

The semi-cruiser

With its different stern, alternative layout and hard-wearing, spray-paint finish, *Inkling* is unlike any narrowboat we've ever tested. **Mark Langley** was on board for its maiden voyage...



Galley has plenty of space and upper glazed stable doors let in a lot of light.

Length..... **69ft**
 Engine..... **Beta 50**
 Berths..... **2+4**
 Price..... **approx £165,000**

AQUA NARROWBOATS ARE BASED AT MERCIA MARINA on the eastern Trent & Mersey Canal, and have been running a highly respected, high-specification hire fleet for a number of years. At the same time, the company also produces a number of bespoke narrowboats for private customers, and the latest example is *Inkling*, a 69-footer based on a Colecraft shell.

This is the second boat Aqua have built for customers Melanie and Peter Coote. The first, *Eunoia*, was a 57ft narrowboat with a 2+2 berth arrangement. However, with the advent of retirement, and a desire to host their grandchildren aboard, the Cootes commissioned a larger boat.

On the Ashby Canal in October we were able to join *Inkling* on her maiden voyage, and, although forced to endure some pretty foul autumn weather, we were most interested in what we saw.

Shell and exterior

From the bow the shell is instantly recognisable as a Colecraft, with the curved lines having more of a cute look than the aggressive bows of many 'Josher' replicas. Interestingly, Aqua describes the stern as semi-cruiser, rather than semi-trad. Imagine a semi-trad stern but with an open balustrade replacing the upper part of the cabin side that normally encloses the cockpit, and with the aft pair of doors removed. The result is different and distinctive, giving an open feel to the cockpit, while providing decent locker storage (one of which is for gas) unlike cruiser sterns. It is also a good-sized space for the owners, their two large dogs and any additional crew to relax without getting in each other's way.

The forward cockpit is covered with a solid oak cratch and canopy, while two corner box lockers provide storage and seating. Artificial teak decking



The Colecraft bow is attractive, distinctive and less liable to catch in locks than some replica bows.



is to be added soon to give a warm, slip-resistant finish to the bow well. Glazing in the cratch panel and the canopy makes this a very light, useable space, ideal for allowing wet dogs to dry off.

Up in the bow, a hatch set into the vertical bulkhead gives access to storage without the owners having to reach around to the deck hatch forward of the cratch. Beneath this a bowthruster is fitted, which is backed by a watertight bulkhead; so if the worse happens and the tube fails, the boat cannot sink.

On the roof, three pigeon boxes give additional ventilation and are finished with chrome portholes to match the other external fittings. The roof has a light paint finish, which will help keep the boat cool in summer, though sunlight reflecting from the surface might hamper the steerer at times.

On arrival for fitting out at Mercia, Colecraft shells are primed with a holding coat (not just a single coat of primer). Towards the end of fit-out, the boats are grit-blasted back to bare metal, removing any mill scale. They are then spray-painted with two-part epoxy paint. While spray-painting has a poor reputation, this is mainly due to cheaper, often imported craft being given just a couple of thin, single-pack paint layers. The advanced paint systems used by Aqua avoid solvent entrapment and micro-blistering that can affect some brush-finished single-pack paints and give it an incredibly tough finish. The same paintwork is used on the company's hire fleet and, despite a high average booking rate, the boats look superb even after a few years' hard cruising.

ABOVE LEFT: The semi-cruiser stern is an adaptation of a semi-trad, giving more effective cockpit space, ideal for dogs, while retaining storage.

ABOVE: The boat tracks straight and true, even in very windy conditions.

BELOW: The light painted roof has ample chrome features, plus a pair of semi-flexible 130W solar panels.



Layout

Inkling has an unusual design that combines the best of both standard and 'reverse' layouts. The galley is aft, next to the steps up to the back deck, and is followed by a dinette. A centre double berth cabin then leads to a bathroom, forward of which is a large saloon. This gives flexible space, either cruising as a couple or with a hoard of family on board, and makes full use of the 69ft length.

Galley

Access from the aft deck is through a pair of stable doors, the upper parts of which are double glazed, like the rest of the boat. The deep steps contain storage for equipment, while to port is the electrical cupboard and engine panel. Opposite is a full-height drying locker for waterproofs and coats. The galley is in a linear form, which backs onto the dinette further forward. Light coloured granite work surfaces help give the galley a clean, spacious feel. To port, a linear four-burner hob makes good use of worktop space and allows larger pans to be used than many standard narrowboat cookers. Underneath the hob, a full-size Belling oven is fitted.

Starboard, the sink is a stainless steel underslung unit with the drainer grooves set in the granite. Most of the storage space in the galley is provided by drawers of varying size and shape. These give very easy access to the contents, and mean the owners don't have to crawl around on their knees to get items out of the back of the cupboard. The deep red cupboard doors, finished with brushed stainless handles, also hide the large Siemens 230V fridge and washer/dryer.

