

# OFF-THE-PEG CRUISER

Merseyside company Bickerstaffe Boats specialises in producing stock boats with popular appeal.

**Mark Langley** looks at *The Katie K*, a 57ft narrowboat built for committed cruising and residential use

**A**lthough Bickerstaffe Boats has been building craft for quite a while at its Kirkby workshops, near Liverpool, it was after exhibiting at the 2018 Crick Boat Show that the company came to a much wider consciousness.

Its approach differs from many builders, as it does not build boats to order or allocate build slots. Instead it only produces stock boats, which are sold on a first-come, first-served basis. This strategy has worked exceptionally well for the company, as it often sells boats almost as soon as they are launched.

Unusually, too, the company offers RYA Helmsman training for two people as part of its sales package. The training is carried out aboard Bickerstaffe's own boat, which also acts as a demonstration craft. Many of Bickerstaffe's customers are first-time boat-owners, so find this service exceptionally useful.

We took *The Katie K*, one of Bickerstaffe's 57ft Euro cruiser-stern boats, out on a miserable, damp day on the Leeds & Liverpool from its mooring near Ormskirk. Although the recent high winds were dying down it was still rather blustery when we headed out onto the canal, so providing a challenging test for the brand new boat.

## Shell and exterior

Bickerstaffe has had a couple of different shell-builders over the last few years and *The Katie K* is based on a Tyler-Wilson shell, built to the Kirkby company's own specification. It has a square stern, to give more useable space aft, and a good-sized forward cockpit. It also has excellently finished steelwork and has been given multiple spray coats of paint in Bickerstaffe's own climate-controlled spray booth. The finish is outstanding but still easy enough to touch up after the inevitable scratches occur. The hull paint is taken up to the gunwale, which gives the boat a more purposeful look, while the two-pack paint provides a very hardwearing finish.



A combination of steel dodger and well-fitted canopy extends the living space and is practical when cruising on many navigations.







The boat handles well and reverses cleanly, with good steerage.



A pleasant colour scheme matches the boat's smooth lines.



The boat barely ripples the surface at tickover.



Traditional solid handrails give good grip, while non-slip paint is applied where needed. Up on the roof are four amorphous solar panels, glued to the steel. They are unobtrusive and their solid black colour makes them look almost like a painted panel. There is also an omnidirectional Gazelle digital TV aerial forward, with a wifi/phone range extender aerial mounted further aft. The horn and twin tunnel lamps are roof mounted and are in the same chrome finish as the mushroom vents and navigation sidelights.

Both cockpits are covered by bespoke covers as standard. The forward one sits on a wide hoop frame, with large windows, which gives a huge amount of practical space underneath. The aft one is

a full-height pram canopy, which allows even tall boaters standing room, with roll-up and removable side and aft panels. Unusually, the side windows in both canopies are round, which matches the shape and size of the superb black-framed Caldwell windows that are bonded to the steelwork.

The aft cockpit has a raised steel dodger that encloses the upholstered seating area as well, into which a folding demountable wooden table fits comfortably. The canopies effectively make the entire boat length useable living space – this is ideal for a residential craft, which many Bickerstaffe boats have become.

## Galley

A central doorway leads down

into the galley, with a decent-sized cupboard either side – one contains the main electrical systems. The galley has a fairly standard design of an L-shape to port with a shorter linear run of worktop opposite. It feels reasonably compact but fits in a lot: a large 12V fridge, washing machine, deep Belfast-style sink and high-level oven, grill and microwave. A glass four-burner gas hob is set into the solid wood worktop, a surface that is much more pragmatic than granite or other stone variants. The wood can easily be refinished if damaged and an occasional coat of oil should keep it looking good for years. Some of the cupboards contain pull-out baskets to maximise storage.



The galley fits a lot into a reasonably compact space.

## FACT FILE

### *The Katie K*

**Length** 57ft  
**Engine** Vetus M4.45  
**Berths** 2+2

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bickerstaff e boat  
company.co.uk





A deep sink in the galley with a good-sized tap.



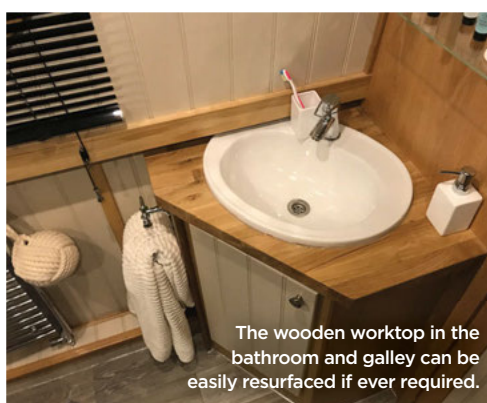
Provision of 12V sockets and USB points throughout the boat avoids undue use of the inverter.



