

# BOAT REPORT

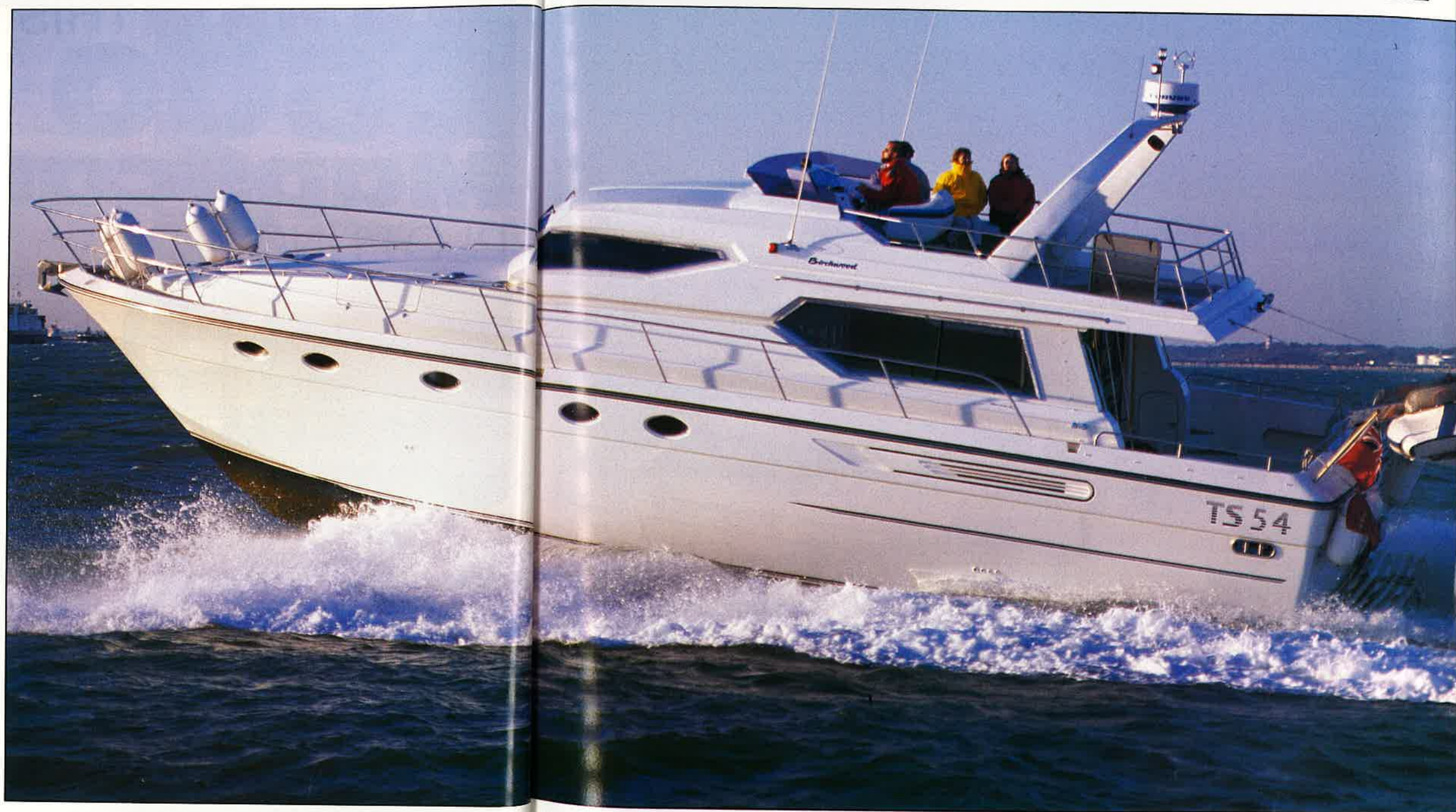
Birchwood's new flagship, 11 ft longer than the TS44 which previously topped the range, is their biggest ever model to date. And this move is impressive — the TS54 can more than hold its own in today's European super league.

JUDGING by the large number of people who at all times crowded on and around the Birchwood TS54 at this year's Southampton Boat Show, this was one of the stars of the event. The boat's mix of stylish good looks, quality finish, and voluminous interior marked it out as something special, and a major step forward for the Nottinghamshire company. At the same time the new model underlined the strength of the big boat market, and the growing trend for companies to move their ranges ever farther up the scale.

