

...and now for something completely different

Paraphrasing the famous Monty Python team, our headline worked nicely as an intro to their programme, and it is just as well deserved for this month's test subject, the X1 Riverboat, says Alan Henderson.

DO YOU sometimes suffer from asymmetric ennui, or from surfeits of skills? Feel that there is already infinite choice in the UK dinghy market, but that nothing really stands out to take your fancy? Well it's time for you to look at a new design which really does stand out from the crowd: The X1 Riverboat.

On the X1's traditional hull shape is mounted a tall, big rig. Not only is there no asymmetric to be seen, nor is there a trapeze. The X1 is a unique blend of an old fashioned hull shape, made and fitted out with the most

modern and best materials and fittings, and paired with an up to the minute and powerful rig.

So many designs attempt to be all things to all men (and women). Some have a range of different size rigs to suit different ages, genders and weights, while others claim to straddle different markets, such as boats aimed at teaching/cruising/racing. But how well can they satisfy diverse markets?

The X1 has no such identity crisis. It is designed specifically to suit the needs of its developer,

to be a fast and easy to sail boat for confined spaces, especially for rivers. In some areas there are many clubs on rivers, and many more clubs are on other restricted waters such as little gravel pits.

Many rivers are surrounded by either buildings or trees, so a tall rig can provide a big advantage. And yet there are few boats designed for such waters, with the rare Norfolk Punts and Thames A Raters being the best known.

For such waters, there is a premium on quick tacking, so

the boat must roll tack well. The ability to run straight downwind rather than zig zag is important, while the short tacks needed and the limited opportunity for reaches mean that trapezes would not be useful. There are often mild breezes in these inland waters, so the boat must perform well in light airs.

All of this points towards a boat with relatively high rocker, limited wetted area, generous sail area, a symmetric spinnaker and no trapezes; the formula adopted by the X1.

The fashion over the last 15 to 20 years for skills and semi skills with asymmetric kites is treated with disdain by someone who, with the aid of designer Phil Morrison, has produced a boat aimed squarely at excelling in particular waters, rather than being just adequate in all.

The X1's main and jib add up to a generous 15.9sqm sail area comparable to some double trapeze boats. The jibs come complete with a furler, so offers an option to reduce area when you wish, or when rigging/de rigging. The jib is primarily in dacron for good furling, while the main is all laminate.

The spinnaker has twin patches, and is easily downed into its chute. The sail is of medium size at 13sqm, in this case a little smaller than most trapeze boats, so offering a good compromise between power and ease of handling. As well as a modern square top mainsail, the X1 comes with a smaller pinhead mainsail for use in heavier winds.

On a sail starting in light breezes, the X1 demonstrated its ability to slip along easily in conditions when most current

classes would struggle to make any headway, and then in medium gusts it picked up smartly. The mainsheet comes off the boom, and this lack of a mainsheet base or tower on the floor helps to make a clean open interior for the boat.

With its sets of toestraps all lined up like soldiers on parade near the mid line, it is certainly a neat and tidy boat inside. It is also comfortable to sit out. Another positive factor is that there is no thwart, so helm and crew have infinite choices of where to sit according to conditions, and this spaciousness means there is more than enough room for three people inside this 16 footer. The GNAV and the high boom position also give extra space to helm and crew.

The X1 picked up pace well in the light stiff, and soon accelerated in windier conditions. The off the boom main sheeting is unusual, but you learned to use it almost instantly, and it is actually far better than sheeting from the floor in giving instant responses to gusts.

The mainsail and carbon mast is very much designed to act like a modern skill rig, with the top leach of the square top main opening easily, but in gusty conditions I preferred the instant response of easing the off the boom sheet.

The jib sheets to a fairlead and cleat on a fore/aft track.

Both sails give excellent visibility, with large windows, while the high boom also helps visibility. The traditional spinnaker also gives better visibility than asymmetric spinnakers.

Under white sails, the X1 is certainly lively, then the spinnaker adds a further boost.

The spinnaker hailand and downhaul are both led aft, and the helm hoists while the crew places the pole and takes the sheets to set the sail. There are no reaching hooks or twinning lines, staying with the theme of simplicity and tidiness, but the spinnaker behaved fine without them.