The ceramic cassette is practical and cheaper to operate than a pump-out.



Four-burner glass hob has plenty of space either side.



The wooden worktop in the bathroom and galley can be easily resurfaced if ever required.

Like the whole boat, cream-painted tongue-and-groove panels are on the cabin side and deck head, with bright LED downlights giving good illumination. The cupboard doors match the style of the cabin woodwork and look very smart. Low-level LED lights in the kickboard of the galley units add a useful touch of class. There is also space for a free-standing bin, which is often missed from boat designs.

## Saloon

The wood-style flooring from the galley gives way to thick fitted carpets in the saloon. There is a raised Pullman dinette to port, which has a smaller coffee table as well as the full-sized dining table. The upholstery is dense and very comfortable, and converts easily to a double berth for guests. A pair of side doors allow more light in, though the kickplate lights continue along the floor, which is potentially less glaring than long strips of under-gunwale LEDs.

Bickerstaffe aims for good practice in its boat fitting, such as vents in all lockers to ensure decent airflow and minimise moisture build up. Also,

combined CO and smoke alarms are fitted, as well as the usual fire safety equipment. There are useful small shelves throughout, all with good-sized fiddle rails to keep things in place.

Further forward in the saloon is a large free-standing sofa with a TV unit opposite. There is a well-installed Morso Squirrel solid-fuel

stove, with insulated flue, in a decent hearth – though the stove is set to starboard, so making the tall exterior chimney more vulnerable to branches when passing boats. The Eberspächer-powered central heating uses black gloss, double panel radiators, which have a designer look while still being highly efficient.



There's even space for a bin in the galley.



Big overhead cupboards in the bedroom. One of the boat's two combined smoke/CO alarms is fitted here.

## Bathroom

A central door leads to the bathroom. Unlike many contemporary boats, this is panelled to match the cabin sides, rather than frosted glass (which can give unwanted shadow theatre effects when someone is using the loo!). The walk-through bathroom has the same ceramic wood-effect flooring as the galley, which is easy to keep clean. The 900mm by 900mm quadrant shower on the centreline is very spacious, while the loo and washbasin flank the doorway from the saloon.

Bickerstaffe has plumped for a ceramic bowl Thetford cassette toilet, for which a spare cassette is provided. The tank is accessed through a discreet hatch in the saloon. The reasoning is not one of cost, but of long-term convenience, being more reliable, cheaper to empty and easier to clean and maintain





#### SEATING

The upholstery is dense and very comfortable.

#### HIGH DINING

The raised dinette gives good views out.

#### TV UNIT

Contains a TV that is both 12V and 230V.

#### DESIGNER LOOK

Central heating uses black gloss, double panel radiators.

than a macerator-type pump-out toilet, especially for residential use. So far, all of Bickerstaffe's customers have agreed on this!

#### Bedroom

The forward bedroom has a lengthways double berth, which can be slid out to increase its width, while still allowing for a walkway past. There is a standard-size wardrobe to port of the door into the cockpit, with a small dressing table opposite, plus cupboards above the bed head. However, the lack of a pump-out loo gives a huge amount of storage under the raised bed, which can take lots of other clothing and gear, that's also easily accessible.

At the side of the dressing table is a set of 12V sockets, containing a twin USB charger and a car plug-type fitting. There are several of these throughout the boat – great for charging modern devices and even lamp fittings. The TV in both the saloon and bedroom has a built-in DVD player and accesses

Freeview. It also runs from both 12V DC and 230V AC, which is ideal in a proper cruising boat, as it means the inverter can be switched off when not required – the standby current, even in 'eco' mode, of most inverters is quite substantial over a 24-hour period. Many of the 230V sockets also have USB ports, for when the boat is attached to shore power.

There is ventilated access to the under-cockpit space, which contains the 450-litre stainless steel water tank. This is insulated to reduce condensation, which can be significant in uninsulated tanks, potentially causing corrosion of the shell from the inside.

#### Engine and services

The electrical system is powered by six 135Ah Vetus batteries in the engine room for the domestic circuit, feeding a 3kW Vetus combi inverter-charger. The switch panels for the 12V and 230V circuits are not hidden in the cupboard but on the aft galley bulkhead, along with heating



Plenty of lounging space in the saloon.



