

BOAT REPORT

HARDY SEAWINGS 254

No sooner seen than tested. Filling a gap in the Hardy Marine line-up, this lively Andrew Wolstenholme-designed 25-footer made its debut at the Southampton Boat Show.

TO DATE, upwards of 3000 boats bear the Hardy hallmark of blue hull and coir rope fendering. Whilst the outboard-powered Pilot and Navigator and the four-berth 25 have erred towards family boating and away from the full Fishing range, it is only over the past year or two that these Norfolk builders have met the established cruiser manufacturers head-on.

The first of their new Seawings outright leisure-orientated craft, a semi-enclosed-wheelhouse 23-footer from the drawing board of Colin Mudie, rather fell between two stools, retaining the blue hull and rope fendering of the traditional line-up but with a much upgraded interior. Although still available, this boat has been all but superseded by the all-new Andrew Wolstenholme-designed 254, a semi-enclosed sports-cruiser.

The 254 fills the gap between the readily-trailable Seawings 194, now available with a more open pilothouse than previously, and the normally

twin-engined midship-cabined 285 launched at the last Earls Court Boat Show. In both this latter design and that of the 254, the shape is very true to the 1990s, with soft, rounded corners and a wedge-shaped transom to incorporate a generous depth of bathing platform over the outdrive leg.

On boats of this size which incorporate a wheelhouse, it is all too easy for the superstructure to dictate proportion, and for the lines to become stilted. However, all looks well with the 254. The quite significant height of topside and the extra measure of coaming keep the upper structure to a minimum, while moulded style lines and the subtle use of a coloured matched rubbing strake help to elongate the appearance of the hull again.

Underwater sections are medium-to-deep-vee, 22° at the transom and a sharp 26° amidships, with two sets of sprayrails, the inner ones fading well before the transom.

Exterior

With the canvas sunroof detached and the rear cockpit canopy stowed in its recess behind the seat-back of the U-settee, the 254 might as well be an open-cockpit boat, except for the considerable protection offered by the full side windows.

A table infill makes this dinette area into a good-sized sunbed or occasional double berth. The seat mouldings are of a good depth, and just right for some serious lounging, while a nice detail here is the flip-over section of cushioning adjacent to the wheelhouse structure. This means not only that those boarding have the security of the stout stainless steel grabrails set between coaming and roof moulding, but also that they don't have to stand on the upholstery.

The helm seat backrest swings over to face aft once you are moored, and its base can either be used as general storage or fitted with a chest-type fridge box. Beneath the dinette moulding we expected to find plenty of stowage space, supplementing the single covered cave locker set into the wheelhouse coaming which the presence of the battery switches dictates to be a dry-storage area only. However, apart from a vented gas bottle moulding, the seat base was devoid of lockers.

Indeed, whilst fenders were catered for by racks on the transom, there seemed a distinct lack of storage otherwise, especially if the fridge was fitted. A moulded step in the transom could be used to better effect if it were to double as a rope locker, for instance. The boat we tested was a pre-production model, however, and Hardy are looking into these matters.

Moving up to the foredeck, we immediately appreciated the inboard camber of the 6in-wide side-decks, and the good standard of non-slip moulded in here and over the entire coachroof. Even with the sunroof infill in place, thereby

removing a measure of readily-grabbed coachroof edge, the stainless steel grabrails to the front and rear of the wheelhouse top were sufficient to allow a safe passage forward.

Deck hardware included a manual vertical windlass set over a good-sized chain locker, and 8in bar cleats fore and aft. Further cleats are positioned amidships, and we were pleased to find the pulpit running far enough aft to offer protection when tending these.

Back in the wheelshelter, the helm is set to starboard and offers good visibility whether you are standing or sitting. In the former case, anyone over 6ft tall or thereabouts will have their head and shoulders through the sunroof aperture, although the wheel and throttle are all still within comfortable grasp.

The usual Volvo engine instruments are incorporated into a cleanly designed one-piece fascia (to be walnut-veneered on production boats) which also includes banks of breakers and ready-use switches. In front is a perspex-covered chart area with adjacent provision for a VHF set. Some further console space at wheel level can be used to inset a log and sounder, while a navigator would probably be best bracket-mounted nearer the screen, glare permitting. A suitable location for a compass must be a further consideration.

Interior

Access is via a wide sliding perspex door which, once locked open, thoughtfully allows the full-length vertical handle to be used as an effective handhold for the co-pilot or for those passing to and from the cabin.

The latter has a conventional layout, with a good-sized vee-dinette-cum-double berth forward, shower and toilet compartment to starboard, and the galley adjacent to the access.

The galley's location affords full standing

Below left: more sportsboat than fully-fledged cruiser, the 254 is put through its paces. Below: the fully moulded toilet compartment (top) and comfortably appointed main cabin (below). Below right: with the full canopy folded and canvas soft-top removed, the wheelhouse is almost totally open to the elements. Here the helm seat bolster has been hinged over to face the good-sized sunbed/settee.



headroom for the cook and allows fry-up smells to waft quickly away. Stowage within the galley moulding is adequate, with three small draws, a cupboard under the twin-burner hob/grill and crockery stowage outboard of the stainless steel sink.