Two hatches in the floor give access to lockers – one is used to keep the white wine chilled, the other for fruit and veg. The floor is 'engineered' oak, which is very hard-wearing and can be sanded if needed. Aqua have sat the already substantial oak floor on top of a 25mm birch veneered ply subfloor, to give extra resilience. Out of sight, under the floor, the ballast is



Underfloor hatches give access to lockers...



...and store wine and veg near the cool baseplate.



The mirror on the forward bulkhead really does increase the apparent space of the galley and dinette.



Four burner linear hob makes good use of space and allows bigger pans.



Galley uses mainly drawers for ease of access to contents.



The curved cupboard in the centre cabin demonstrates superb joinery.



The large quadrant shower on the centreline in the sizeable walk-through bathroom.



Macerator loo is hidden by the door when open.



Fold-up dressing table allows passage even with bed pulled out.



Neat woodwork touches are on show throughout the boat.

engineering blue brick, rather than concrete slabs, as it both absorbs less moisture and, if it does become damp, does not produce a corrosive alkaline solution, unlike concrete.

Dinette

The first thing that catches your eye is the huge mirror on the forward bulkhead, which really does create the impression of extra space. The raised dinette comfortably seats four people, but if there are six aboard then an extension section slides out and, combined with a couple of loose tall stools, enables everyone to sit in comfort. The solid wooden legs used for the table help the section lower to form a double berth,

and avoid the more common tubular metal Desmo legs which are not liked by *Inkling's* owners. Space under the dinette gives access to lots of storage, while a shallow drawer uses that space under the raised dinette base. Two pairs of glazed side doors either side of the dinette provide even more light and ventilation.

The interior of the boat is fitted in a mixture of ash and oak finishes, with some very nifty joinery details. Painted panels on the ceiling and cabin sides enhance the light, airy interior. Aqua take pride in the quality and substance of their woodwork; however, the pragmatism of running a hire fleet shows through. Screws are accessible

to enable panels to be removed, so that wiring, plumbing and other services can easily be given attention. So many boats hide sections of pipework and cable away behind linings, never thinking how they may be replaced in years to come.

Central bedroom

The mirrored bulkhead that separates the mid cabin from the dinette/galley is slightly deeper fore and aft than normal. It completely hides a neat sliding door (with wooden framing and laminated opaque glass) – the mirror can be removed to enable the mechanism to be accessed easily. Once in the bedroom, a double berth is fitted lengthways,

IN DETAIL EQUIPMENT

SHELL

- ▶ 10/6/5/4mm shell
- ▶ Semi-cruiser stern
- ▶ Chrome portholes and fittings
- ▶ Stainless steel water tank
- ▶ 95kgf bowthruster

ENGINE

- ▶ Beta 50 engine
- ▶ PRM 150
- ▶ Hospital generator silencer

LINING

- ▶ Ash and oak interior
- ▶ Spray-foam insulation
- ▶ Engineered oak floor
- ▶ 25mm ply subfloor

FORWARD SALOON

- ▶ Sofa bed
- ▶ TV unit and shelves
- ▶ Morso Squirrel s/f stove
- ▶ LED illuminated cupboards

BATHROOM

- ▶ Jabsco macerator toilet
- ▶ 900mm quadrant shower
- ▶ Granite vanity unit

GALLEY

- ▶ Belling linear hob
- ▶ Belling oven
- ▶ Stainless sink
- ▶ Siemens fridge
- ▶ Compact washer/dryer
- ▶ Underfloor wine lockers

DINETTE

- ▶ Four converts to six seats
- ▶ Glazed side hatches
- ▶ Inlaid table
- ▶ Drawer under base

BEDROOM

- ▶ Extending double berth
- ▶ Large wardrobes
- ▶ Dressing table

ELECTRICAL SYSTEM

- ▶ Four 110Ah domestic
- ▶ Victron 3000/120 combi
- ▶ Victron energy monitor
- ▶ LED lighting
- ▶ 230V ring main

HEATING AND HOT WATER

- ▶ Webasto diesel heating
- ▶ Designer stainless steel rads
- ▶ 55-litre twin coil calorifier
- ▶ 1kW 230V immersion heater

unusually, with space at both the foot and head of the bed. The bed pulls out slightly, to give a wider double, but enables sufficient space to walk around, giving anyone sleeping on the dinette easy enough access to the bathroom when the centre berth is made up. Some storage drawers are fitted under the berth, though most of the space is taken up by the waste tank.

Two large wardrobes are fitted, one being 4ft in length, while overhead cupboards are curved to match the portholes. The wood blocks used to fabricate the curve of the cupboards is superb and another example of the boat's outstanding level of craftsmanship. As with the rest of the boat, LED lights are fitted throughout with down lighters, reading lamps and warm LED strip lights under the gunwales, which highlight features and give low-level ambient lighting. Main lighting is controlled by wall switches which operate sensible groups of lamps, while the strip lamps can be controlled by a remote control.

