



Popular Cruisers

MOONRAKER 36

In the early 1970s, the Moonraker 36 made an enormous impact on the motor cruising scene. Alex McMullen describes its appeal (and one or two shortcomings) with some help from current owners.

Nowadays we would probably call it a mid-range cruiser, but in 1970 the Moonraker 36 was towards the bigger end of the production motorboat market. The 300 that were built in the first four years, and the 100 or so that followed through to 1980, represented an impressive volume of business for this size of boat.

Initially at least, it was its competitive price that made the 36 so popular. The earliest models cost under £10,000, which was a bargain even then. Three years later it was still good value, at under £20,000, when fitted with a flybridge and with engines powerful enough to produce planing speeds.

Another attraction was its accommodation. In its standard aft-cabin version, which was by far the most popular, it offered six comfortable berths; at a

push, seven or eight could sleep aboard.

Moonraker 36s were built at Bell's Boatyard in Brundall, on the Norfolk Broads. The original manufacturers were Buxton Marine Services, who changed their name to Moonraker Marine within a few months of launching the boat. In 1972 the moulds and moulding rights were bought by Colin Chapman, of Lotus cars' fame, who leased a couple of sheds and an office in the yard and continued to build and sell the boats through a company called JCL Marine.

Naval architect Robert Tucker designed the hull, which has a very fine, well-raked entry and a deep-vee form back to midships, from where the underwater sections level out to a 15° deadrise at the transom. The design has a reputation for coping



Morvyn & Karen Phillips Darius

Motor Boats Monthly contributor Morvyn Phillips and his wife Karen have owned their Moonraker 36 since 1991, and in that time have covered 6000 miles in her.

They have cruised to eastern Germany (see MBM Feb & Mar 94) and to Denmark and Sweden (see MBM Aug & Sep 95); in fact the boat spent two years in Scandinavia, and Morvyn's account of a cruise from Copenhagen to Stockholm will appear in a future issue.

Darius is one of the older Moonrakers, built in 1971 with an aft cabin but without a flybridge (with one, she would not have been able to do the mix of coastal and inland cruising that the Phillips enjoy). Originally she had an open-backed wheelshelter, but a previous owner converted it into a fully enclosed wheelhouse.

Morvyn and Karen liked the boat enough to buy her despite the fact that she was suffering from osmosis. After her gelcoat was removed, she spent nine months on the hard, drying out, before a new one was applied.

The two 145hp Perkins were taken out for rebuilding, which

entailed cutting a hole in the wheelhouse roof. Morvyn reckoned this was the best way of making sure they would run properly. "Engine surveys can only tell you so much," he says.

One of the main problems turned out to be with the heat-exchangers. "They were chugged-up with sand, which seemed to confirm what we had been told about the boat having always been on the East Coast. Touch wood, they have run OK since then.

With all the gear they carry on board for their long cruises, top speed is only 14-15 knots. "In fact we often cruise at displacement speed, about 8 knots."

Morvyn confirms what most owners say about the seakeeping of Moonrakers, at least of early models. "In a head sea she is brilliant. Wet, of course, but with no problems other than that. She is not very good in a following sea. It's all right if you can outstrip the sea, but if it outstrips you the boat likes to broach and you have to fight the wheel."

At low speeds she has proved to be very easy to handle, and it is normally only Morvyn and Karen on board. "She's the best boat we have had for low-speed manoeuvring, because she is heavier. Other boats have been blown about by a mere puff of wind."

Darius leads rather a nomadic life, with nowhere she can call home. "We don't have a permanent mooring," Morvyn



'In a head sea she is brilliant. In a following sea it's all right if you can outstrip the sea, but if it outstrips you the boat likes to broach'

explains, "because we get bored staying in one place." Currently, just for a few months, the boat is on the Medway, but very shortly she will be leaving for this summer's cruising, in home waters for a change. She will be going round to the South Coast and continuing west, weather permitting all the way to the Scillies.



Above: from its launch in 1970, the Moonraker 36 won public acclaim for its volume of accommodation and its competitive price. The flybridge model was introduced the next year.



