

Boat Report

BIRCHWOOD CHALLENGER 380

A brand new recruit to the MBM Cruising Club fleet is the latest incarnation of one of Birchwood's most popular flybridge product-lines. Its proud owners invited us aboard.





Launched last year, the Challenger 380 is a much updated version of the 37, arguably British builders Birchwood's most popular model of late. We were pleased to be invited by owners Ron and Nicola Lane to join them on their new aft-cabin version, *Timbo*, as they prepared for their maiden cruise in company with other members of the MBM Club.

Design

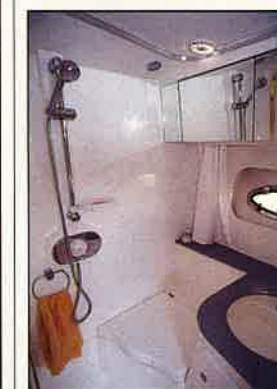
The hull is almost identical to that of the 37. It has a medium-to-shallow vee form aft, with a deadrise of no more than 12.5° through from amidships to the transom, but the forward vee sections tighten up considerably and there is a keen enough entry to maintain a comfortable ride in a head sea.

A run of keel puts the 380 into what we would normally think of as the semi-displacement class, as does the lack of sprayrails or a distinct hard flat to the chine, but it motors easily and has the feel of a

Above: the console ahead of the single helmsman's seat has plenty of room for instruments plus a chart area and 'bits' tray.

Below: facing L-shaped settees make the saloon layout very sociable.

Below right: an angled double berth dominates the well-appointed aft master cabin. **Right:** in the forward cabin, the two single berths overlap at different levels so as not to restrict legroom.



Above: practical features include Avonite worktop with infills over the sink and hob, access to the engine by hinging up the stairs adjacent to the galley, and toilets disguised within the mouldings. **Below left:** wide and gently angled steps lead from the aft deck into the saloon, where the owners of our test boat specified teak and holly decking instead of carpet. **Below:** the dinette can be curtained-off to provide another sleeping area.

fully planing boat when underway, especially given its top speed of 26 knots plus.

The scalloped topsides have been made a shade smoother at the transom, with a fully integrated bathing platform and moulded steps up to the aft deck. And the window line and radar arch have been softened, as has the coaming around the flybridge, which remains low and unobtrusive.

Since building our test boat, Birchwood have also altered the rear portion of the saloon windows, making them more elliptical.

Exterior

The bathing platform extends the full width of the hull and, thanks to the grabrails running across the transom and the good-sized moulded steps up through the central walkway, offers the least arduous route aboard. Climbing up from a pontoon to the side deck is a considerable

stretch, although just about feasible.

The aft deck is a most useful size, with plenty of seating on top of the lockers across the split transom, which house the gas bottles as well as offering a good amount of general storage space. The deck area itself is teak-laid, while other top surfaces are finished in a moulded non-slip.

Side decks are quite wide at 10in (25cm). Moving around safely is helped by the superstructure being angled in to give plenty of shoulder-width, by a guiding run of toerail at the gunwale, and by guardrails that run right back to the aft deck.

A split rail arrangement at the pulpit makes it possible to board over the bow if you are moored Med-style. The fender holders incorporated in the rails on each side appear likely to obscure the view from the interior helm, but in practice you barely notice them.