A neat folding dressing table lifts up from under the starboard gunwale – and it is still possible to squeeze past with this up and the bed pulled out. Plenty of 230V sockets are positioned throughout the boat and the fittings match the stainless steel designer radiators, which run from the Webasto central heating.

Bathroom

A spacious walk-through bathroom sensibly divides the main bedroom from the forward saloon. A large quadrant shower is on the centreline; behind is shelving against the cabin side, although this is quite deep so it may be hard to reach items that fall to the back. The macerator loo pumps to a stainless steel holding tank under the centre berth.

A raised ceramic wash basin sits on a granite work surface which matches the galley finish. The surface extends over a shallow cupboard under the gunwale, while both extractor fan and opening pigeon box help control moisture. Unusually, a fire extinguisher is mounted on



Solid fuel stove properly installed, with two chimneys, for cruising and mooring.

the hull side by the loo – a very sensible place to put one, given the proximity to both cabins.

Forward saloon

Ahead of the bathroom bulkhead, a Morso Squirrel stove sits in a very large hearth. The stove has been fitted to fully comply with the Code of Practice for installation of solid fuel stoves on boats. This means there are decent air gaps between the stove and the properly insulated hearth surrounds. A double-wall flue is installed, cranked to avoid the cabin side, and the boat carries a short (cruising) and long (moored) double-wall chimney. The hearth is edged in oak, while a small bookcase sits just by the door to the bathroom.

A large, free-standing settee is opposite a small TV unit to port. Cupboards under the port gunwale are glazed and LED lit, as are the high-level units either side of the doors up to the bow. Lower cupboards store more items and have additional shelving space for the cabin. Wall lights here are matched to neat joinery details, such as the elaborate decorative joints between pelmet sections. Deep drop-back vent windows and another pigeon box make the space very relaxing, coupled with virtually no engine noise or



Smart and efficient stainless steel radiators shift all the output of the Webasto heater.



Deeper than usual mirrored bulkhead has sliding doors contained within it.



The saloon is a spacious place to relax and provides another sleeping cabin.



LED-lit cupboards add to the atmosphere of the forward saloon.



Clean and neat engine installation.



Sturdily installed batteries plus inline large-current fuses.

vibration while underway. In fact, it's an ideal place for a mid-cruise snooze. Certainly the owners' two dogs were quite content to sleep here during our visit, ignoring the howling gale outside.

Engine and services

Under the aft deck a Beta 50hp engine is installed, with PRM hydraulic gearbox. The prop shaft runs through a conventional stern gland, via a Centaflex alternator coupling. The large domestic alternator feeds a large battery bank, which provides 230V pure sine wave power via a Victron Combi 3000W inverter/120A charger. Unusually, the engine control panel is to port inside the cabin, so most steerers will not be able to see it, thus relying on the alarm buzzer to warn of any issues. It is a little unusual for private boats to only have an instrument panel with just a rev counter – the addition of oil pressure and temperature gauges can help monitor engines, especially on rivers or when they get older, helping to offset problems. Alarms only sound when things have really gone wrong.

The engine fuel supply is very well fitted in copper, with a proper water-fuel separator inline, before the engine's secondary filter. The keel cooling

tank is a decent size, so should allow for cool running on tidal rivers, while the aft part of the engine bilge is sectioned off. This means that water dripping in from the stern gland (essential on conventional stern tube glands to prevent overheating) does not end up sloshing around the whole engine and can be dealt with by the bilge pump, leaving a minimal amount of water in the boat. The large engine silencer helps reduce to a whisper the booming sound that larger diesel engines can produce.

The pair of 130W flexible solar panels on the cabin roof charge the battery bank via a MPPT (maximum power point tracking) regulator to ensure that they give a decent amount of power even under shadow. This should mean that in summer around 60Ah of capacity can be returned to the battery bank as a minimum, with around 20Ah per day in winter, which will keep the system topped up when the boat is not cruising, or is tied up for a few days. A Victron battery monitor system enables the owners to have a good overview of the system as it provides far more information than a simple voltmeter-ammeter combination.

Underway

We joined *Inkling* on one of



Underway on the Ashby Canal.

the windiest days of the year, with intermittent heavy rain showers. The Ashby Canal is not the deepest and many boats would have struggled to keep a true course. Even at tickover,

Inkling held a straight line and up to cruising speed, drew very little wash. The helm has great visibility, while the engine is exceptionally quiet, despite the lack of sound insulation.

Verdict

Aqua Narrowboats have produced a craft that fully meets its owners' requirements: a sturdy boat for extended cruising, both as a couple and with their family. The unusual layout works well, the fit-out is first rate and the pragmatic touch of experienced hire operators shows through. It also looks good from the outside, has a fantastic interior, handles well and is built to last.

It's a testament to the company's craftsmanship that the owners returned for their second boat. Such trust seems to be well-founded, however, as *Inkling* is an excellent and highly original craft.

Aqua Narrowboats

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