Our test shortly after the show proved that there was every justification for this view. The smart external looks were matched by an interior layout that was both novel and spacious. The fittings, furnishings and joinery were in the main excellent, and the standard engine option gave a respectable turn of speed. The boat appears to have more interior volume than many of its rivals, yet at a highly competitive price, and these two facts have already ensured a full order book. The vessel we tested was number two off the line, fitted with 530hp Detroit Diesels and destined for the Med, but number five is scheduled to have the first pair of 1000hp MAN V12s installed in this country, and should be a real flyer.

## Design

The TS54 comes from the board of managing director Ted Andrews, and the Birchwood design team. Underwater it has a shallow to medium vee hull, with a deadrise of 10.5° at the transom. The chine is rounded, with a narrow spray-deflecting knuckle. A pronounced keel protects the stern gear, and gives directional stability. Above the waterline, the 54 shows a marked advance on the smaller models in the range. Gone is the familiar bluff bow, and the 'scalloped' topsides, to be replaced by a styling that is definitely moving towards the Italian. The window shapes and superstructure profile are attractive and



# HIGH FLYER



# BIRCHWOOD TS54



# BOAT REPORT

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# BOAT REPORT

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modern, making this a striking boat when seen alongside in the marina. The anchor drawn up into a hawse-pipe — practical but not pretty — has been superseded by a more conventional stem head mounting, while the oval portholes and stainless steel fairleads break up what would otherwise be a very tall side aspect.

## Accommodation

A brief look at the layout shows accommodation for seven people. Two in a double-bedded master cabin forward, two in single berths in the starboard guest cabin, and two more in bunk-type berths in the cabin to port — each cabin with its own en-suite bathroom. A compartment in the forepeak, entered through a deck hatch has a single folding bunk for a crew member, plus its own WC and washing facilities. The galley is down below, on the same level as the sleeping spaces, while steps up lead to a huge split level saloon, with a circular dining table forward, and an entertaining area aft.

This bland statement is readily made. Less easy to convey is the spaciousness, comfort and quality finish of the Birchwood.

Full headroom is a term frequently used by



**Above left: piece de resistance — the split-level saloon, which can accommodate a multitude of guests with ease. Left: the interior helm, with enough space to install extras such as the radar and Loran fitted to the test boat. Above: the master cabin, located forward. Generous headroom, and a mirrored bulkhead add to the open feeling of an already spacious area.**

boatbuilders (and boating magazines). Usually it means just a bit taller than the writer, or if you are lucky, a bare six foot. In the TS54 you have all of this and more to spare, avoiding any feeling of claustrophobia in the cabins, and turning the saloon into a cathedral of an entertaining space. Resisting the temptation to shoe-horn in berths has meant that none of the cabins are cramped, while their bathrooms are true walk in spaces; that in the master cabin having its own separate shower cubicle.

All the WCs are electric, for that extra touch of convenience, though the units fitted were noisy in operation, and would benefit from being replaced with the quieter and more efficient vacuum models available.

Storage space is good, with attention being paid to the fact that the ladies are likely to have evening dresses, needing full-length wardrobes.

The joinery is excellent, of a quality to match any UK production boat, and ahead of much of the European competition. Furnishings are equally good, of course being available to the owner's choice, and in fact down below the only disappointment was some of the light fittings which looked ordinary by comparison.

The galley continues the theme of light and

space. Even though it is below, there is no feeling of restriction here. More than sufficient stowage, for both long cruises and extended stays in harbour, and every convenience that you would expect to find ashore. A full-size fridge/freezer, a choice between electric oven or microwave, a washing machine and dishwasher all come standard, powered from shore supply or 10kW generator.

The saloon is the piece de resistance of the boat. It is of course the first space you enter when stepping aboard, and the sheer size is remarkable on a vessel of this length. At times during the boat show there were four or five groups of visitors dotted around its acres, none of them getting in each other's way, while during our test, seven people were lost from each other. Of split-level design, it is large enough for the biggest Mediterranean shore-side party, or alternatively the whole family, grandchildren included could spread out here without feeling cramped. Dressed throughout in a superbly-finished warm teak, upholstered in Connally leather, the saloon exudes an opulence rarely seen on production craft, yet is still a welcoming and friendly space.

