

A weekend cruise in the Solent on an Atlantic 40

Julian Aldridge takes Dick Durham on a cruise from Keyhaven, Hampshire, to Newport, Isle of Wight, in his Atlantic Class Power Ketch, *Geordie Lass*, which he rebuilt from a wreck for £17,000

The cry of a curlew, a summer wind blowing the smell of mud across the marsh and a yacht dried out against an ancient quay for a scrub: not the impression you'd expect from a Solent backwater. Sleepy Keyhaven is a world away from the Hamble scramble, even though it's opposite the Needles.

Yes, Keyhaven is the land that timeshare forgot: there are no fancy yacht clothing shops, overpriced finger berths or gimlet-eyed brokers here. Even Contessa 32 builder Jeremy Rogers has moved his workshop from Keyhaven to posher Lymington.

I tried the local yacht club to find my skipper, Julian Aldridge, a 47-year-old farmer, and in the wooden clubhouse of Keyhaven YC, which began life as a tin shed, he was the sole occupant staring through the windows at the rising wind. 'This is a good little club,' said Julian. 'I walked in here covered in seaweed after scrubbing off my boat yesterday and nobody said a word.' An unlikely occurrence at some other Solent clubs I can think of!

We loaded up his RIB and motored down Keyhaven Lake, past a line of angling boats, dinghies and small cruising boats until reaching the junction of Keyhaven Lake and Mount Lake, where he showed me his half-tide mud



Julian keeps *Geordie Lass* in a half-tide mud-berth in Keyhaven

berth mooring. Julian has fitted a second Samson post on the back end of his boat, as the stern needs to be as secure as the bow in a mud-berth mooring.

I was amazed to see his neighbouring yacht was *Betty II*, a 25ft gaffer on which I had sailed at Leigh-on-Sea, Essex, where she was built in 1929. Now, she is starting a new life on Solent waters. 'I would expect *Betty II*, with her centreplate, to find a mooring here,' I said, 'but not your long-keeler.'

Julian explained he had moved her off his normal berth at High Water and taken her

further down towards Keyhaven entrance at North Point, where there is more water. Here, he'd picked up a spare mooring to ensure that we could get away.

And there *Geordie Lass* was, lying athwart the creek, a very fine ship: high topsides, good sheerline, stocky, sensible rig and sawn-off counter. It

was hard to believe that seven short years ago she was a write-off in Alderney's Braye Harbour. *Geordie Lass* had chafed through her mooring warp in a northeasterly gale and was wrecked on the rocks of Maggie's Bay within the harbour, a story *Yachting Monthly* reported at the time (April 2003 issue).

'I'm a bit of a cheapskate,' said Julian modestly. 'I call my hobby boating, not yachting, and I do everything on a budget.'

He's not wrong there: to moor a boat of *Geordie Lass*'s size on a Keyhaven half-tide mooring costs a mere five per cent of the annual bill for a marina in the Solent, which would not leave you much change from £7,000.

'I've got no radar, no chartplotter and after all these years sailing, *Geordie Lass* is the first boat I've owned that has an echo



Geordie Lass wrecked at Alderney in the Channel Islands



'I've got no radar, no chartplotter and this is the first boat I've owned with an echo sounder'

ME & MY BOAT

*An all-weather
'little ship'; many
were owned by
retired ocean racers*



ALL PHOTOS: LESTER MCCARTHY



The wheelhouse is comfortable but takes away your wind sense





The first Atlantic 40s were timber built, but Geordie Lass was built in GRP in North Devon in 1977



We rigged up a cover over the wheelhouse back



Skipper Julian Aldridge prepares to anchor

sounder,' said Julian, whose down-to-earth approach is epitomised by his candid admission that he dropped part of his surname, as it was 'too pretentious'. His original name was Julian Mooring-Aldridge – his sister Jo once worked for *Yachting Monthly* as the magazine's Lymington correspondent.

Julian started sailing as a child with his father William, mother Ruth, two brothers and sister Jo aboard an old Hillyard-style double-ended ketch, *Cliffette*, from Poole.

By the time he was 14, he was cruising his own 13ft Voyager bilge-keeler, *Ambo*, from Poole to the Solent and back. He has recently built another Voyager for his own teenage daughters to cruise.

