

BOAT REPORT

Earls Court '88 marked the appearance of Birchwood's first outdrive equipped boat for some years — the SD34 sports cruiser. A flybridge version was launched 12 months later, the subject of this month's boat report.

TWENTY five years have passed since Ted Andrews designed the first Birchwood, a 19 footer, and built it in his garage. Since then, his operation — still a family concern — has grown to 100,000 ft² of factory space, in which some of Europe's latest designs are produced.

With that in mind, we are always interested when a new boat comes out of the Birchwood stable, even more so when it fits into the popular 30-35 ft size range. The TS 34 is a case in point, and we were pleased when the opportunity came to take it out on the Solent for a day in April.

Design

Birchwood have successfully blended the original hull lines of the larger open cockpit, Med-style SD 34 — first introduced in 1988 — with a low-profile, finely-raked superstructure to produce one of leanest, sleekest looking flybridge, family cruisers we have seen in a good while. Andrews has kept the familiar scalloped Birchwood topsides with their pronounced concave profile, while hardening the angle, and also flattening the underwater planing sections through a wide flat chine into a medium-to-deep vee. The variable deadrise is 20° amidships, running off to 16° at the transom. In a major break with the rest of the

BIRCHWOOD TS34



SILVER JUBILEE



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Above: the helm position has a wide bench seat with stowage for charts under. Other welcome features include a large grabrail by the companionway, and an area for chartwork immediately by the helm. Left: the master cabin forward. Above right: the saloon. Good design and a sensible choice of colours enhance the spacious feel. Right: the galley, which received a commendation in last month's Family Fours feature. Far right: the guest cabin.



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family, the 34 hull does not have a keel. However, two pairs of sprayrails aid both lift and directional stability, with the inner pair stopping well before the transom to ensure a clear flow of water to the outdrives.

Exterior

Our initial inspection of the hull showed that great care had been taken in the moulding and finishing. No pin holes or scuff marks could be seen, nor were any scratches visible. That in itself was pleasing, as this was the boat which had been exhibited at the last Earls Court show some three months earlier. No evidence was found of the extra handling and transportation that this had entailed, or indeed of any wear and tear from three months use at Birchwood Boats Solent.

The TS34 would look in keeping either in a Mediterranean marina or on the Upper Thames. Stainless steel deckrails have been carefully blended into the lines of the boat, to enhance the form of the hull and superstructure, running from a height of 25in (0.64m) at the bow down to approx 19in (0.5m) at somewhere near 2/3 of the deck length. A plastic-covered life-line halfway between the deck and the rail provides additional security. This is further enhanced by the deck moulding which features a very sensible toe rail around the whole of the gunwale, and a good non-slip surface.

Altogether one gains the impression that the deck is a safe working area. Two items in particular were found very pleasing. Heavy and solidly-mounted grabrails are provided on those parts of the superstructure where the side decks are not protected by rails. This is not only practical, but confidence inspiring. The second point was the opening in the deckrails at the pulpit. Nowadays, it is frequently necessary to moor bow to. When this happens, stepping ashore over high deck rails at the bow is almost impossible, especially for the shorter-legged members of the crew. Having the rails open at that end makes life a lot easier.

A manual anchor winch is provided as standard, although electrically-operated models are available as optional extras. Also standard are a 10 kg Bruce anchor complete with 2.5m of chain, and six 8in aluminium bollards.

The deck itself is uncluttered, making it ideal for sunbathing, and equally suitable as a working area when coming alongside, or casting off.

Stepping aft and down to the cockpit, one finds that this area is as safe as it is practical, yet at the same time aesthetically pleasing. With corner seating for four people it is open to the fresh air, yet well sheltered against any rain by the overhang from the flybridge. The very deep well-deck affords good protection against the wind and the elements when underway. However, a now almost mandatory

stern door in the transom allows ready access to the extremely well-moulded bathing platform, and to the fender baskets mounted against the transom. At the same time, the door makes for very comfortable boarding when moored stern-to.