On the lower level you have a U-shaped settee, coffee table and sideboard, with



## BOAT REPORT



lockers for storage and location of the optional TV, video and stereo systems. Also down here is a corner bar, complete with ice-maker, cocktail cabinet and stools, but the layout of this area is entirely optional, to the owner's individual choice.

The upper level has a circular dining table to port, with room to seat seven people. Up here you have a clear view out through the windows, making this a popular place whether in harbour or out at sea. At the same time you are close enough to the helmsman opposite to avoid the feeling of isolation and remoteness that can often occur on large craft. The helm position itself is well-equipped and comfortable. An Autohelm 6000 pilot with flybridge repeater, and a VHF are standard. The visibility forward appeared initially to be restricted, but underway this turned out not to be a problem. The instrument panel forward is well laid out, and includes space for an optional radar, and Loran or Decca. There is no chart area, and while the dining table opposite is large enough to perform this function for passage planning

the night before, it would still be good to have space close to the helm for a folded chart and quick reference notes while underway.

## Exterior

The immediate problem that faces you with the TS54 is how to get aboard. The topsides are over 6ft high, and there is no assistance in the form of either recesses, handholds or footholds. A boarding ladder is supplied which clips to the gunwale, but someone has to be aboard first to deploy this, and it is anyway a less than perfect arrangement. Entry via the bathing platform is a possibility, but the fender racks make this precarious. Mediterranean stern-to mooring is no problem, with an electrically-operated passerelle that stows neatly in a concealed transom compartment.

Once aboard you step into the well-sheltered cockpit. The flying bridge extends aft over this to keep the rain off, while all-round canvas awnings make this a snug area on the windiest of days. The cockpit gives the first indication of

**Top left: the bar area comes complete with a sink, and U-Line ice-maker. Airconditioning is optional. Top: a seating area opposite the helm is always a good idea, allowing those who use it to watch the action, and keep the skipper company. Above: each cabin has a genuine walk-in toilet, with full headroom. Left: mirrors again, this time in the twin-bedded guest cabin.**

## BIRCHWOOD TS54

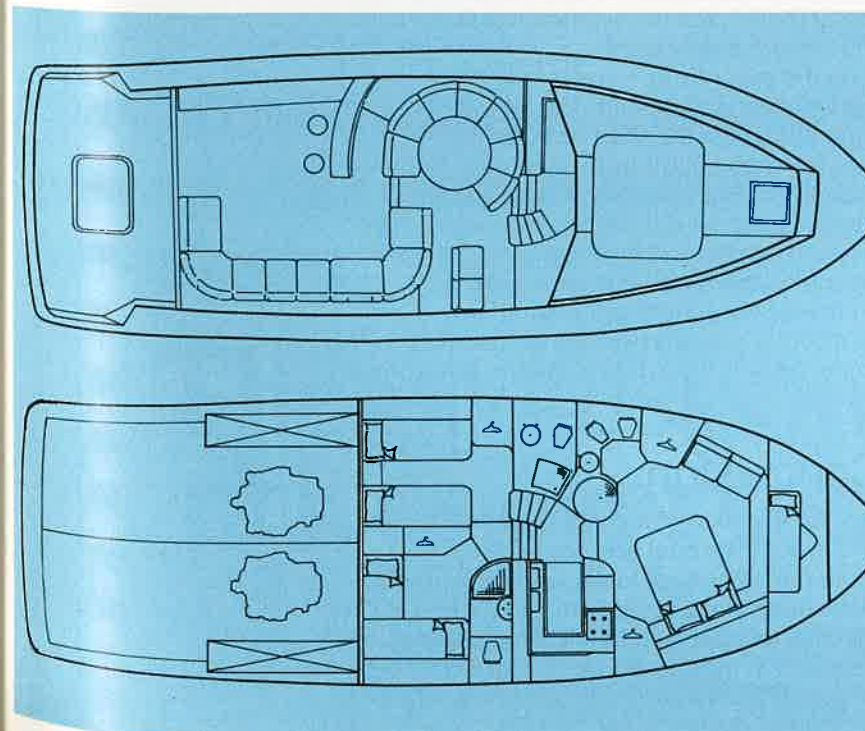
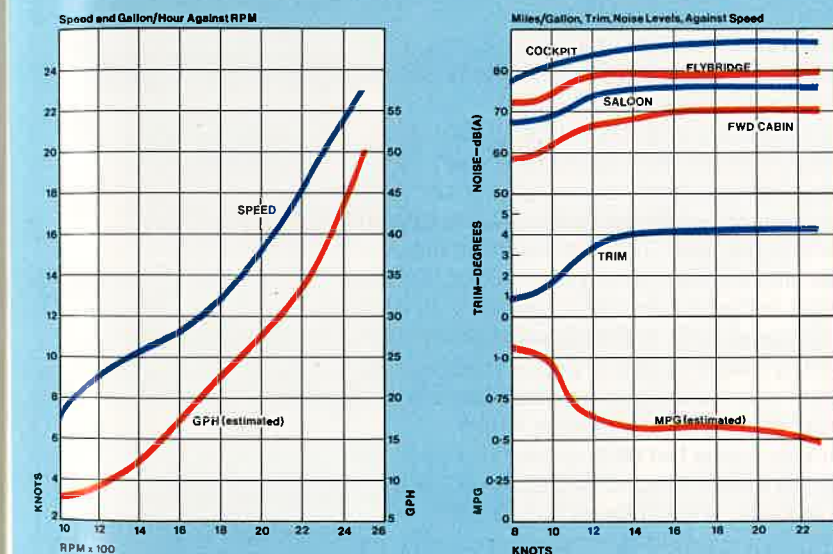
### Birchwood TS54

