A social SPACE

Bespoke built for a cruising couple accommodating frequent visitors, *Astrid* is a 64ft wheel-steered narrowboat boasting the latest hybrid technology. **Mark Langley** finds out more...

CHARLOTTE AND TERRY SWEENEY BOUGHT THEIR LAST NARROWBOAT as an off-the-shelf model with a few adjustments. Although this diesel-powered craft provided good cruising and a pleasant bolt-hole for the experienced boating couple, after a few years they began to refine what they were after: a hybrid, with extra space inside for guests and more of a social exterior. After looking at a large number of boat-builders, they settled on Bluewater Boats, based in Warwickshire, due to its level of expertise in creating genuine bespoke boats.

Bluewater Boats is one of the few boat-builders to undertake the entire process in-house, rather than buying in shells. Owners David and Sharon Warner have decades of boat-building experience, from narrowboats through wide-beams and inspection launches to genuine coastal-capable Dutch barges, all built from the baseplate up at their premises. This means that they really can provide boats to suit anyone and WW has visited a range of these over the years.

However, *Astrid*, which was exhibited at this year's Crick Boat Show, is quite different in many ways. Aimed to be a very social cruising boat, with space and privacy for guests aboard, *Astrid* wowed show visitors with its style and layout, but also the extremely high level of engineering – something Bluewater is rightly proud about. *Astrid* is not the

Extra studs at the bow and stern make using spring lines very easy for proper mooring. The hatch in the deck gives access to the integral water tank.

***Astrid* wowed visitors at the Crick Boat Show with its style and layout.**

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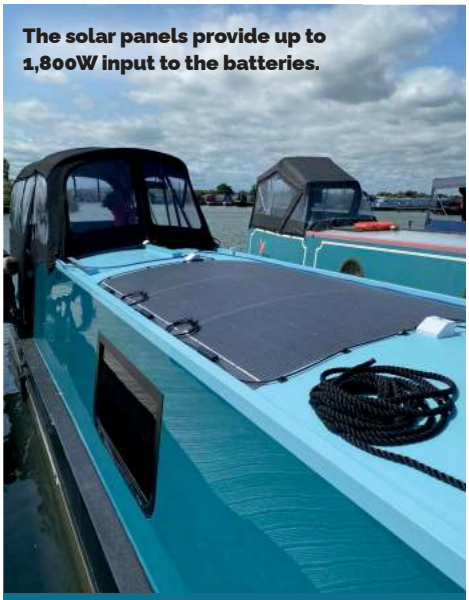
The pram canopy makes the cockpit a year-round useable space.

With no tiller to get in the way, the aft cockpit is fully useable when underway and is very comfortable.

The wheel steering is at a good height for standing.


The solar panels provide up to 1,800W input to the batteries.

The cockpit can be fully enclosed with dog gates, while another mooring stud on the gunwale is very useful here.

NEED TO KNOW

TECH SPECS

Length 64ft **Berths** 2+4
Propulsion Vetus 22kW hybrid
Price from £280,000 inc VAT

CONTACT

01926 811699, *bluewaterboats.co.uk*

The colour scheme works really well on this modern narrowboat.

common 'reverse layout', but has a central galley, with bathroom and bedroom forward, leaving the living spaces aft.

Shell & exterior

Astrid is a 64ft narrowboat with a large square cruiser stern and a short enclosed bow, concentrating all the useable outdoor space at the back. The boat length was a compromise – the couple didn't want it to be too long, yet it also had to be able to fit in everything they required. At 64ft, cruising is not as restrictive as some envisage – only the main line of the Leeds & Liverpool and the Calder & Hebble will be out of reach. The extra space above a 57ft layout has been very well used.

The shell is in 10/6/5/4mm plate, with substantial interior framing and external rubbing strakes. The hull, bar the baseplate, is shot blasted and coated with two-pack epoxy blacking, while the cabin sides and roof are finished in epoxy paints with at least six coats applied wet-on-wet (to give maximum adhesion and longevity), including the last two in Alexseal, which provides a very tough finish.