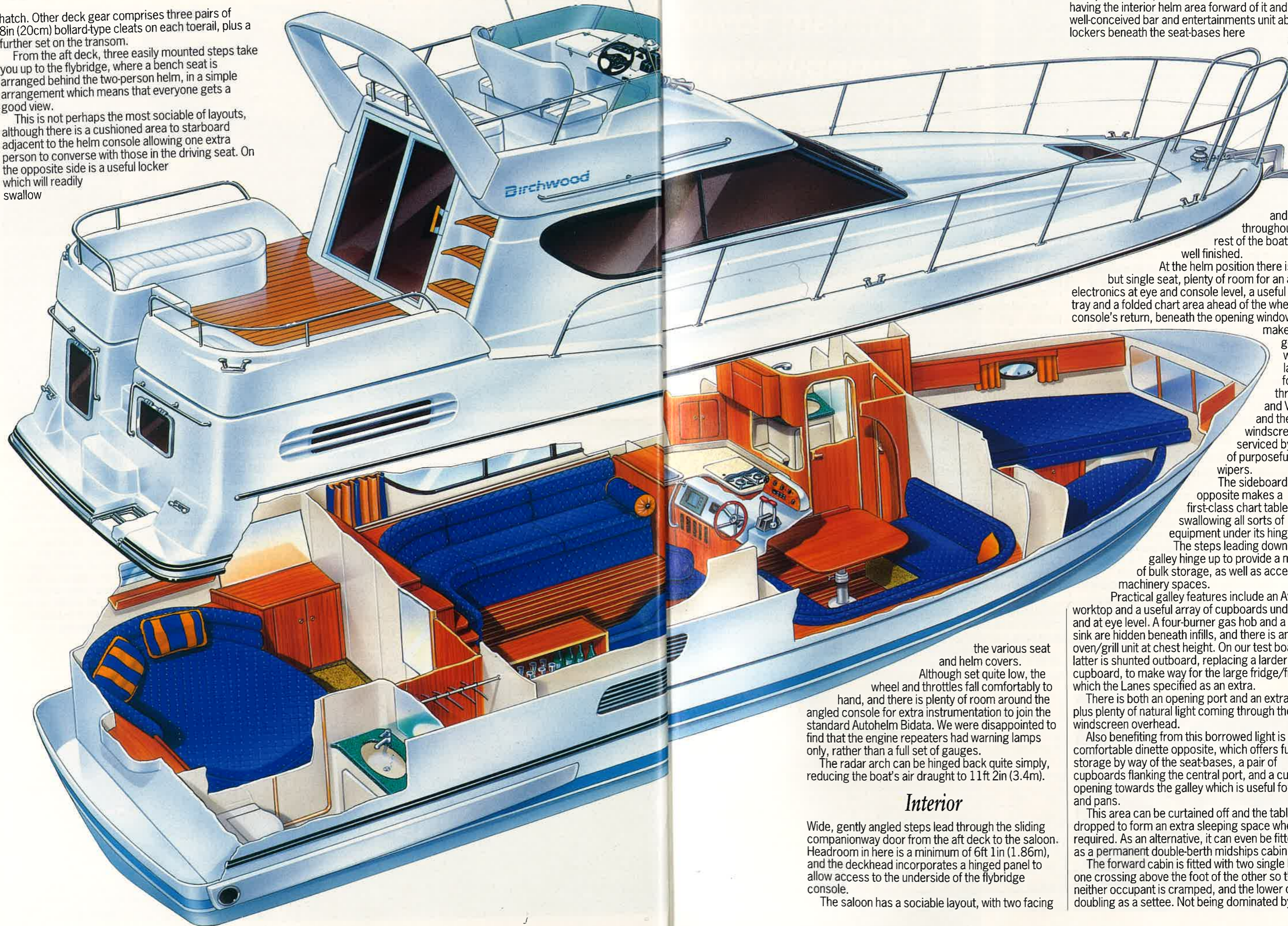
Ground tackle is handled by a vertical Lofrans windlass, with the chain locker accessed via a small



hatch. Other deck gear comprises three pairs of 8in (20cm) bollard-type cleats on each toerail, plus a further set on the transom.

From the aft deck, three easily mounted steps take you up to the flybridge, where a bench seat is arranged behind the two-person helm, in a simple arrangement which means that everyone gets a good view.

This is not perhaps the most sociable of layouts, although there is a cushioned area to starboard adjacent to the helm console allowing one extra person to converse with those in the driving seat. On the opposite side is a useful locker which will readily swallow



L-shaped settees, the smaller one to starboard having the interior helm area forward of it and a well-conceived bar and entertainments unit abaft. The lockers beneath the seat-bases here

and throughout the rest of the boat are well finished.

At the helm position there is a wide but single seat, plenty of room for an array of electronics at eye and console level, a useful 'bits' tray and a folded chart area ahead of the wheel. The console's return, beneath the opening window,

makes a good wide landing for the throttles and VHF, and the windscreen is serviced by a pair of purposeful-looking wipers.