Engines: Twin Detroit Diesels 6V-92TA diesels, 530hp at 2300rpm, 9005cc, V6 cyl.

Conditions: Wind Force 3, sea calm.

Load: fuel 25%, water 50%, crew 4.

rpm	knots	gph	lph	mpg	range	trim	Sound levels			
							Saloon	Fwd cab	Ckpt	Flybdg
1000	7.4	7.5	34.1	1.01	757	1.0	68	57	78	71
1200	9.2	9.2	38.2	1.00	750	1.25	69	59	80	72
1400	10.4	11.5	52.3	0.90	675	2.0	70	62	82	75
1600	11.2	17.0	77.3	0.66	495	3.0	73	65	84	77
1800	12.8	22.3	101.4	0.57	428	4.0	75	66	85	78
2000	15.0	27.3	124.1	0.55	412	4.25	76	69	87	78
2200	18.1	32.6	148.2	0.56	420	4.5	76	70	87	78
2400	21.9	43.2	196.4	0.51	383	4.5	77	70	88	79
2500	23.2	50.0	227.1	0.46	345	4.5	77	70	88	79



LOA	57ft 0in (17.4m)
Hull length	54ft 0in (16.5m)
Beam	17ft 9in (5.4m)
Draught	4ft 2in (1.3m)
Displacement	23 tons
Fuel	2x350gal (3180l)
Water	200gal (910l)
Price (as tested)	£317,460 ex VAT
(Standard)	£292,000 ex VAT

#### Builder:

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

#### Supplier:

Birchwood Boats Solent Ltd,  
Vespasian Road,  
Southampton, Hants.  
Tel: 0703 224252

the standard of finish to follow, with its laid-teak decking — a practical luxury touch that extends to the rest of the decks.

Movement forward along the side-decks is assisted by strategically-placed handrails on the wheelhouse side. However we were concerned that the guardrails stop too short of the cockpit. When you walk back down the boat, just at the critical point as you are about to step into the cockpit, you are left without protection to stop you slipping overboard. Extending the rails, with a gate in them would be preferable.

An excellent feature were stowage lockers let into the forward coachroof port and starboard. Big enough for a fender and warps, these are just where you need them. On a 50ft boat it is a long walk from end to end, and at the crucial moment when you are mooring it is vital to be able to grab a spare line or fender. This is an idea we think we will see followed on other boats in the future.

The rest of the mooring arrangements include a substantial electric anchor winch, six good-sized bollards, and closed roller fairleads let into the bulwarks aft. Another good feature was the electric warping winch set in the middle of the aft end of the cockpit. On a boat of this size, the windage can be considerable, making it virtually impossible to pull the craft into the pontoon on a stormy day, and the facility of mechanical assistance, fitted as standard, is a welcome one. Another good idea in this area, and one that we have commented favourably on with previous Birchwoods is the liferaft stowage. This consists of a locker let into the transom, with a door controlled by a remote mechanism in the cockpit. Pulling the lever deploys the liferaft,



# BOAT REPORT

◀ which still remains attached to the boat. Few manufacturers give any consideration to stowage of this vital piece of safety equipment, essential on a serious offshore cruising boat.