There is plenty of sitting headroom around the dinette, with stowage beneath the seat-bases and to the sides towards the bow (in large elasticated holdalls) in lieu of a full run of backrest cushions. This configuration works reasonably well. The widening seat-bases often found to the head of a vee are often impractical to use when trying to sit at the table; in this case, there is plenty of room for a couple to sit each side and eat, with the fore-part left less cramped with cushions.

The toilet compartment is based on an easy-clean moulding. Although on the small side, it is adequate, with plenty of stowage, access to the seacocks and an opening port for ventilation.

The whole of the interior has a comfortable air, with a measure of well-executed teak joinery, padded side and head linings and inset spotlights.



Engine

Two engine options are offered, both of them Volvos. The boat we looked at had the more potent petrol installation, a 205hp V6 with Duoprop, while a 130hp diesel outdrive is the alternative.

Access to the engine compartment is through a sizable hinged section of the cockpit seating, which is then supported on a gas strut. To say the size of the compartment is adequate would be something of an understatement; whilst we would be the first to advocate ready access to the engine and powertrain on any boat, overindulgence in this quarter can introduce shortcomings in other areas — principally, in this case, cockpit stowage. And although the areas outboard of the engine have been fashioned into storage bins, as well as providing space for the calorifer and pump, they are not readily to hand without disrupting the cockpit.

The installation itself appears well-found, with a fuel/water separator to supplement Volvo's own pre-engine filter and a fuel cut-off led back to the helm. Wiring and piping runs were well disposed, and clear of obstructions and hot-spots. An automatic bilge pump is located towards the rear of the compartment, and a Halon extinguisher is also fitted.

The stainless steel water and fuel tanks are set under the forward part of the cockpit sole, and are accessible through a removable screw-down

portion of decking. A no-nonsense vented battery box is glassed into the fore part of this compartment. Insulation is provided only as an optional extra.

Handling and performance

The Southampton Boat Show provided us with the opportunity to put the 254 through its paces, with the demonstration areas beset with the washes and wakes of all manner and size of craft to give some particularly unpleasant seas.

Unravelling these took some doing, but the Seawings gave a sound if lively account of itself, cutting through oncoming wakes cleanly and pushing over following ones in a responsive manner. Catching some of the larger wave-forms beam-on, it proved to be a might tender, but then this was much to be expected given their speed. Given its fair bulk of topside and superstructure there was the usual tendency for the boat to lean to windward, but a measure of corrective tab readily rectified matters.

The Duoprop allowed hard turns to be achieved when trimmed out for normal running, without loss of power or grip. In fact, it would be advisable to warn the crew before really going to town, as these proved to be sharp with a high measure of heel, in rather more of a sportsboat fashion than the cruiser ambience might suggest.

In the fairly lumpy conditions with two crew and half tanks, we achieved nigh on 30 knots at full throttle. Some juggling with propeller sizes may give a knot or two more, although we thought the boat's speed adequate given the power on tap. Dropping back from this 4700rpm to 4000rpm gave a comfortable 24-knot cruising speed, with consumption around the 9gph (41lph) mark, which is not bad. The generous 69gal tank allows a full weekend's cruising without having to worry overtly about the creditable range. Cutting right back to 3000rpm and trimming the drive back in, we could keep the 254 on the plane at a rougher-water get-you-home 14 knots.

Up to 4000rpm, sound levels stayed at a reasonable 83dB (A) in the cockpit, 76dB(A) down below. Pushing over this mark, the levels became intrusive, 89dB(A) at full throttle. The effects of the lack of insulation on our test boat were possibly aggravated by the large void of the engine compartment acting something like a drum, allowing noise levels to creep-up unnecessarily.

Our only other niggle was the lack of any side bolster to the helm bench. Turns to port found the skipper's mate sliding out of his seat.

Conclusions

It was good to find a new cruiser in the 25ft bracket at Southampton, especially one coming from such a well found yard. Underway or tied-up, the 254 looks good, its light-grey gelcoat standing out from the crowd, and it certainly proved lively in the mixed conditions we ran it in.

Obviously, our main gripe concerns the lack of storage around the cockpit, but we liked the fit-out and general standard of build. And, for our fickle weather, this semi-enclosed sports-cruiser is a versatile craft whatever your choice of cruising grounds — river, estuary or coastal. □

Hardy Seawings 254

Loa 25ft 4in (7.69m).

Hull length 23ft 2in (7.05m).

Beam 8ft 2in (2.48m).

Draft 3ft 0in (0.92m) with drive down.

Weight 1.95 tonnes dry.

Fuel 69gal (313lt).

Water 15gal (113lt).

Price £27,955 ex VAT as tested with 205hp petrol Volvo with Duoprop.

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