When Julian left school, aged 17, he joined the boatbuilding firm of F C Mitchells in Poole as an apprentice shipwright and, in his spare time, built a ferro cement 23-footer, *Zeewind of Poole*, and in 1994 sailed her to Venezuela and back, solo. The 2,700-mile Atlantic crossing from the Canaries to Barbados took him 26 days. For old times' sake and 'sentimental value', she is now laid up in a barn on his farm at Milford-on-Sea.

Julian has also restored a burnt-out former 35ft Keyhaven ferry, which was a Dunkirk Little Ship, and took her back to Dunkirk for a reunion with old soldiers. She is now based on the Walton Backwaters in Essex.

But it was *Geordie Lass* that gave him his chance to own a larger boat. She was built in 1977 by J Hinks & Son, at Appledore, in Devon. But coincidentally, F C Mitchells, the boatbuilders of his youth, also built them, and Julian worked on the last Atlantic 40, *So Long*, in 1983. In total, about 54 wooden versions and 14 GRP hulls were launched.

Julian spent three years rebuilding and refitting *Geordie Lass* in his Hampshire barn.

We motored out of Keyhaven after two hours of flood and had no less than 7ft 6in depth over the bar on Neaps. As I steered the boat under the lee of Hurst Point, Julian clambered onto the coachroof to raise the mainsail. We cut the engine and bore away up the Solent

Keyhaven in a nutshell

A world of empty marsh and snaking creeks behind the ancient walls of Hurst Castle – where Charles I was held before his execution in London – is a haven of beauty and peace. The only items now sent to the capital are seagulls' eggs lifted off the saltings in spring and sold as a delicacy.

The river warden, Roy Plummer, has seen the marshes at Keyhaven erode fast



There are swinging moorings and mud-berth moorings in Keyhaven. It costs £7 a day to anchor

But things are changing. Already the pilot books are out of date: many show the leading marks as being 281° True to get through the entrance safely. But Keyhaven River Warden Roy Plummer told me tidal erosion has meant they've had to realign the beacons so that the correct compass bearing

to enter the harbour is now 307° True.

'Eleven years ago, when I came here, it was predicted that the marshes would all be eroded in 50 years. Now, it's said they could disappear in 25 years' time,' he added.

In the local shipwright's office, an ancient mariner with a long white beard, yachting cap



The linear galley to starboard has most mod cons, except hot and cold running water!

with a westerly Force 4-5, keeping the mainsail and large genoa goosewinged. She was soon clocking over 8 knots, assisted by a knot or so of tide.

'We won't set the mizzen,' said Julian, 'as we're not going far, though it does take care of any weather helm on a long passage.'

We started tacking downwind as heavy showers on a following wind hit us and Julian rigged up an awning over the back end of the wheelhouse. Then, once Newtown Creek came abeam, we decided to have lunch at anchor.

Once inside the narrow marshy inlet, we headed round to the port hand and let go the 45 lb CQR anchor: 'I have always used CQRs and they have never let me down,' said Julian as the chain rattled out.

After lunch – with fresh produce taken from a top-loading fridge neatly built under a cockpit seat – we used the electric windlass to haul the ground tackle back up into her stainless steel double bow roller. We motored out of the creek and set sail once more, having cleared the offing buoy.

Her mainsheet arrangement comes aft to a three-block system mounted on the aft cabin coachroof. In through Cowes Road, we had the wind on the beam and she made 6 knots with no heel, except in the occasional gust →



The entrance to Newtown Creek, Isle of Wight, where Geordie Lass and crew stopped for lunch



Julian gives Dick a computer presentation of his other boats in the Geordie Lass' cosy saloon



Dog's hair can block bilge pumps as this old salt at Keyhaven's boatyard discovered

and pullover sat at a desk with a labrador and a terrier tethered to its legs.

'They're camera shy,' said John Lesh, 67, as photographer Lester McCarthy tried to get a photograph of the hounds. 'They're not used to celebrity,' he added, as they hid under the table. John, a sailor for 54 years, is used to dogs: he found pooch hair blocking the bilge pump of his last boat three years after his favourite labrador had died!

What does it cost to keep your boat here?

New Forest District Council (Tel: 01590 645695) only has moorings available for people who live in the area, but they can be incredibly cheap. Visitors are welcomed and charged £7 a day for anchoring – the main anchorage is just inside North Spit – or between £9 and £12 for a swinging mooring overnight, depending on the size of boat.