The X1 is a quick boat, so a medium rather than large spinnaker is a wise choice for a boat aimed primarily at confined waters. It also means that the spinnaker pole is short enough to do end over end gybes, making the crew's work easier. The pole is aluminium, whereas all other spars, even the GNAV, are carbon.

Both centreboard and rudder are lifting type, good for shallow waters and ease of launching/recovery. The cockpit is open and fully self draining, while the sealed mast and external halyards help prevent inversion after capsizing.

The boat is longer than most modern dinghies at 16ft, and it is narrower than most, with a beam of 30in, and it has a long slender and elegant appearance, a little reminiscent of an airship's shape, with long straight sides rather than the usual flare to a wide beam. Definitely retro in hull shape, you have to go a long way back to find a comparison.

For me perhaps the two Uifa Fox designs, the Jollyboat or National 18, or an Proctor's Osprey are the closest in size and shape to the X1, while the X1's modern bow is quite unique.

But onto this retro hull, built in modern materials (epoxy foam sandwich), goes the best in modern spars, sail design and equipment. This is a no compromise, premium boat. It has not been pushed to hit a particular price point,

at which the men with slide rules calculate that it can shift enough units, it has simply been designed to be an excellent boat for its own purpose.

It is a design to enthuse its developer, as a sailor on his own waters, and it accomplishes this with flying colours.

The developer, Chris Ingram, expects a PV of about 960, though it will be a hard boat to handicap across the wind bands. It will be exceptionally quick in light breezes, when other boats with normal sail areas can hardly get going.

Performance will come more into line with other boats around F2-3, while at higher windspeeds keeping up with skills may be more difficult. However the X1 can easily take a third crew to do some more righting moment in stronger breezes.

It also has the smaller pin head mainsail as a choice to change down to, and if sailed two up, the sailor may well opt to avoid using the kite on windy reaches.

Primarily designed for good performance in displacement mode, it nonetheless planes well too, feeling well mannered, and with plenty of buoyancy forwaad. The X1 has no inclination to bury the bow as some other classes do.

Chris Ingram named the boat the X1 Riverboat, because it was designed for river use. He is now demonstrating the boat on lakes and estuaries as well as on river venues, and is finding it goes equally well on the sea. X1s are bound to be found on many types of water in the future, and are good for fast cruising or distance races.

This is a boat which is different from the usual. It makes sailing possible in light winds, say 5mph and under, in which it is no pleasure to sail most popular

classes. It carries weight well, whereas there are few dinghies designed to carry the weight of two average size men. Carbon rigs have indeed tended to reduce the optimum crew weight for many classes, leaving few choices for say 23 stone and above.

The X1 will be ideal for two 'average to big' men, and as a hiking boat with a lot of sail, having a generous crew weight aboard may well be an advantage. The ability to add a third crew is a bonus, which again is rare in the dinghy market.

The introductory price of the X1 is £11,995, ready-to-sail inc VAT. This includes the Oxington open hull, Selden carbon mast and boom, aluminium spinnaker pole and mast fittings, Harken deck fittings as standard, four Hyde sails including 2 mainmains (1 x full size down head, 1 x cut down pin head), jib and spinnaker. Trolley, trailer and covers are extras.

This is a quality product which may well appeal to older owners who are used to traditional spinnaker boats, thus competing against boats like Merlins or S05s. Against both it has the advantages of simplicity, with its tidiness and simple systems offering a contrast against these over complicated and hence expensive classes. As a river boat it has few competitors, and could do well.

In the north, the first opportunity to see or try the X1 will be at the Birkenhead Trophy, Ulswater on 2/3 July. A batch of X1s is now under construction, and a limited number may still be available for reservation.

● Thanks to Chris Ingram of River Sailing Dinghies for the test sail, and Martin Dixon for photography. www.x1riverboat.co.uk

Plenty of sail on the X1's tall rig. Photo: Martin Dixon.

X1 with kite. Photo: Martin Dixon.

The X1's rig gives plenty of power in all winds. Photo: Martin Dixon.