Ample storage can be found under the seats, one of which serves as a gas bottle locker, and in two sizeable side lockers. These latter also contain the fuel and battery master switches, a fact that could be valuable in an emergency, as it allows external access if fuel cutoffs and electrics need to be shut down in the absence of the owner. To cope with that other emergency, a manual bilge pump is mounted at the stern, level with the cockpit sole. Once again, this is readily accessible, without having to climb down into the bilge.

From the cockpit, a stainless steel ladder leads to the flybridge. We found the ladder steep and with treads too far apart. However, we have since heard from the builders that the angle is already being changed, and we hope that they will also add the extra tread at the same time.

Once on the bridge, it was interesting to note that five people could easily be seated there—surprising on a 34ft boat. Duplicated instrumentation is confined to rev counters, trim indicators and engine switches, in addition to a steering compass. And, again showing the thought that has gone into this design, the GRP radar mast is hinged, so that it can be folded down when passing under bridges, an important feature for river users.

Accommodation

The saloon is entered through a large sliding door from the cockpit, and the first impression is one of space and airiness. This is so much so, that you momentarily think you are on a larger boat. The bright and modern colour scheme, the large windows and the well designed lay-out were cleverly combined to create that effect. The curtains are lined, the good quality fitted carpet edgebound, and eyeball type lights are flush fitted into the pvc



The port aft quarter settee, with locker under, and steps forward.

BIRCHWOOD TS34

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Engines: Twin Volvo TAMD41A diesels, 200hp at 3800rpm, 3600cc, 6 cyl.

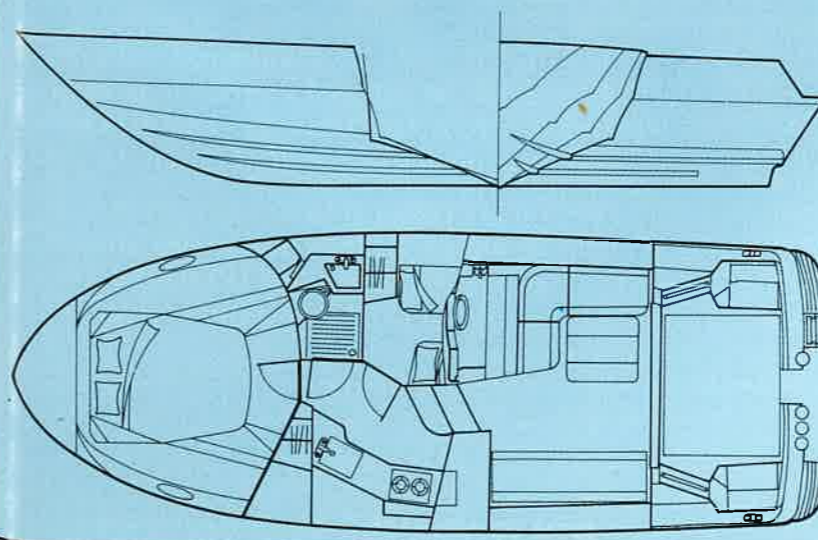
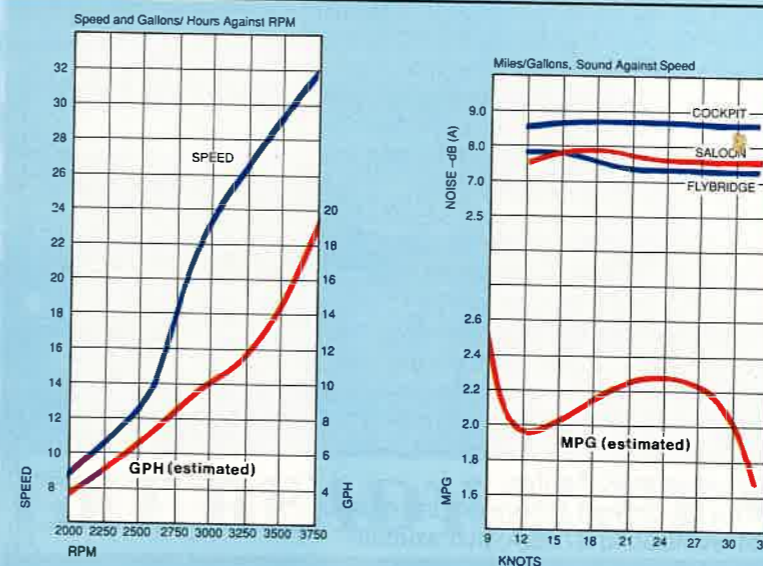
Conditions: Wind SW'ly 4, sea slight. **Load:** Fuel 25%, water nil, crew 3.