An accessible electrics panel in the galley.



controls and the battery monitor, making them easy to check. Cupboards also have battery-operated PIR-controlled LED lights in, so they are independent of the boat's supply – should a circuit trip and cut off the lights, you're not left in the dark. The roof-mounted solar panels produce up to 400W of power and are more effective in low-light conditions than other types of panel. In the late afternoon of a very dull winter's day the panels were still putting 40W into the domestic battery bank.

Under the aft deck is a brilliantly designed engine room, with the 42hp Vetus engine at its centre. The engine drives through a PRM150 hydraulically operated gearbox and Vetus water-lubricated stern tube. This should mean a dry engine bay. The engine has a proper fuel-water separator before the engine filter and the skin cooling tank is large and fitted with an internal baffle, to ensure proper cooling when the engine runs hard. Twin 90-amp alternators are fitted, one charging the domestic bank, the other the bow-thruster battery and engine starter battery.



There's enough space in the wardrobe for hanging clothes, plus masses of room under the bed for long-term storage.



#### WOODWORK

Cream-painted tongue-and-groove side panels.

#### HIDDEN DOOR

Cassette tank access is behind the log basket.

#### SOLID-FUEL STOVE

The stove to starboard in an excellent hearth.

The batteries are mounted in a sturdy case with oversized cables to reduce voltage drop, all properly sheathed in conduit. There are also master fuses in

every feed cable – and, usefully, a set of spare fuses are attached to the master switch. There is even a set of 12V sockets embedded in the battery box to enable inspection lamps or other equipment to be plugged in. Bickerstaffe also paints non-slip patches in contrasting colours in the engine room, which is a superb idea – fairly easy to do but not common in the boat-building world. It helps direct you where to stand, which is not always obvious in an engine space.

There is also a powerful LED lamp here, so you can see what is going on without needing a torch. However, instead of lifting the quite chunky deck board to check the engine, you can use the camera inside, which displays to the helm position. Meanwhile, a bow camera assists

with tight mooring spaces, with the monitor integrated into the pedestal with the engine control panel, single lever control, bow-thruster and ready-use switches. Under the aft seat is the classic Tyler-Wilson 'unsinkable' weedhatch – lifting the deck cover gives access to a chute to get to the prop, without water getting into the engine room.

The gas locker is to port, containing a single 13kg propane cylinder, with an Alde bubble leak detector fitted as standard. The locker on the other side of the door contains space for general storage, including a rack for windlasses, mooring pins and a hammer (which, like a full tank of diesel, is standard with the boat). This is a good place to have it, rather than dripping a muddy pin into a cupboard inside the boat, where racks





The roof has neat solar panels and a 4G aerial booster.



The neatly designed electrical system includes accessible spare master fuses.



The combi inverter in the electrics cupboard.

are often found. Both lockers contain a battery-operated light, but the one in the gas locker might not be the best idea – though it is above the height of the cylinder and fittings.

### Handling and underway

Due to the poor weather, we just rolled up the aft section of canopy and removed the side to starboard to allow us to get on and off the boat. The engine started on the first turn and the noise was quite muted, even with the canopy up, which could potentially have made it an echo chamber. An owner could easily add sound insulation panels in the engine bay, which would make it a very quiet boat indeed.

Despite the wind, we pushed off the bank without using the bow-thruster and cruised past moored boats at tickover, which were not disturbed (apart from one instance when the owner had tied up with a centre roof mooring line). Opening the throttle up to a good cruising speed produced surprisingly little bow and stern wash – long swims and sharp exits make for good water flow.

Visibility through the canopy is surprisingly good and, although we were slightly nervous of passing under the L&L's bridges, there was plenty of clearance. However, Bickerstaffe has made the canopy quite quick to drop for those lower bridges elsewhere on the network. The high canopy didn't affect the sure



The gas system has a bubble tester for self-checking leaks.



The neat folding and removeable table in the cockpit with seating for four plus.

footedness of the boat's handling either, which is very pleasing.

The seating in the aft cockpit is generous – four people can make themselves comfortable when cruising and a standing or perching steering position works well. There is lighting in the cockpit to help with movement at night and getting on and off the boat with the canopy up is a lot more secure than many boats, with suitable handholds in easy reach.



Four 100W solar panels blend very well with the roof.

### WW'S VERDICT

Bickerstaffe is virtually unique in its approach to building boats. Many of its customers are new to boating and if they were to specify a more bespoke craft, they might choose something that is less tried and tested. *The Katie K* is a brilliant example of a well thought out craft for both cruising and residential

use for a couple, given that, with the standard canopies, almost the entire boat is living space. It is also very good value for money.

Bickerstaffe Boats will be exhibiting at Crick again this year and, if you are looking for a ready-to-go boat for long-term cruising, should be worth investigating.