Up at the bow, there is multi-bolted hatch in the forepeak, which gives access to the integral water tank. Although less common these days, given modern water

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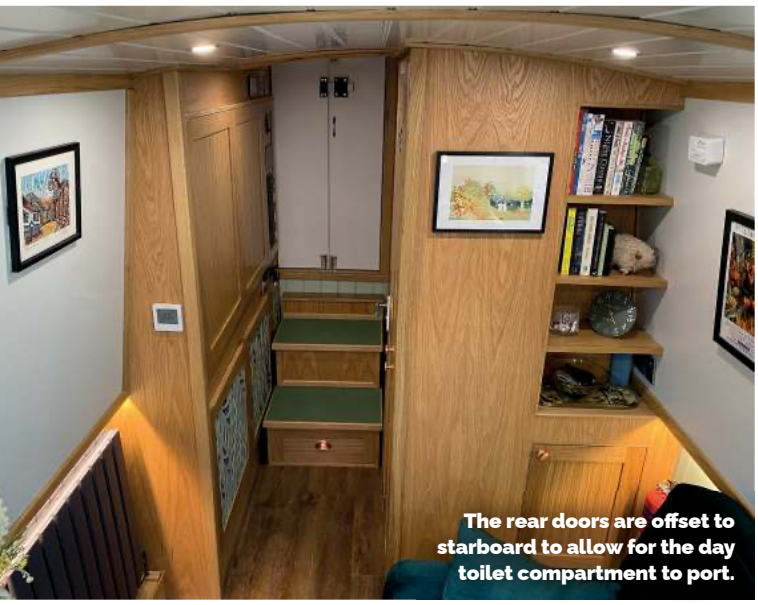


The rear doors are offset to starboard to allow for the day toilet compartment to port.

The aft saloon has a large sofa-bed facing the entertainment centre.

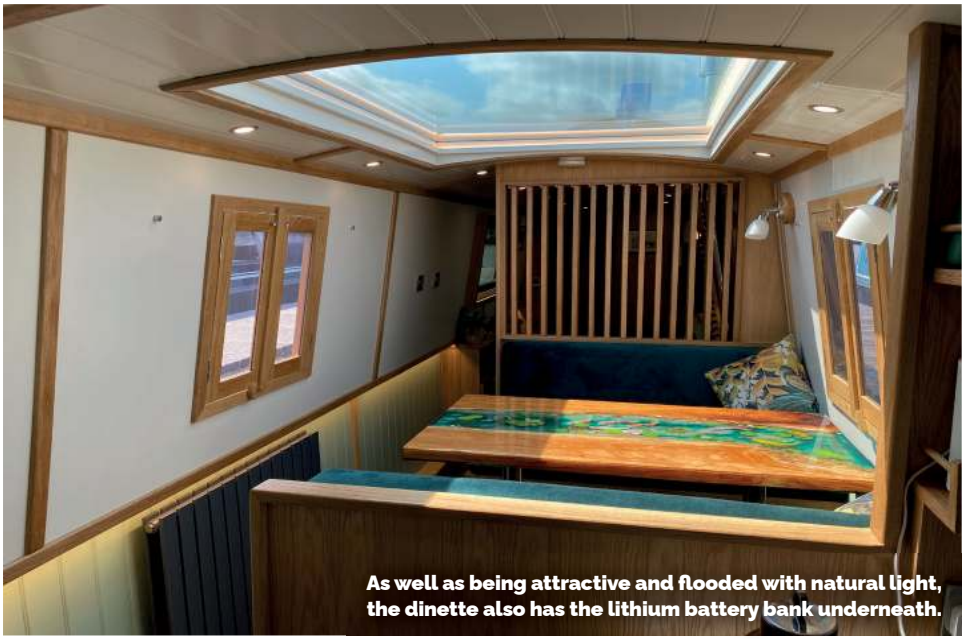
tank paints, it is a sensible choice and the large inspection hatch does make periodic inspection possible, unlike a sealed separate tank. The bow flares quite a bit and, with the cabin tapering inwards and upwards, it avoids the boxy lines of some narrowboats without a forward cockpit. There are glazed doors into the cabin and a proper sliding hatch above, so it's a useable exit rather than just for emergency escape.

The stern cockpit is huge by narrowboat standards, with a U-shaped seating area formed by the solid steel dodgers and surrounding a neat folding table. There is a lot of storage underneath the seats, including two recessed extra-deep lockers to provide secure stowage space (complete with locking cable eye) for folding bikes, as well as a spare 12V fridge/freezer box. The space is made even more useable by the absence of a tiller – this is a wheel-steered boat. The wheel is mounted to port alongside a central mini seat, with the door down into the cabin offset slightly to starboard.

