



This was scary!

The place was wrong, the weather bad, the craft untried and **Max Campbell** hadn't helmed a sailing boat of his own for 20 years. Great idea. Here's how he fared, including with a pal on trapeze...

I wasn't allowed to admit to nervousness – I was trying to exude enough confidence for Elaine to feed off. We were going to sail, for the first time, the boat we'd spent a thousand or two hours building, and we'd chosen Rutland Water because as well as being tide less, it had an easy to use slipway next to an empty T-headed pontoon, in a sheltered creek with very few moored boats.

I knew, because I'd checked it out. We'd chosen the day because that morning it had been blowing a nice steady two to three.

But now I was faced with a choice of six slipways, all unfamiliar, and only two of them had pontoons close. These pontoons stuck straight out into scores of moored boats, both of them had boats already tied up either side, and we couldn't use the ends because the anti bird nets were in the way.

As we finished rigging the boat in the car park (it was now getting too late to find the place I'd expected), a black-clouded front darkened the skies and we could see windsurfers out on the water

skimming around at silly speeds between and over the white horses.

I kept up the bravado as we floated off the trailer and tied up between two boats, facing into the wind, which also meant facing the shore 30 yards away. We'd put a reef in (the first time either of us had practised) and set the staysail, but left the yankee jib in its bag. The wind was coming slightly across the jetty, cracking the clew of the staysail back and forth like a whip.

The only way out was to let the bow blow off, springing the stern in, then let go, start sailing, aiming at a gap in the moorings, gybe round, thread through the other boats, then harden up onto a close reach to miss a shingle spit and head for the middle of the lake. This seemed an ambitious manoeuvre for the first few yards of handling the boat under sail, but I needn't have worried; it all went like clockwork.

As we blasted down, and out into clearer wind, I immediately realised we'd need a second reef to be able to make way back to windward, and the leeward end of the lake ended in a big concrete

wall, which we didn't want to get on closer terms with.

I can't say we got the reef all tidied up first time, but we managed OK, and clew and tack were never out of our control. It was as we luffed up for the third or fourth time to tie in the reef points that the bosun appeared next to us in his RIB to check we were coping. We were, but it was nice to see that he was watching.

With the much-reduced rig we tacked comfortably back up the lake (Elaine has a different definition of comfortable, I admit), the rigid hull shouldering the short sharp waves apart, occasional splashes coming over the fore and side decks, with my confidence in the boat mounting exponentially. She heeled progressively in the gusts and however far she heeled the helm remained neutral and light; I could luff or bear away at will and with "one finger" forces on the tiller.

Rutland Water is a great resource for anglers and sailors – an interestingly-shaped large body of water in the midst of very attractive countryside – but with our pontoon now looking like a very small target almost directly to windward



the other side of a few score of moored boats.

I reckoned that we could tack down through the moorings, then approach the end of the jetty on a close reach, luffing up to come-to on its leeward side. The first circuit found us in just about the right position, but with a jetty full of boats, and the bosun shouting over "Give us five minutes". We repeated our setting-off manoeuvre, and came round again a few minutes later, when we found ourselves too far to leeward, making a third circuit necessary. This time we came-to at a standstill, in a gap only a couple of feet longer than the boat and with the bowsprit overhanging the boat in front. It would have required either a fourth circuit or a daring leap if there hadn't been someone on the pontoon to take our lines, but there had been.

With lines fore and aft and the sails down, I could relax and reflect just how well she'd behaved. Through all those tacks and gybes she'd never got caught in stays, never taken the bit between her teeth and gone all nasty, never lost steerage and drifted down onto an

obstacle, never touched anything, until the gentlest possible kiss against the jetty at the end.

The bosun came down the pontoon to meet us "Nimble little thing, that" he said, which I took as the highest praise. The wind had been measured as force five, gusting six, and it promptly died away to a two or three as we got her settled back on the trailer and out of the water.

Odd, isn't it, that while I interpreted the trip as a valuable exercise that demonstrated how controllable the boat was in difficult circumstances, Elaine saw it as a dangerous expedition confirming her view that sailing is generally a sequence of unpleasant circumstances of unnecessary difficulty.