Interior views of a 1974-built Moonraker 36, with accommodation plan. Usually the open-plan forward area (left) had a convertible dinette aft of the wheelhouse (below left) came with a single helm seat as standard but was often specified with a second forward-facing pilot seat, as here.

The JCL enigma

JCL Marine Ltd, builders of the Moonraker 36 from 1972 to 1980, were a big name in the marine industry in that period, producing the Mamba, the Marauder, the Mirage and the Mystere motoryachts as well. But what the initials JCL stood for was always something of a mystery.

Most people thought the C might stand for the first or last name of the company's founder Colin Chapman, and the L for Lotus, the car for which he was best known by the general public.

The truth is more prosaic. JCL was one of the combinations of registration-plate letters reserved for new cars sold in Norfolk, where the company were based. It can still be seen on the county's roads.

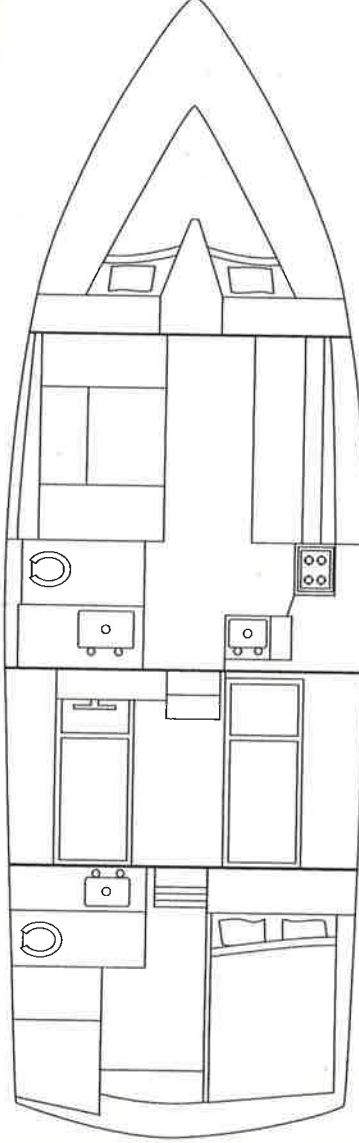
Dimensions

Loa up to 41ft (12.5m), depending on length of stem and stern overhangs.
Hull length 36ft 3in (11m).
Beam 11ft 9in (3.58m).
Draught 3ft 1in (0.93m).
Air draught 8ft 10in (2.69m) without flybridge; 11ft 1in (3.37m) with flybridge.
Displacement 6.7 tonnes.
Fuel capacity 100-200gal (455-910lt) before 1973; 200gal (910lt) after 1973.

well with head seas, though for being rather wet in such conditions. With its long bow and its broad, relatively shallow transom, it can be hard work to keep on track in a following sea.

The hull shape was tweaked several times by the builders to reduce the amount of water riding up the sides when punching into waves, and to increase controllability when running with them.

The first few boats had no sprayrails, but some were added very early on, originally in wood and later built into the mouldings. The chines were increasingly broadened, and taken further forward to deflect spray and provide a little extra lift in the bow. Another early change was the lengthening of the short skeg keel towards the stern, to increase



George Larkin

One Eyed Jacks

Although George Larkin's Moonraker 36 was built in 1975, only halfway through the production run, she is one of the later models, a Series E. By then, most of the many

developments in the design and layout of the boat had been made.

George has owned One Eyed Jacks for nine years, and keeps her at West Wick

Marina on the River Crouch in Essex. He cruises with his wife Sandra, and sometimes also with their son Graham, in the Thames Estuary and across the North Sea to Belgium and the Netherlands.

Power comes from two 175hp Perkins T6.354s, which give a top speed, when light-loaded, of 20 knots.

"We cruise comfortably at 15-16 knots," George says, "at which speed she is quite

economical, doing 2.2mpg." That means fuel consumption of about 7gph (32lph).