The stern deck has two low-level gates either side to control access for the dogs when mooring or in a lock. The deck itself is finished in synthetic teak covering, which

The stunning Pullman dinette table.

Lots of oak framing and furniture work very well with the painted cabin side panels.



As well as being attractive and flooded with natural light, the dinette also has the lithium battery bank underneath.

provides good grip, is easy to clean and adds sound insulation. There is a large pram canopy over the cockpit that allows standing headroom, making the cockpit a great second saloon even on the wettest of days. The canopy drops surprisingly quickly too, and dismantles in sections for easy storage.

The main cabin has a mixture of portholes and rectangular windows, all double-glazed with thermal breaks to minimise condensation. The cabin sides are in a single colour which, combined with the black hull paint brought up to the gunwale and the slightly lighter blue on the cabin roof and handrails, makes for a very attractive modern paint scheme. On the roof are low-profile Vetus stainless steel mushroom vents, as well as nine 200W solar panels adhered to the deck. There is also a slightly raised glass skylight, but more of that later.

Saloon

The offset door from the aft deck takes

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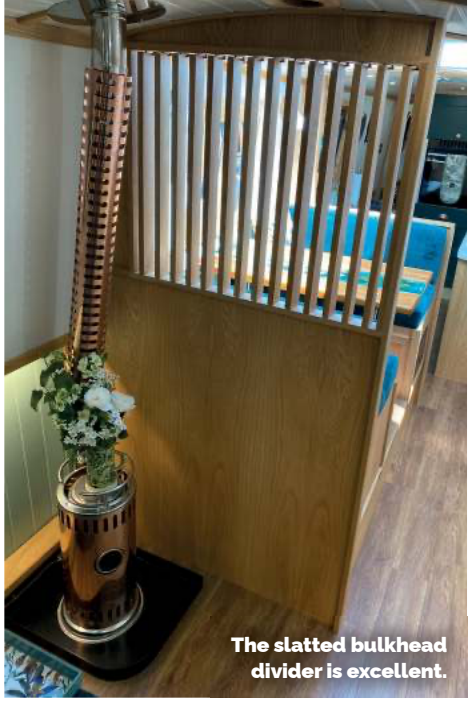

The slatted bulkhead divider is excellent.

The galley is a good size with the white worktops providing a nice contrast to the deep green cupboard doors.

ASTRID UP CLOSE...

A deep sink and tall tap are practical.

Storage at the end of the galley run is a nice touch.

Neat glass and wine racks are tucked into the galley corner.

GOOD IDEA

A proper waste bin cupboard in the galley, with room for sorting recycling.

Pull-out shelving in the cupboards works very well.

The combined oven/grill is at a good height, and the four-ring induction hob is a nice size.

Small but very handy shelves are found throughout *Astrid*.

A drawer freezer is practical and ideal for small frozen food storage.

you down into a mini-corridor to the starboard side. There is a large electrics centre (to call it a cupboard would be a disservice!) against the cabin side, while to port is the guest/day toilet. This has a separating dry toilet inside, a very neat washbasin, hooks to hang clothes and shoe cupboards to properly store footwear.

This is a brilliant use of space – really convenient when cruising, and great for guests aboard, but it also fits in a lot of storage. With its own opening porthole, judicious use of mirrors, opaque half-glazed door and sensible-sized fittings, it's a surprisingly spacious compartment. Just forward of the loo is a narrow hanging locker, half the depth of the bulkhead, which is helpfully illuminated, providing storage for more jackets and shoes.

The main saloon has an extra-long (210cm) sofa-bed from the Sofa Bed Barn. This faces an entertainment cabinet under the starboard gunwale, which is crafted in oak to match the hardwood framing and bulkheads used throughout the boat. The main panelling on *Astrid* is painted tongue-and-groove effect on the hull side and ceiling, with flat panels on the cabin sides. The colour choice is an off-white and very pale green, which is calming and works with the oak. The engineered wood flooring from Ambiance is very attractive and practical for the owners' dogs – and for a boat that is to be cruised year-round.

The aft bulkhead, forming the end of the day toilet, has a low-level cupboard and a higher shelving unit tucked into the space between the hanging locker and the cabin side. There is also one of the larger 2kg dry powder extinguishers clearly on display here and not hidden away in a cupboard somewhere. Further forward to port, there is a copper-finished, trimmed Lockgate diesel heater, set in a steel tray hearth. This is very neat and can provide a good source of heat without the mess of a solid fuel stove.

