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A Kelt with Class

David Harding sails the drop keel Kelt 8.50 and finds she's stylish, rapid and remarkably roomy.

If ever there was a floating Tardis, it's the Kelt. From the outside she's a sporty looking cruiser with styling that's unmistakably French. But down below, it's hard to believe she's only 28 feet long.

Her extraordinary volume comes from her long waterline and unusually full ends. While we've all become used to wide transoms over the past 10 years or so, performance boats often have fine bows so from above they look like slightly rounded wedges. Not the Kelt. Borrowing from hydrodynamic theories developed for supertankers, designer Gilles Vaton opted for a particularly bulbous stem. Why? Because Kelt say it increases speed and directional stability, giving better downwind control and – as you'd expect from this hull shape – less pitching. The rounded bow also means no wasted space at the foot of the forward berth, so its reduced length allows a roomier saloon.

All well and good but does it work? It can't have been a major breakthrough, or every boat would be designed this way. All the same, the yacht has attracted a keen following in Britain, particularly on the East Coast. For Mike and Christine Harrison, who sail from Tollesbury, she was perfect.

"We'd had a wonderful year mucking about in a Hurley 20," said Mike, *"but we wanted something bigger. Then we saw a Kelt on the Crouch and fell in love with her. She had everything we wanted – reasonable performance, massive accommodation for her size, an after cabin and a lifting keel."*

On the level

As you might expect from an innovative builder, the optional centre plate arrangement is unconventional. Kelt covered the bottom of the hull in a cast iron 'grounding shoe',

incorporating a shallow keel which houses the lower part of the iron plate when raised; the rest disappears into a GRP box in the saloon. To let her dry out upright, she has a pair of mini stabilising fins – also part of the main casting – and a separate iron skeg in front of the short spade rudder.

The builders say that the centre of gravity of the drop keel version is virtually the same as with the fixed fin keel. But you have to live with that shallower rudder, which inevitably provides less grip in heavy weather. What's more, the reduction in lateral area, so far aft, increases any tendency to weather helm. You can raise a swing keel part way to control the weight, but the rudder's small size and lack of balance were noticeable aboard *Liquidator*. Making to

windward at around 4.8 knots in 15 knots of breeze, there was a steady pull on the tiller which quickly increased as she heeled in the gusts though thanks to her 48% ballast ratio, ample form stability and generous beam she felt reassuringly stiff, able to carry her canvas without sailing on her ear. Even so, Mike and Christine hadn't managed to get her going as well as they'd hoped in club races – that's one of the reasons why Mark Chisnell and I were there, to offer some advice as part of our Sail Clinic series.

Their problem made me wonder about weight. The photos in the original brochure show the lip of the sugar scoop just kissing the water, while *Liquidator's* was immersed by several inches. Since a dragging transom produces horrendous



A short coachroof leaves an almost flush foredeck. The keel's lifting line emerges through a pulley just abaft the mast and is led back to a winch.



Three ports and plenty of stowage in the after cabin.



turbulence, we tried moving a couple of people up to the bow – but to no effect. Reducing weight maybe the only answer – like most boats, they probably need to be sailed lightly laden for best performance.

Another effect of the small rudder was a wide turning circle under both sail and power. And it simply wasn't powerful enough to gybe her round from a hove to position with the sheets pinned in. Incidentally, some Kelt's have suffered damage to the rudder blade and skeg after drying out on uneven surfaces – something to be wary of when buying. But enough of the criticism! After all, when a boat draws only 2ft 2in and has an inboard rudder, a shallow blade is an inevitable part of the package. Apparently an owner of a Feeling 326 – with a similar underwater configuration – transformed his boat's performance by adding winglets to the bottom of the rudder.

Something I couldn't fault is the angle outboard of the cockpit coaming, so the helmsman can lean back comfortably against the guardwires while

SPECIFICATIONS

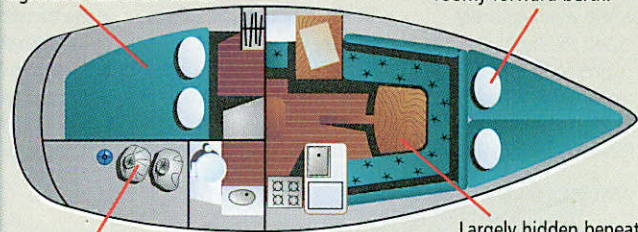
LOA	28ft 0in
LWL	24ft 6in
Beam	10ft 4in
Draft (fin)	5ft 4in
	(lifting keel) 2ft 2in-5ft 11in
Displacement	7,000lb
Ballast	3,350lb
Sail area	474sq ft
Engine	Yanmar 10 or 20hp
Headroom	6ft 0in
Designer	Gilles Vaton
Builder	Kelt/Kirie
Price guide	£19,000-£23,000

CATCHING A KELT

First seen in British waters in 1984, the original fin keeled Kelt 8.50 soon established a reputation as one of the fastest 28ft production cruisers. She later became the Kelt 29 – essentially the same boat with a slightly modified coachroof and 'wrap-around' window. In the late '80's, Kelt were taken over by Kirie – the builders of the Feeling range – who sold the lifting keel version of the 29 as the Feeling 29 DI (Deriveur Integral).