rpm	knots	gph	lph	mpg	range	Sound levels (dB(A))			
						saloon	fwd cab	cockpit	flybdg
2000	8.9	3.6	16.4	2.47	430	—	—	—	—
2250	10.1	4.9	22.3	2.06	358	—	—	—	—
2500	12.2	6.4	29.1	1.90	331	74	76	85	77
2750	18.0	8.3	37.7	2.17	377	77	75	86	76
3000	23.1	10.2	46.4	2.26	394	75	75	87	75
3250	26.2	11.3	51.4	2.32	403	75	75	87	75
3500	29.2	14.3	65.0	2.04	355	75	75	87	75
3750	31.9	19.2	87.3	1.66	289	75	76	87	74

LOA	34ft 0in (10.3m)	Displacement	5.4 tons
LWL	27ft 1in (8.25m)	Fuel	174gal (790lt)
Beam	12ft 2in (3.7m)	Water	57gal (269lt)
Draft	3ft 0in (0.9m)	Price ex VAT	£74,620

Builder:
Birchwood Boat International
Ltd, Common Road, Huthwaite,
Sutton-in-Ashfield,
Nottinghamshire.
Tel: 0623 515133

Distributor:
Birchwood Solent, Vespian
Road, Southampton,
Hants.
Tel: 0703 224252.



headlining. Full marks to the interior designer.

To port, a straight three to four seater settee faces the folding dining table which can be raised or lowered by a ratchet mechanism. Beyond that, but on a lower level, is the open plan galley, which again enhances the feeling of spaciousness. The settee can of course be used as a single bed.

On the starboard hand there is an aft facing three seater settee (four at a pinch), L-shaped so that the transverse leg of the L forms the rear of the raised helmsman's and navigator's bench. Ample storage is available under the seats and behind the backrest of the settee.

The steering console is raised above the saloon level, in order to provide really good visibility. It is well positioned and has a double helmsman's bench which, in turn, has chart stowage underneath. Equipped with full Volvo engine instrumentation, including power trim and trim tab indicators, it is also fitted with an Incastec speedlog and an Incastec echosounder. In addition, there is an indicator panel, showing the operation of the bilge pump, engine room fan and navigation lights. In front of the helmsman, a chart table is provided, and there is also space for chartwork ahead of the navigator. However, the chart space may have to be sacrificed if an owner wants to fit any of the many electronic nav aids considered so essential nowadays. For protection of the electrical supplies, a circuit breaker switch panel is fitted in front of the navigator's position.

A special mention must be given to the excellence of the windscreen. Here, visibility is better than on many boats. Furthermore, three, strong pantograph-type windscreen wipers are fitted as standard, each being provided with a freshwater screen washer jet. Added to that, there are three sunblinds on individual rollers. Altogether, a most satisfactory arrangement.

Less ready to understand was the fact that only one fuel contents gauge is supplied, even though two fuel tanks are fitted. We were informed that, as a balance pipe (with no gate valve) is fitted between the two, the same amount of fuel will always be in each of them, and hence only one gauge is needed. Whilst accepting that logic, we would have expected individual tanks servicing both engines, as with the present arrangement, contaminated fuel, or a ruptured balance pipe would totally disable the boat.

Moving down to the lower level forward, the galley is found to port. Again spacious and open overhead, it appears to belong to a larger boat. A two-speed extractor fan and opening portlight (complete with fly-screen) should ensure that cooking odours do not pervade through the boat. The galley has a three-burner gas hob, an Optimus oven, a single sink with chopping board infill, and a good size fridge complete with ice-box. The work surfaces are laminated, and there is plenty of storage

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space for all necessary utensils, as well as food stores. Noticeable was the fact that all shelves had fiddle rails, and that grabrails were fitted around all the work areas. Once more, safety consciousness was apparent by having a gas shut-off valve in the galley, where it is more accessible, in addition to the shut-off valve in the gas locker.