Dinette

Between the dinette and the saloon there is a full-height bulkhead, where the top section is a vertical louvre. This ingenious design opens and closes with very few moving parts – move

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The bathroom is spacious and features a good-sized washbasin with decent storage underneath. The shower has a fantastic floral backing.

one slat and the others all follow. This allows the bulkhead to become very see-through, while also increasing privacy for anyone sleeping in the saloon, or on the dinette itself.

Most dinettes are fairly similar, following the L-shape or Pullman design, but this one has an added set of features. Firstly, hidden under the seating is easily accessible storage for bedding, as well as a pull-out drawer freezer (rather than a chest freezer, as is more common). Underneath the dinette plinth itself are the lithium batteries for the propulsion and systems – these are in their own sealed compartment, ducted externally through the hull sides.

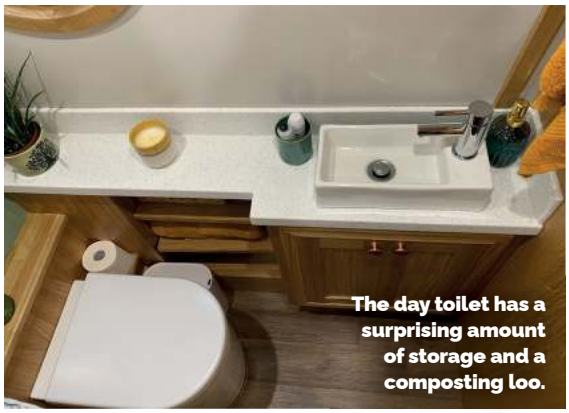
Above the dinette is a massive 1,500mm by 1,000mm fixed skylight, which floods the inside of the boat with light. There is also a pair of glazed doors either side of the dinette for more ventilation. However, your eyes will be instantly drawn to one of the most superb dining tables I have ever come across, which looks like a koi pond. Within the layered acrylic resin structure, fish, plants and invertebrates appear to be suspended mid-swim. This stunning feature has been built up from layers of paint and is properly a three-dimensional artwork which photographs fail to do justice to. It is also surprisingly hardwearing.

Galley

The walk-through galley has the oak cupboard fronts painted in a deep matt green, which looks outstanding against the copper-finished details and the bright white Staron acrylic worktops and splashbacks. The deep, one-and-a-half bowl sink is to port, with a pull-out bin cupboard underneath and a pair of half-height cupboards forward, one containing the microwave. There is a narrow upper bulkhead against the dinette, which gives a couple of useful fiddled shelves, one of which has a Sonos speaker attached, linked to the comprehensive onboard entertainment system.

On the starboard side, there is a linear four-ring induction hob, with a full-sized washer/dryer and 230V fridge integrated as well. Against the forward bulkhead on the centreline is a full-height unit, with the 'slide and hide' combined oven/grill – electric, as, being hybrid powered, this is easily a gas-free boat. There are three drawers under the oven, plus a cupboard above.

The galley worktop to starboard continues to the side of the oven unit, which gives useful extra space, as well as a glass and wine rack to be tucked in the upper corner. On the forward end of the port worktop are three fiddled shelves, allowing items like mugs and chopping boards to be stowed neatly.



The day toilet has a surprising amount of storage and a composting loo.

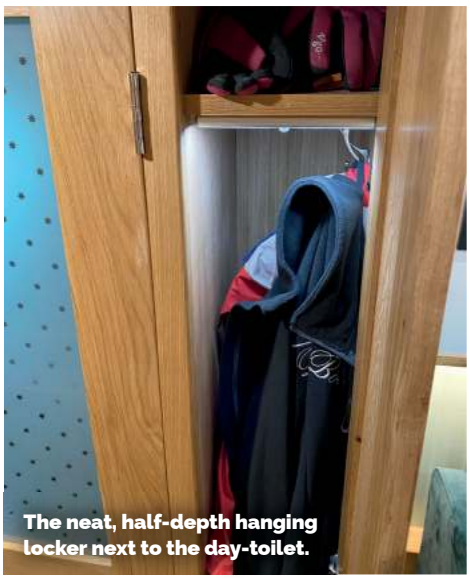
The copper-effect towel radiator is stylish.

The dog bed under the wardrobe.