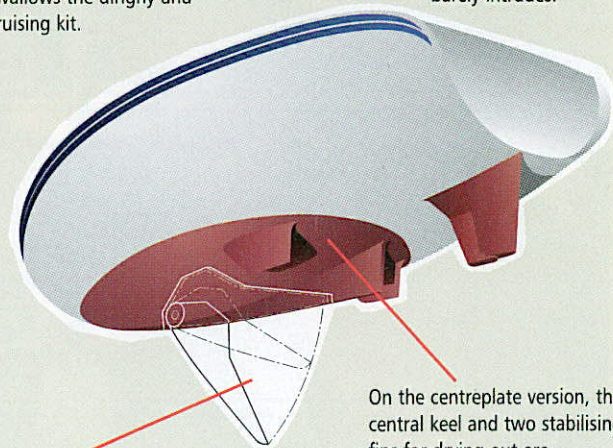
Three ports let plenty of light into the after cabin.

The bluff bow provides a roomy forward berth.



A deep cockpit locker swallows the dinghy and cruising kit.

Largely hidden beneath the table, the keel case barely intrudes.



The 800lb plate swings up into a GRP case in the saloon.

On the centreplate version, the central keel and two stabilising fins for drying out are incorporated into a 2,500lb cast iron underbelly.

sailing upwind. But I wondered whether it might be a wet perch in a blow. "We've been out in some pretty boisterous conditions, and stayed virtually dry when other people have been getting soaked," Christine assured me. Perhaps another effect of the bluff bow which Kelt forgot to mention?

Capable Kelts

Despite being restricted to weekend sailing most of the time, the Harrisons have now made several crossings to Holland and encountered a few good blows. "We're confident

the boat will take anything the weather throws at us," said Mike. "The only disconcerting thing is the way the keel can rattle a bit when she's slamming into a head sea. It's the one time we wished we had a fixed fin – otherwise the lifting arrangement is perfect for East Coast sailing. That's why these boats are so popular around here."

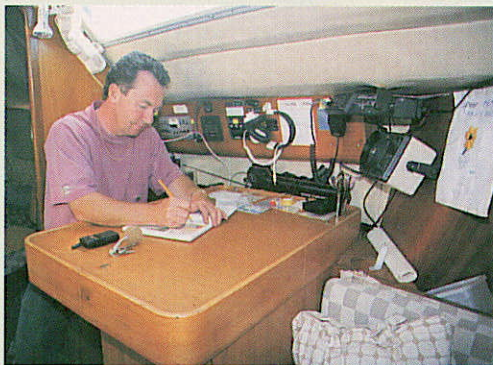
"It also keeps her low to the ground, which makes it easy to get on and off when she's ashore during the winter," added Christine. "The yard drops her down on a few

baulks of timber so we can antifoul the bottom. It all feels nice and stable during the gales!"

So is there anything they don't like about her? "A bigger engine would be nice," admitted Mike, "together with some warning instruments, a fuel gauge and a larger tank – it's only 7 gallons." They'd also like a bigger rudder for manoeuvring. "And a fridge," said Christine. "Other than that, she's everything we need. It really makes you wonder why there aren't more boats like this." It does indeed.

A CAVERNOUS KELT

■ The 8.50's interior designer, Patrick Roseo, did an excellent job down below. Taking full advantage of the high-volume hull, he gave her an open plan layout with a U-shaped partial bulkhead separating the raised forward bunk from the main living area. This provides comfortable seating around three sides of the saloon, where the tube for the keel's lifting cable makes a useful grab handle. The keel case itself is largely hidden beneath the table and is remarkably unobtrusive – but you sacrifice the bottle stowage where you'd normally expect to find it! Thanks to the short coachroof and flush foredeck, headroom forward of the galley and



A deep chart table provides plenty of stowage. The cylindrical fuel tank is mounted beneath the outboard side.

chart table is just 5ft 4in, though six-footers can stand upright in the companionway. They can also lie full length on all the bunks, including the saloon settees, which extend beneath the forward berth when the athwartships backrests are removed. Further aft, the roomy stern

cabin is one of the brightest and airiest I've seen, with opening ports to the hull side and cockpit and a large circular window in the transom. A port also opens from the cockpit into the heads to starboard, where you find wet hanging space abaft the sink. In fact stowage

throughout the accommodation is good, largely because there are no interior mouldings taking up space. The finish – as on many French production boats of this age – was beginning to wear, with the headlining coming away in places and the cushions feeling rather thin. But new upholstery and a little refurbishment would soon put that right. More importantly, what about the structure? Investigation beneath the bunks and floorboards revealed a comprehensive framework of longitudinal and athwartships stiffening members bonded to the hull. And apparently *Liquidator's* surveyor had given her a clean bill of health, remarking that she seemed a well built boat.



Clever design makes the most of the Kelt's open plan interior.

Other boats to look at



PARKER 27

Ron Holland's lightweight, slippery hulled development of his Super Seal 27 has a fractional rig and vertically lifting keel.



SOUTHERLY 28

Unashamedly a motor-sailer – but, like the Kelt, she has lots of room below and dries out upright with the keel raised.



GIB SEA 282

Voluminous, lightly ballasted French coastal cruiser which came with a choice of centreboard or fixed fin.