The cockpit gives access to the flying bridge, up a ladder, and through a hatchway. As is often the case, the edge of this hatch provides a sharp corner for head or back, and this is going to be addressed on future boats. The flying bridge itself is a spacious area, with seats for all the crew, and room for sunbathing. The aft end could possibly provide stowage space for a small tender. Security is provided by substantial guardrails and well-sited handholds.

## Engines

A variety of engine options are available on the 54. Smallest and cheapest are a pair of Caterpillars totalling 750hp. The next and currently most popular choice are two GM Detroit Diesels. These 6V92TAs together produce 1070hp, while top of the range are a pair of MANs, either 1640hp total, or 2000hp depending on model.

Our test boat was fitted with the Detroit Diesels. These are mounted under the saloon in an engineroom that fully justifies the term. Access is via the lazarette, through a hatch in the cockpit sole and a watertight bulkhead door. Once in the engineroom there is ample space to move around and get to all parts of the motors, and all the auxiliary equipment. Filters, pumps, batteries and service points are all easily accessible. Fuel is stored in two stainless steel tanks, and piped through large Racor filters. A balance pipe connects the two tanks, but there is no changeover system — this has to be ordered as an extra.

Electrics consist of two 24V systems, for engine start and domestics, each consisting of four 95Ah batteries. These are backed up by a 240V ac circuit, powered as standard by a 10kVA generator. Additional batteries are supplied when the optional air conditioning and bow thruster are fitted.

The fire extinguishing system for the engine compartment is an impressive remote-controlled set up. Less comprehensive is the bilge pumping arrangement. The boat is divided into three watertight compartments, each served by an automatic electric pump, backed up by a manual unit. The electric pumps should in anyway be larger than those fitted, but we would prefer to see a full-size pumping arrangement, with at least one engine-driven unit. Once you are up to this size of craft you are in the realms of small ships rather than large boats, and the engineering systems should mirror this.

Soundproofing in the engineroom is good. The twin-stroke GMs are inherently noisy, with a bark from their exhaust that is hard to disguise. On the Birchwood however, the

sound levels were more than creditably low, showing just 77dB(A) in the saloon at full speed. Out in the cockpit the note was more obtrusive, at 88dB(A), though helped in this area by the side-mounted exhaust boxes, while up on the flying-bridge, matters were a comfortable 79dB(A).

## Handling and performance

The first day of our test was disappointingly calm. However this gave us a good opportunity for our performance runs, and to try out the low speed handling. Top speed we recorded was 23.2 knots, with the engines over-revving slightly, indicating power in hand when the loading increases. Fuel consumption we were unable to measure, but based on our previous tests with these units, and the manufacturer's published data, we estimate a total of 50gph at 23 knots, 32gph at 18 knots. These equate to 0.46mpg and a range of 345 miles at 23 knots, 0.56mpg and 420 miles at 18 knots.

At slow speeds the TS54 was a dream to handle. The keel gives a good grip on the water in cross winds, while the large rudders turn you quickly on the spot. This combination may have a slight speed penalty out at sea, but the benefits in marina manoeuvrability must offset this. Close-quarter handling was further helped by the smooth and precise gear shifts. So often with these large engines there is a time lag as they drop into gear, often accompanied by too much power when you get there. On the Birchwood, the Allison boxes were smooth, slick and quick, helped by well-adjusted single-lever Morse controls. For the final touch when mooring, our test boat had the optional bow-thruster fitted. This is so useful that we wonder why boats of this size still class it as an extra.

On the second day of our test we had a little bad weather to cope with. The 54 coped adequately with the short seas we encountered, but this was not without some quantities of spray thrown around. The brisk breeze picked this up and gave us some damp moments on the flying-bridge, and also kept the triple wipers working hard down below. Otherwise the conditions were not taxing for a boat of this size, and we look forward to a longer run at a later date to give us some better feedback.

## Conclusion

The TS54 marks a major step forward for Birchwood. The boat achieves a rare combination of good looks, and good finish, with a huge amount of interior space that will attract it to the bigger family, or a couple who have a lot of friends. Add to this an attractive price tag for its size, and it is no surprise that buyers are queueing up. ■