Fisher Owners' Association	fisherowners.org

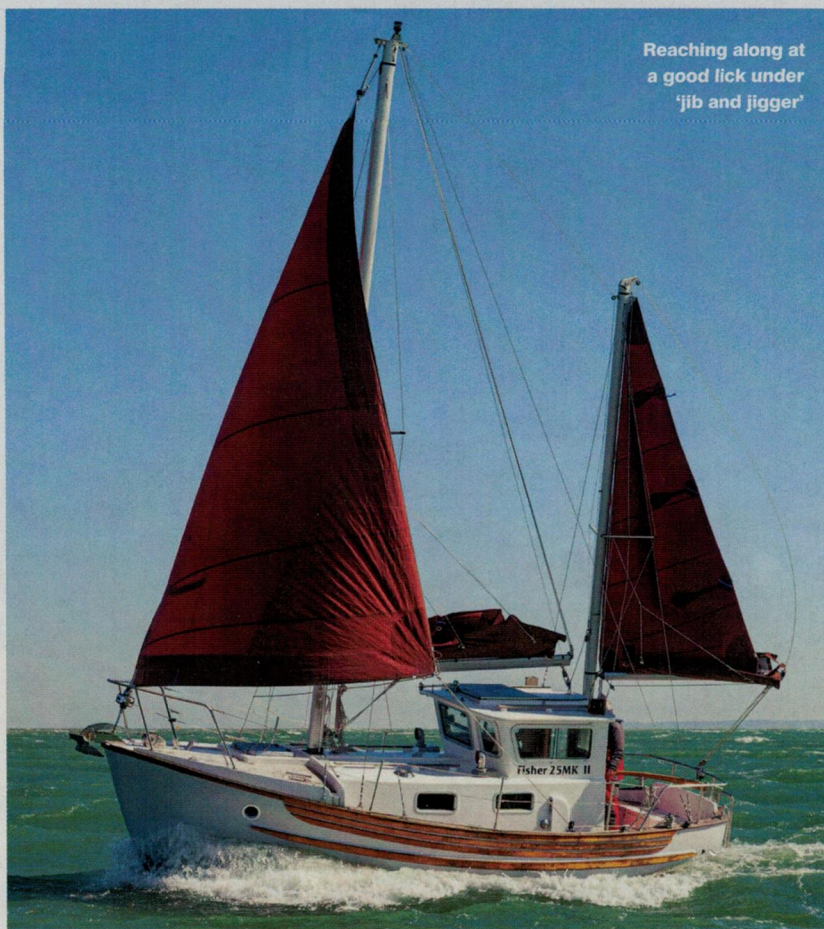
tank – or at least its forward end. Its aft end can just be seen from the stern locker. Getting at the rest of it, for cleaning or inspection, would be tricky, as would reaching the stern gland. Lifting sections in the cockpit sole might be the answer.

Dropping down the companionway, you find a small galley tucked away to starboard. Beneath the hinge-up cover is a single hob, a sink and a tap for the pressurised water. Fiddles would be useful. Opposite is the generous heads compartment, which has moved aft from its position on the original Fishers between the saloon and forecabin. Reminding us that this boat is built in Sri Lanka is the use of teak for so many fittings that would be made of plastic, stainless or chrome in most heads compartments, including the towel rail, the surrounds to the vent and mirror, and even the soap-holder.

With the galley and heads now aft (originally it was a linear galley), the



ABOVE Even the soap holder in the heads is made of teak



saloon is on the short side: between the bulkheads it's less than 1.2m (4ft). Nonetheless, the generous beam and the headroom of 1.78m (5ft 10in) create a feeling of space. You can also sleep on the berths because, although just 53cm (21in) wide, they extend into trotter-boxes that run through the forward bulkhead and under the berths in the forecabin.

And what a forecabin it is: you won't find much to match it in a 25-footer. Each side of the V-berth is a generous 2m (6ft 7in) long and the pale tongue and groove-effect hullside lining gives a pleasantly traditional feel.

The finish throughout is less refined than you'd expect to find on a boat built in Europe, but it's generally friendly and welcoming as long as you don't look too closely at some of the detailing. When it comes to robustness, there seems little to take issue with. It's good to see minimal use of interior mouldings, and bulkheads bonded directly to the hull and deck. Further structural reassurance is provided by the solid laminates in the hull – weight-saving not being an issue with the Fisher – and the ballast encapsulated within the long straight keel that allows the boat to dry out with legs or to sink into soft mud.

PBO's verdict

There's nothing quite like the Fisher 25. She undoubtedly deserves her reputation for being tough, capable and comfortable.

And the fact that the 'new' builders were also responsible for producing some of the earlier boats brings us neatly full circle.

The basics are all there with the born-again Fisher, now bearing her 'Mk II' designation. What she needs is a little tweaking and cosmetic attention down below – really nothing major – together with a revision of the sail-handling systems and hardware.

Given that our test boat was the first one to be built at the yard for several decades, it was no surprise to find a few rough edges. In relative terms these are all details, and should be readily resolved once production gets under way.

It's good to see her back.



To fully treat a Fisher 25 motor sailer would take 7 litres of Coppercoat, at a current retail price of £693 including VAT.

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