Opposite the galley, the guest cabin is located to starboard. Comfortable, with two single berths. It has standing headroom over the dressing area and sitting headroom over the beds. It is fitted with a wardrobe, has an opening portlight with flyscreen and will comfortably accommodate two adults.

Forward, but still on the starboard hand, is the toilet and shower compartment. Again fairly large for this size of boat, with good headroom, this is well ventilated and has an opening portlight with flyscreen. Although the boat under test was fitted with a sea toilet, a chemical toilet could be fitted in its place quite easily for inland waterways use. The shower curtain covers a comfortable space, and there is room for storage in the vanity unit.

The master cabin occupies the bow section of the boat, where it offers excellent accommodation. With full headroom on entering, which slopes down over the large double bed towards the bow, one does not feel claustrophobic. Here too, the choice of colour and cloth covering materials have been used to advantage in order to create a feeling of space and luxury. A hatch over the bed serves the dual purpose of providing either an escape route to deck, or allowing for ventilation. Two opening portlights also provide the latter. Wardrobe, drawers and an extra large drawer under the bed offer sufficient storage space for two persons on an extended cruise.

Engine room

The engine room is readily accessible through two hatches in the cockpit sole. It houses two Volvo AQAD41 six cylinder diesel engines, with an output of 200 hp each at 3800 rpm, driving Duoprop outdrives. Virtually all parts of the engines can be reached comfortably for servicing. The most important components, such as raw water filters, oil fillers and header tanks being uppermost, not even requiring entry into the engine room compartment. In addition to the propulsion plant, the calorifier is also fitted in the engine room. The compartment itself is soundproofed, protected by two automatic fire extinguishers, and is fitted with an electric bilge pump.

Just forward of the engine room, and under the saloon sole, are the two fuel tanks and the water tank. The first, made of mild steel, have a total capacity of 174 gal (790 lt), whereas the water tank, made of polyurethane/pvc, holds 57 gal (259 lt) of freshwater. Twin battery banks with a capacity of 380 Ah are also located there, and should suffice, even

for a less than cautious consumer.

It was reassuring to note that Birchwood have double-clipped all the piping and water inlets, a practice we have advocated for some time now in the interests of safety.

Handling and performance

Outdrives are always at their best when moving at speed. Yet, the TS34 performed even the slowest manoeuvres with ease. On casting off the tide was ebbing fast, and really slow, precise handling was necessary. The boat responded accurately and instantaneously to the helm.

Once out on the open water, regrettably there was not enough of a sea to test the handling characteristics of the craft in really rough conditions. Nevertheless, the wash of large vessels passing us while we were moving at speed allowed us to conclude that the test boat would acquit herself with credit in almost any weather. Even when we used the photoboot to create some very confused water, the TS 34 stayed stable.

The boat came quickly on the plane, with no hesitation at the hump speed. Lateral stability was also beyond criticism, while it was at all times easy to steer a straight compass course. Trim requirements were not critical either. The boat reached all her speeds, including the maximum without the driver having to take too much time with power trim or trim tabs.

Back in the marina, well set-up engine controls and steering allowed us to come alongside with complete confidence, even with a new £300,000 TS 54 as a fender.

Top speed was a shade under 32 knots, with 3750 rpm indicated, 1.66 mpg consumption, giving a range of 289 miles. Cruising at a comfortable 3250 rpm, the TS 34 gave a creditable 2.32 mpg at 26.2 knots, equating to a range just over 400 miles.

Except for the cockpit, where engine noise put sound levels up to 87dB(A) at maximum speed, noise throughout the boat was good, particularly in the saloon, where the aft mounted engines produced a commendably low 75dB(A) maximum.

Conclusions

The TS34 is a family cruiser with all the space and comfort that this requires. Yet, Birchwood's latest is no sluggard, offering endless hours of high speed fun when this is wanted. Its range and performance make the TS34, capable of serious offshore cruising, but it would be equally at home on the river with its slow speed handling making it an ideal boat, particularly where locks are concerned. The immaculate finish and up-to-date styling all combine to give a craft which, competitively priced, must be a welcome addition to the growing list of mid-range flybridge cruisers. ■