For scrubbing off at the village quay – which dries 0.6m at LW – there is no charge.

What are the tidal constraints?

Double High Waters occur at or near Springs and tidal predictions refer to the first HW. Off Springs, the water 'stands' for approximately two hours. Then, the tidal predictions refer to the middle of this period.

Although pilot books warn deep-draught craft away, and usually play safe by describing the harbour as being suitable only for shoal-draught boats that can take the ground, there is a fair amount of anchoring room inside North Spit and plenty of water once you're

over the bar. We had 7ft 6in over the bar after two hours' flood on Neaps.

What is the shelter like?

Once inside, the holding is good and there is shelter from all wind directions.

What facilities are available?

West Solent Boatyard (Tel: 01590 642080) charges £5.50 per foot to crane out and clean off. The yard offers marine surveyors, engineers, shipwrights, riggers, lay-up facilities and chandlery.



You can scrub off for free at the town quay

Key cruising features

The boat has davits, hugely useful for the shorthanded cruising sailor as he can haul up his RIB without having to deflate and pack it away each time it is used

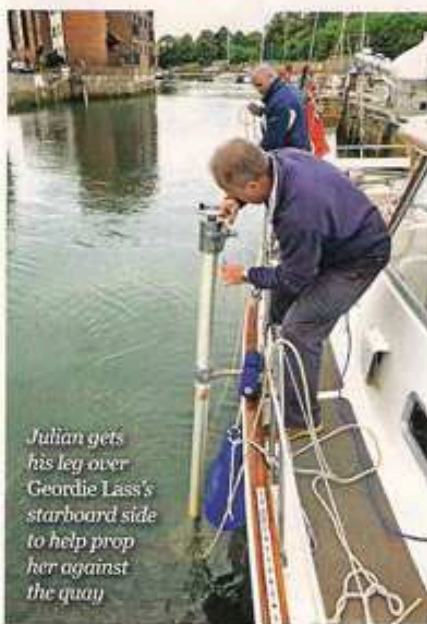
Her wheelhouse gives wonderful shelter – it even has windscreen wipers – but it is an obstacle to wind sense

All sail handling is done at the mast

The aft cabin is a comfortable nook, with the centre cockpit breaking it from the main accommodation

The anchor point for legs. Julian loves this feature as it means he can dry out surrounded by marine arcadia rather than a soulless marina

Her bow roller supports a 45 lb CQR: 'I have always used CQRs and they have never let me down,' said Julian, who has an electric anchor windlass



Julian gets his leg over Geordie Lass's starboard side to help prop her against the quay



Julian gleanes business tips from Alan Sugar

when she dipped majestically, carrying her sail well in the flat water.

We sailed right up the Medina to the head of navigation, the town quay at Newport, and moored alongside. Julian then hauled one of his extendable, aluminium boat legs out of a cockpit locker, slotted it into a socket in the topside and set it up, braced with guy ropes each side.

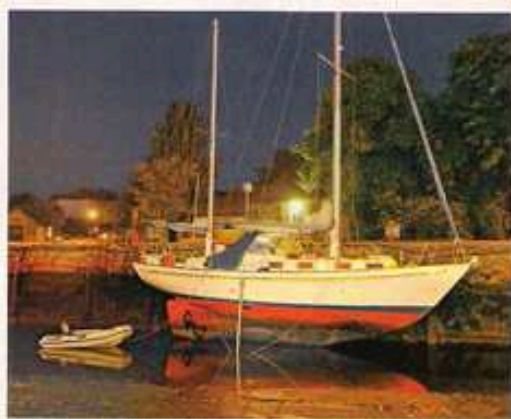
'I bought the legs second-hand off a 50ft Nelson,' he said. 'Our favourite cruising destination is Herm in the Channel Islands, where we dry out and let the children play in perfect safety. It means that instead of sitting in a boat park – which is how I see marinas – we are sitting in a beauty spot.'

He also rigged a warp around the base of the mast to a quayside bollard, just to make sure she didn't fall the wrong way. With a fender board supplied by the local council and the belt-and-braces of a line to the mast, Geordie Lass lay perfectly upright and steady on the river bed as the tide ebbed away.

'The last time we were up here my wife, Alison, was on deck in her bathing costume when the TV gardener Alan Titchmarsh motored by and exclaimed, "Nice legs!" Alison was flattered, but he meant the boat's!' said Julian.