Bathroom

The bathroom is walk through but with both doors to port, creating an offset layout. As you enter, the striking botanical illustrated wallboarding of the shower immediately hits you – the theme goes well with the muted greens and copper colours throughout the boat. In the large (900mm x 800mm) rectangular shower, the other wall is a muted matt finish, which contrasts the art well. There are rainfall and handheld shower sprays and the two opening doors make access to the shower very easy.

The rectangular washbasin is atop another Staron counter, with a cupboard and open shelves below. There is a good amount of space for toiletries and the lighting is well-placed. The macerator loo is against the hull side to starboard, which gives plenty of arm and leg room. The toilet pumps to a tank under the forward bed and Bluewater has



The neat, half-depth hanging locker next to the day-toilet.

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The master bed occupies the full cabin width but has a shelf before the door, which is a good idea.

The ventilated laundry bin is excellent.

Drawers and open storage under the bed is a practical feature.

The bedroom is compact but fits in plenty of storage.

"Bluewater Boats is one of the few boat-builders to undertake the entire process in-house"

ensured that there is easy access to all the pipework for any future issues. Opposite the toilet is a copper pipe-style radiator/towel rail, which is functional and attractive. The other four radiators in the boat, all running from the Webasto 5kW diesel heater, are anthracite column units – again, a good choice given the internal colour palette. All the heating pipework is boxed away too but is easy to access, like all the systems aboard.

Bedroom

The master bedroom feels quite grand, and accommodates a fixed double bed with a width of 5ft at its base and 6ft 6in in length. Although the toilet tank is housed under here, there is still a lot of storage, with four drawers and four open slots, which take baskets or shoes and so are adaptable. There is also more stowage space forward of the bed and easy access to the Vetus 76kgf bow-thruster, which sits in its own compartment. Having the proper opening doors and hatch gives increased ventilation and better access out of the cabin than craft of a similar style.

At the head of the bed is a shelf – many boats that have this cabin layout shove the bed right against the forward bulkhead, which means curtains overlap the pillows and it can be hard to prevent draughts. Here that is avoided as the space is used for placing phones, drinks, books etc. There are reading lights and two double 230V sockets with USB outlets here, plus yet another cute shelf for the Sonos speaker.

The aft bulkhead has a wardrobe that is comprised only of shelves – far more practical than hanging space, say the owners, and certainly you can then store a lot more (there aren't that many requirements for hanging ballgowns and suits on most inland boats, so skipping the railing can be pragmatic). There is also a dedicated ventilated laundry hopper, plus, under the two drawers, is a dog bed at floor level for one of the owners' pooches who likes a more cave-like space to sleep. Above the laundry hopper are some open shelves that are ideal for books. Four portholes plus the glazed forward doors make the bedroom feel very spacious.

Propulsion & electrics

The heart of the boat is the hybrid system and *Astrid* is the first narrowboat to be fitted with the latest 22kW Vetus electric motor. This is very well installed with a water-lubricated stern tube and the motor itself having its own skin cooling tank on the hull swim. To power the motor, the battery bank under the dinette houses eight 200Ah 25.6V nominal Victron NG lithium batteries. These give 800Ah at 48V nominal, or around 38kWh capacity. The batteries have three converters to step down to 12V for the boat's domestic circuits, which is a belt-and-braces approach – many boat-builders would just fit the one.

The batteries can be charged from the 1,800W of solar fitted, which runs through an MPPT charger or from the Victron Quattro 10,000W inverter when connected to a shoreline, or from the onboard generator. The Vetus 6GLX generator can produce up to 6kW and is a slow speed (1,500rpm) unit, so working efficiently and quietly. The generator sits within its own sound-reducing enclosure and has a large silencer to keep

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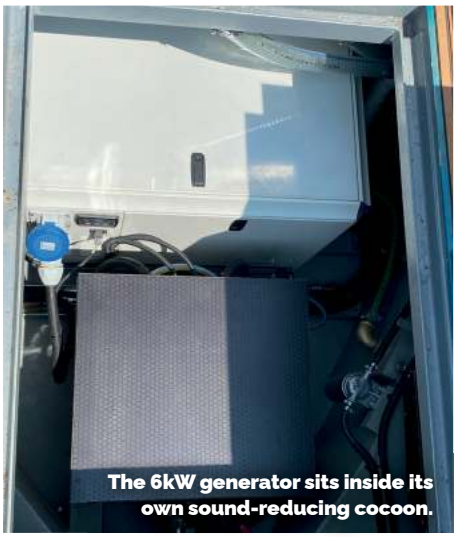
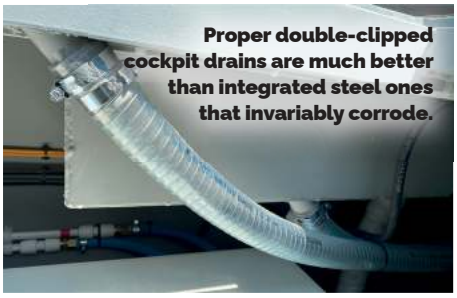


The 6kW generator sits inside its own sound-reducing cocoon.

