

## BOAT REPORT

FAST  
TRIO

In a major new launch, Shetland Cruisers are introducing UK-built examples of the Australian Signature sportsboat range. Emrhys Barrell went to preview three of the models during two wet and very windy days in November.

FOR over 20 years, the Shetland name has been synonymous with trailable family cruisers. Countless thousands have taken their first steps afloat in these sturdy craft, and the company's reputation for sound construction and value for money has enabled the marque to survive the many ups and downs of the marine industry. Now, in a major move forward, Shetland have expanded into the performance market, with the negotiation of the UK rights to manufacture and market the Signature range from Australia.

Signature themselves have become something of a legend in boating circles down under, with their total commitment to performance and rough water handling, backed by quality of build and looks. Rough in



Shetland have started by importing five models in the Signature range—we tested the 1700S (left), the 2100S (top) and the 1900S (above) in blustery conditions on the Orwell.

Australian terms means straight out into the Indian or Pacific oceans, with few sheltered areas, and usually breaking seas in between. John Haines, the outfit's designer, builder and guiding light, has raced these waters for 30 years, and when he set up his own company in 1983 to build runabouts and sports cruisers he had clear ideas as to what was needed.

The resulting developments have been fast and furious, with the company not afraid to experiment with designs in their quest for the ultimate. Good hulls have lasted the course, others have been discarded. Some formulas have worked better than others, with certain models becoming landmarks in sportsboat history.

Shetland have initially imported five craft in the range, from 15-21ft, but they are already constructing their own moulds from these, and by the London Boat Show the first all-British boats will be rolling off the line. We took the opportunity of two windy days

in November to put three of the models through their paces out of Levington Marina on the Orwell.

The boats we took out were the 1700S, the brand-new 1900S, and the 2100S. All outboard-powered, these are basically day-boats, though other models with accommodation are also available.

### Design

The obvious place to start looking at Signatures is under the waterline, and it is here that you get your first inkling as to what makes the boats different. The classic design compromise is

# BOAT REPORT

# SHETLAND SIGNATURES

between a medium-vee hull to give easy planing and low power requirements, and deep vee to cut through waves and give a smooth ride. In Signature hulls, John Haines has combined the two, with sections that are concave in form, giving a deeper vee at the keel but flaring out to shallower angles at the chine. Thus, when you are getting on the plane you have the assistance of the medium vee, but when you are up and running, the deeper sections cut through the waves. The moral with a Signature is for a smooth ride you keep going fast!

Other distinctive underwater features are the spray rails. In the Signature these are achieved by what is best described as a 'clinker' form, with four clear strakes running the length of the boat. These provide progressive steps in planing surfaces, smooth out the ride, reduce spray, give tenacious cornering, and also add considerable strength to the hull just where it is needed to take the pounding of the waves.

Walking round to the back of the boats gives you a potted history of Signature hull development. The noticeable feature on earlier models is the flat pad at the keel. Up to 5in wide, this improves the planing surface, and increases stability, preventing the boat from rocking or 'chine-walking' at speed. By the time the 1700S was produced, the aft end had become distinctly complex. The pictures show what we mean, but the sections started to show a gull-wing form, with two narrow tunnels either side of the keel. The last 2ft of this hull is notched, giving a planing step, while the final tweak is a tube at the forward end of the notch. This is connected to the transom, ventilating the area aft of the step.

What all these latter modifications do is arguable. The tunnels give more grip when cornering. The trapped air provides high-speed lift and softens the ride in waves. The step reduces wetted-surface area and so cuts down drag, while the ventilating tube lets air in at lower speeds, increasing prop slip, and allowing the engine to build up revs quicker. When you are cornering at high speeds the same tube reduces pressure under the step, pulling the hull down and increasing grip. That is our theory. You may have your own. Signature aren't telling, but they have patented the designs.

And the net effect of all this? Well, the results are quite remarkable. The



hulls do get up and plane fast. They do run level and smooth in choppy conditions, and as for cornering, the boats really ought to be fitted with seat belts, because the uninitiated can turn them so fast that passengers end up in a heap at the side of the boat. The 1900S in particular was quite fearsome, running around like a catamaran, but not uncontrollably so, and providing you kept the power on, refusing to spin out.

## 2100S

The top of the range model on display was the 2100S. A big, capable sea-boat, based on a race-winning hull, this is now in its second successful year. Two bucket seats keep driver and navigator in place, though the port one was suffering from a hard week's testing. The driving position is good, allowing you to look through or just over the screen, with the throttle lying well to hand, and the seat adjustable on sliders. The navigator has a well-placed grab handle — the four passengers behind are not so well catered for.

Two traps forward give access to small lockers, while a larger hatch leads into the big underdeck stowage area. Looking in here reveals an excellent standard of glass work, with a deep spine running under and stiffening the foredeck, and fully encapsulated built-in foam buoyancy.

An integral fuel tank is located under the cockpit sole and, aft of this, a hatch gives access to the fuel shut-off. The rear seat bottom lifts up to reveal a shallow locker, but the real stowage space is behind the seat,

Right: the 2100S prior to launching. In these views of the 1900S high and dry (above and below right), Signature's latest distinctive design features can be clearly seen.

under a short cushioned sun-lounger. In here you find the battery, and tank for the engine oil-injection system. A big ski-tow pedestal ahead of the engine tells you what most people will do with this boat.

Underway, the 2100 is a dream to drive. Straight-line performance is excellent, with the boat quickly onto the plane. Top speed on our radar gun showed 45 knots, but this was on a rough and windy day, loaded with a full crew of four of Shetland's chunky boat-builders out on their works' outing. In better conditions you should see at least 5-6 knots more. The Orwell was producing a nasty steep chop but, trimmed level, the 2100 took this in its stride. Downwind, with the nose up, you could pile on the power and still keep control, even in turns, and we came away with a great feeling of confidence in the hull.

## 1900S

The 1900S was brand-new for 1989. First impression is of sleek stylish lines that will turn heads both on the water and on its trailer. The hull continues aft of the transom, flanking the 200 Merc that was fitted to this particular boat with two sponsons or wings, which are both eye-catching and practical. Not only do they look good, they provide extra lift at the stern, and give you two boarding platforms. The engine well is snug and



compact, assisted by Mercury's neat, narrow hydraulic steering system. The smooth styling is continued with the recessed stern cleats.

Moving forward, the cockpit is deep and secure. The curved rear bench seat will take three passengers, while ahead are two deep bucket seats with headrests, for driver and navigator. Cave lockers port and starboard take small items, while the rear seat backrest hinges up to give access to the stern compartment. Padded armrests alongside the front seats keep elbows from being banged, while

grab handles keep you in place. The screen is in fact solid, a black wrap-round section that deflects the slipstream upwards, an arrangement that gives you a narrow band of clear air to look through.

Performance as we have said is startling. Four-up, the boat recorded 46 knots top speed, but again you should see at least another 5 or 6 knots in better conditions. Straight-line handling was good, the boat coping capably with the short chop. And the cornering was nothing less than out of this world.

## 1700S

Further down the range, the 1700 is a big runabout, with lots of storage under its foredeck. Performance with a 135 Mariner was 40 knots four-up.

Proposed prices for the models described, without engines but including VAT, are £5,350 for the 1700S, £6,750 for the 1900S, and £7,500 for the 2100S. For further information, contact Shetland Cruisers, Redgrave Common, Redgrave, Diss, Norfolk IP22 1RZ. Tel: 0379 898496.