For our second trip, we found the nice T headed pontoon in the quiet sheltered creek. It's part of the Anglian Water public facility at Whitwell, on the north bank, whereas we'd previously gone to the Rutland Sailing Club on the south bank. My brother Craig joined Elaine & I on another blustery day, and we set off with two reefs and staysail.

We worked up to the west, windward,

end of the northern arm of the lake, and had just turned onto a run to sail back down, when history repeated itself and a rainy squall came down the lake. This was a BIG gust, and as we surfed along keeping pace with the 2 to 3 foot high waves that seemed to emerge instantaneously, I was perhaps the least sanguine person aboard. Craig was grinning widely – "Wow, she's really going now", Elaine was huddled against the cabin end, having her thoughts about sailing confirmed yet again, and I was steering, heart in mouth, just about keeping control, telling the others to keep below the boom in case we broached, and perhaps gybed involuntarily. If we'd had further to go, we could have rounded up, dropped the main and carried on under staysail alone, but as it was we reached the entrance to our little creek in a few minutes, and as we popped in, we gained the shelter from the land, the squall went past, and I breathed again.

The manager at the chandlers managed to go online and see the sailing club's anemometer, which had measured the gust at 32 mph, the bottom end of force seven.

We met up at Weymouth the next weekend with the only other Secret yet sailing in British waters (though there are another seven in build)- Simon's "Mystery", and an 18' lug yawl rigged Stornaway, "SeaJay" belonging to Colonel Chris.

For the whole weekend the weather gods were on our side. The sun shone, the sky stayed blue and the wind came steadily from the southwest, across the sea, but allowing Portland Bill to shelter us from the waves. On the first day it was blowing a steady force four, and we set full sail, including the yankee jib, for the first time.

The next day it was blowing harder, so we started the day with a double-reefed main. We had a professional sailor on board as a guest, and with his encouragement we shook one reef out and pushed her really hard.





Now some people have laughed when they've seen trapeze gear on a retro-style gaffer, and others have scoffed. To tell the truth, I've scowled at the laughers, and tried to explain to the scoffers. All the explanation necessary could be read on Craig's face as he settled his weight into the harness; it's fun. It didn't make a great deal of difference to how flat the boat sailed – the lead

in the keel and the flat bottom do most of that work, but when I've got Craig, or one of my children, on board, it will add another (optional) dimension to the crewing job.

We headed due south, the bowsprit piercing the steeper seas, and green water washing the foredeck clean, and occasionally sluicing up the front of the coachroof. We measured 5.7 knots close hauled, and there was no slamming or jarring, or even noticeable slowing, as we punched into the waves.

Downwind, just broad of a beam reach, we measured 7.0 knots, but if we'd been brave enough to shake out the other reef, and if we'd had the gennaker ready to set, we all felt we could have got her planing.

Our guest was more used to hi-tech racing boats – he'd just come off a Laser SB3 – and he got us to tension everything up to within an inch of its life, by sailing downwind and heaving in on the forestay tackle, but I felt that this left us with the mast raking forward rather too much, and the foresail sheet leads thus too far forward to tension the feet of the foresails, especially the staysail.

These little boats are clearly very sensitive to trim – both sail trim and

crew weight. At one point we almost literally sailed a ring around Mystery, and then suddenly she was doing the same speed as us – Simon said later that easing the jib a few inches just let her take off – the double slot of the cutter rig does require care to get it working efficiently.

I am learning every time I go sailing, and expect to continue to do so for some time. I have now lowered the gooseneck slightly, shortened the shrouds to rake the mast aft more, moved the foresail sheet leads and cleats, got the gennaker ready to set and added a footbrace to allow trapezing further aft, and I'm looking forward to sailing on the Orwell in a couple of weeks' time, to see how these developments work out, but I'm sure I'll come away from that outing with more ideas to improve her performance still further.

I never was a racing man, in my dinghy sailing days, but I must say I am attracted to the idea of racing this boat – there is so much to play about with, and it's only by racing that you can really see the effect of making those subtle adjustments and get it all working optimally.

Max Campbell at the helm