The sideboard area opposite makes a first-class chart table, while swallowing all sorts of equipment under its hinged lid. The steps leading down to the galley hinge up to provide a modicum of bulk storage, as well as access to the machinery spaces.

Practical galley features include an Avonite worktop and a useful array of cupboards underneath and at eye level. A four-burner gas hob and a double sink are hidden beneath infills, and there is an oven/grill unit at chest height. On our test boat, the latter is shunted outboard, replacing a larger cupboard, to make way for the large fridge/freezer which the Lanes specified as an extra.

There is both an opening port and an extractor fan, plus plenty of natural light coming through the windscreen overhead.

Also benefiting from this borrowed light is the comfortable dinette opposite, which offers further storage by way of the seat-bases, a pair of cupboards flanking the central port, and a cupboard opening towards the galley which is useful for pots and pans.

This area can be curtained off and the table dropped to form an extra sleeping space when required. As an alternative, it can even be fitted out as a permanent double-berth midships cabin.

The forward cabin is fitted with two single berths, one crossing above the foot of the other so that neither occupant is cramped, and the lower one doubling as a settee. Not being dominated by a huge

the various seat and helm covers.

Although set quite low, the wheel and throttles fall comfortably to hand, and there is plenty of room around the angled console for extra instrumentation to join the standard Autohelm Bidata. We were disappointed to find that the engine repeaters had warning lamps only, rather than a full set of gauges.

The radar arch can be hinged back quite simply, reducing the boat's air draught to 11ft 2in (3.4m).

Interior

Wide, gently angled steps lead through the sliding companionway door from the aft deck to the saloon. Headroom in here is a minimum of 6ft 1in (1.86m), and the deckhead incorporates a hinged panel to allow access to the underside of the flybridge console.

The saloon has a sociable layout, with two facing

lump of mattress in the centre, and benefiting from plenty of headroom, the cabin has a roomy feel. Storage is plentiful too, with a good-sized wardrobe, a dressing table, a useful run of lockers at eye height above the window line and some space beneath the lower berth.

The en-suite toilet/shower compartment, which also has a door from the lower lobby, hides the toilet from view within the moulding and brightens up the sink area with a coloured Avonite surface. There is plenty of stowage space and, as with the galley and the aft WC, we were pleased to find an extractor fitted.

Completing the accommodation is a comfortably proportioned aft cabin, with its angled 6ft 3in x 4ft 0in (1.91m x 1.22m) berth and a similarly appointed en-suite toilet compartment.

Storage is provided by a useful-sized hanging locker, a dressing table, a pair of cupboards and a berth-base drawer. The false cupboard fronts beneath the transom escape hatch allow you to reach the steering gear for maintenance purposes, while bilge access is catered for well enough by several openings in the sole.

Timbo's interior is fitted out in cherry joinery with a practical matt finish. Unusually, drawing on their commercial boating experience, the owners specified teak and holly decking throughout the saloon and galley area, instead of carpeting. This is clearly a success, not only being obviously less prone to dirt and waterlogging, but also giving the interior a much warmer, yachty feel. Perhaps a revival beckons?

Engines

Engine options run from a pair of Volvo Penta KAMD42s, rated at 230hp apiece, through various Mercruisers and Ivecos, to 330hp Iveco 8061 SRM33s. *Timbo* is fitted with the latter.

For engine checks, it is as easy to hike up the central portion of her teak and holly sole as it is to hinge up the companionway steps adjacent to the galley. Either way, access is most reasonable.

There is space to stand or squat on the central duckboards between the engines, and most day-to-day checkpoints can be reached from here. The raw-water strainers and fuel/water separators are located on the forward bulkhead, and you can squeeze around the outboard side of the engines to get at the filters.

The shaft logs are easy to inspect and adjust, as are the batteries in their centrally located box, and just abaft of this a duck board can be

levered up to inspect the bilge.

A rather small-capacity Rule 1000 submersible bilge pump is all that can be fitted into the skeg of the keel, although a manual unit is also provided here; two further submersibles are supplied, one forward and one aft.

The fuel tanks are covered in loaded foam insulation, as are the rest of the compartment's larger flat areas. On the whole the installation appears very sound, and tidily finished like other hidden areas of the boat.