The new 22kW Vetus motor is very powerful but extremely quiet.

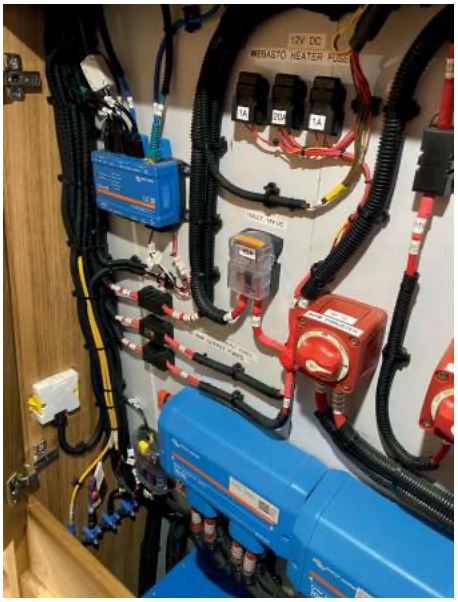


Proper double-clipped cockpit drains are much better than integrated steel ones that invariably corrode.

All items are labelled and over engineered with a good degree of redundancy.

Room under the cockpit seats for cruising gear, plus a spare compressor coolbox.

The recessed sections of the lockers give secure storage for folding bikes.



The electrics compartment is very well ventilated, with attractive mesh covers at the base of the unit, and the electrics are superbly installed.

the noise down. This unit is keel-cooled and also heats the calorifier when running, so has its own skin tank. The whole generator is simple to service, with the insulation panels easily lifting clear. The motor is well protected by additional framing and a cover.

To manage all this, there is a very complex but incredibly well-engineered electrics system. The touchscreen Victron controller oversees the main electrics, while Vetus's own touchscreen handles the propulsion side. The cable organisation, and its associated fuses, is a joy. Every cable is (doubly) labelled at both ends, fuses and busbars are suitably protected, and the entire space is very well ventilated through some fabulous fretwork at the base of the cupboard, as well as high-level vents.

Handling & underway

Wheel-steered narrowboats and wide-beams sometimes get a reputation of being difficult to handle – yet, if they are well set-up, they can be very easy. On *Astrid*, there is a Vetus hydraulic system. As you turn the wheel, you are moving a hydraulic pump which then actuates a two-way cylinder ram attached to the rudder stock. The sizing of the system is crucial so you do not have to make lots of turns of the wheel for only a small movement of rudder. The steering on *Astrid* is perfectly sized – it is not too light but feels right. Although there is a rudder position indicator fitted, after a minute or two you don't feel the need to use that as a reference. Handling the boat, even in the quite vicious winds on the day of our test, proved very straightforward. The absence of a tiller means that the cockpit is very useable while cruising, keeping everyone together.

The new Vetus motor is powerful, with a lot of extra oomph in reserve for tidal rivers. However, it also allows very fine control as well, which we found useful navigating back into the owners' quite tight mooring. The bow-thruster is good as well, giving a useful nudge, particularly in windy conditions, but the boat handles extremely well without it. The wash is very low and even as you increase the power, the wheel steering never becomes difficult, easily tracking a straight line. The motor is hushed when powering the boat and even if you run the generator it is still quieter than most standard diesel boats cruising.

WW VERDICT

Astrid is an outstanding boat, with a novel interior that is ideal for a cruising couple with dogs and frequent visitors. It feels very spacious and the wheel steering really opens up the cockpit as a proper social area while out cruising, without a tiller getting in the way. The standard of fit-out is excellent, while the engineering is just superb. Even the cockpit drains are double-clipped reinforced transparent pipework, rather than cheap integral steel pipes which invariably corrode over time.

The thoughtfulness of the builder, which produces boats from the baseplate up, shines through on *Astrid*. No wonder it caught the eye of so many people at this year's Crick Boat Show.

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