We dined in the pub opposite that evening, keeping an eye on the boat from the bar.

After a comfortable night aboard, we were late getting away the next morning and as I let go the mooring lines and our photographer, Lester, wrestled the leg back aboard, Julian said: 'There's only 6ft 6in under us.'



Geordie Lass lashed by mast rope and propped up on one leg alongside Newport Quay at Low Water

There was too little run in the ebb right at the top of the River Medina to push the boat's head round, so we had to warp her bow downriver. We bumped once, twice, three times on the gravelly bottom before we were away clear.

As we motored back down the Medina, Julian, who plans to buy a Bruce Roberts 440DS Classic for his retirement, said: 'If I'd had £60,000 to spare and just spent it on a boat, I would never have had the same satisfaction of the building and launching that I had with Geordie Lass. All my boats have been like that – from living the dream to reality!' ▲

Do you have a favourite local cruise that you would like to share? Email us at yachting_monthly@ipcmedia.com or ring us on 020 3148 4867

What we thought of the boat...

Atlantic 40 Class Power Ketch

Technical specifications: interior layout, hull and rig plans, facts, figures and vital statistics



LEFT: The chart table is large, forward facing and beside the companionway

RIGHT: One of the best aft cabins I've seen



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

- Price around £56,000
- LOA 39ft 6in (12m)
- LWL 30ft (9.1m)
- Beam Tilt 9in (3.6m)
- Draught 5ft 6in (1.7m)
- Displacement 9.6ton (9,754kg)
- Ballast keel 8,000 lb
- Engine 80hp
- Sail area: mainsail 257sq ft (23.9m²), genoa 390sq ft (36m²), mizzen 108sq ft (10m²)
- Fuel 590 lit (130 gal)
- Water 568 lit (125 gal)
- Berths 8
- Design Walter F Rayner
- Builder F C Mitchell

100-POINT BOAT TEST

Marks out of 10: our verdict for each of 10 key attributes

PERFORMANCE Sturdy, reassuring and purposeful, this is an all-weather 'little ship', many of which in their day were owned by retired ocean-racing sailors who wanted a boat that sailed well, but was equipped for comfort.

6

AT THE HELM The wheelhouse is a serious obstacle to getting your 'wind sense' – especially in this case, because a small Perspex hatch in the roof has crazed. But even if Julian replaced it, the visibility is restricted.

5

DESIGN & CONSTRUCTION Her ballast keel is glassed into the hull in three castings, so no need for keelbolts. Bulkheads are 5/8in marine ply, bonded to the hull. The mouldings are GRP sandwich, with balsa wood inserts.

8

SAILPLAN Her mainsail, mizzen and genoa allow you to bring the centre of gravity down in a blow by dropping the mainsail completely. It also takes less muscle to trim three smaller sails than two big ones.

8

DECK LAYOUT Hugely spacious and safe, the aft deck even has a GRP 'garden bench' fitted! There is space for a 2.8m Avon RIB in davits, plus her outboard; a roomy lazarette for fenders and warps; and wide sidedecks.

8

LIVING BELOW In her day, she was the last word in luxury. She has one of the best aft cabins I've ever seen on a boat of this size. There's ample stowage space throughout this seven-berth yacht.

9

CHART TABLE She has a big, forward-facing nav station beside the companionway, which is handy for calling courses out to the helm. There are also grabrails each side of the companionway steps, to steady the navigator.

9

GALLEY *Geordie Lass* has a linear galley fitted to starboard with a gimbaled, two-burner, stainless steel oven and grill, a single stainless steel sink, plenty of work surface and ample stowage.

7

HEADS There are two heads compartments, one to port just aft of the vee-berth forward cabin, and the other as an en suite to the aft cabin. Ventilation is good and can be increased by opening any of the windows.

8

MAINTENANCE Her 80hp Mercedes diesel engine is readily accessed from the lift-out sole of the centre cockpit. The engine compartment is very spacious and has effective sound insulation.

10

TOTAL SCORE

The Atlantic 40 Power Ketch is, as her name suggests, a robust, safe and steady ship that will take families across oceans. Her hull shape is chunky, the coachroof bold, but not brassy, and her rig easy to handle. Sail handling is done on deck, rather than from the cockpit, but the decks are wide and safe and so is the centre cockpit. She's a purposeful boat, which, although now out of fashion, should never be overlooked by serious cruising folks.

78
100