Handling and performance

We joined *Timbo* on her way from her home port of Weymouth in Dorset to Chichester in Sussex, where she was to set off for St Katharine's Yacht Haven in London with the MBM Cruising Club.

The worst conditions we encountered were on the final leg, past Hayling Island, in the shape of a fairly healthy chop pushed up by the shallows off Portsmouth. This the 380 took in its stride, giving a most comfortable steady ride in any direction while manoeuvring around our photoboot.

The hull responded readily to both helm and throttle, right through the rev-range, giving smooth, easy turns and a comfortable head-sea ride.

The view from the interior helm is almost unimpaired, and quite reasonable astern, due largely to the broad and uncluttered windowline that runs well aft. Noise levels were surprisingly good, especially in the saloon, given the lack of sound-absorbing carpet over the engine hatches.

For easy cruising, and fully loaded for just that, the 380 would sit happily at 2200rpm, giving just under 21 knots, estimated fuel consumption of 14.1gph (64lph) and a range of 230 miles. Flat-out, with the tachos showing 2650rpm, we clocked a comfortable 26.2 knots.

Conclusions

Birchwood's 380 hull provides a versatile aft-cabin cruiser which is easily-used, both outside and in. On the whole we were well pleased with its predictable handling as well as its overall finish, and the separate dinette arrangement makes mealtimes easy.

Timbo has, dare we say it, the same ambience of a well-loved sailing yacht, with space used to best practical advantage and teak flooring throughout the main living area giving a wonderfully warm feel.

The Lanes say they found her very comfortable on their week-long, 450-mile maiden cruise, and easy to handle between the two of them. □

Builders

Birchwood Marine Ltd,
Common Road, Huthwaite,
Nottinghamshire NG17 2JU.
Tel: 01623 515133.

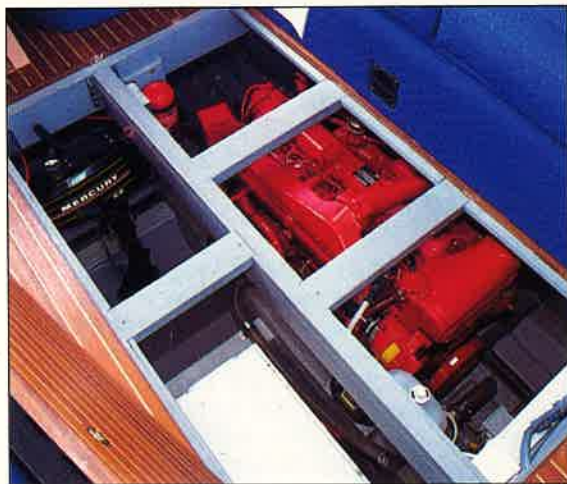
Suppliers

Birchwood Boats Solent Ltd,
Vespasian Road, Bitterne
Manor, Southampton,
Hampshire SO2 4AY.
Tel: 01703 224252.



Above: there is room for plenty of choice should you be called to the bar...

Below: ...and basic maintenance checks should you be summoned to the engineroom.



Birchwood Challenger 380

Engines twin Iveco 8061 SRM33 diesels, 330hp at 2700rpm, 6cyl, 5.9lt.

Conditions wind SE Force 3, sea slight. Load fuel 60%, water 60%, crew 3.

rpm	knots	gph	lph	mpg	range*	trim	sound levels dB(A)			
							saln	aftcab	aftdk	flybg
1800	13.3	6.8	31	1.95	312	3.0	77	82	82	73
2000	16.5	10.0	45	1.65	264	4.0	78	84	82	70
2200	20.6	14.1	64	1.46	234	4.5	82	86	83	70
2400	23.5	19.4	88	1.21	194	4.5	80	88	84	74
2650	26.2	28.2	128	0.93	149	4.0	82	88	85	75

Acceleration 0-20 knots, 11.9sec

(* allows 20% margin)

Loa 38ft 1in (11.61m)

Beam 12ft 8in (3.86m)

Draught 3ft 0in (0.91m)

Air draught 15ft 4in (4.67m)

Displacement 8.5 tonnes

Fuel capacity 200gal (910lt)

Water capacity 60gal (270lt)

Price £147,796 ex VAT