The engines are rather noisy, it being the high-pitched whine of the turbos that offends; this is particularly so in the wheelhouse, but then the boat is normally driven from the flybridge. Another criticism is poor access to the outside of the starboard engines.

"Early boats were reputed to give a very wet ride, but this

Olly & Mavis Ashton Namorada

When Horace 'Olly' Ashton was looking for a boat seven years ago, the Moonraker 36 was not on his list of possibilities, because he doesn't like aft cabins. He prefers aft-cockpit boats. With their safe outside seating area, as well as enclosed accommodation, he reckons they offer the best of both worlds.

But, persuaded by a friend to go and look at a Moonraker that was for sale, he

discovered she was one of the rare aft-cockpit versions, and bought her with his wife Mavis.

Olly says he has been on many other motorboats, but never on one so easy to handle. "I have been out in winds up to Force 6 and 7, but she has never slammed on me." And he reckons Moonrakers are not as bad as they are made out to be in following seas. "It's up to the person behind the wheel. If he knows what he is doing, there's no problem. You have to know when to accelerate and when to ease off, to keep the boat going."

The builder's manual, still on board, includes detailed instructions on handling a 36 in different sea conditions.

Olly and Mavis keep the boat in their



'You can comfortably seat nine people in the aft cockpit, or twelve if you squeeze them in'

directional stability. All these modifications improved, but by no means eliminated, the 36's high-speed handling quirks.

Moonrakers were always built in GRP, the deck and superstructure being of sandwich construction, with a foam core.

Some of the pre-JCL boats had a fault with their GRP fuel tanks, which originally were just formed in the bottom of the boat, under the sole. Wicking of the glass mat led to fuel blockages. Where this came to light it was sorted out, though it required major surgery; the tops were cut open and the tanks were carefully cleaned out and lined with resin, or in

one, with her deep sprayrails and large chine, is quite dry. The only conditions in which she is difficult to handle are a following or quartering sea. She's very good head-on to the waves, and not too bad beam-on, but when the sea gets round behind her it tends to lift the stern.

"However, I have never had a moment's fear. I am always confident that the boat will get me there, and back."



home town of Boston, on the River Witham, and cruise in The Wash, northwards to the Humber, and around the Norfolk coast into the Broads. Last summer, Namorada completed the Boston to Great Yarmouth leg of the Voyage Of Hope round-Britain relay in aid of the Foundation For Children With Leukaemia, after Olly received the crystal baton from the Mayor of Boston (above).

Built in 1972, Namorada is powered by two 145hp Perkins T6.354s. Without the weight of a flybridge or an aft cabin, her top speed matches that of most of the more powerful models, at over 20 knots. She cruises comfortably at 17 knots, at which she burns an average of 8gph (36lph).

The Ashtons usually have three or four people on board with them when cruising, or as many as nine for day trips, when the all-round cockpit seating comes into its own. "You can comfortably seat nine people there," says Olly, "or twelve if you squeeze them in."

some cases stainless steel tanks were installed. None of the owners of early Moonraker 36s we have talked to reported problems in this area, although we have heard of one severe example.

When JCL took over, they brought in Lloyd's Register to check out the design and, where necessary, order changes in construction methods. Subsequently, the boats were issued with Series Production Certificates; some, at extra cost, were built under individual Lloyd's supervision and granted Hull Moulding Certificates.

When the Moonraker was launched, it came with two 98hp Bedford-based GM 330 diesels as



standard. These gave a top speed of 14-15 knots, so it was only practical to cruise at about 12 knots, barely semi-displacement speed.

However, Perkins T6.354 (turbocharged, 6cyl, 354ci) engines of 145hp or 175hp (the latter with aircharge cooling) were among the alternatives, and within a couple of years the 145s became the standard installation and the 175s the increasingly popular main option. Top speed with the 145s is normally 17 knots, giving comfortable cruising at 14-15 knots. With the 175s the boats should be able to do 20-23 knots, cruising at about 18.

Non-turbo Perkins 6.354s of 115hp were also offered, but few were fitted. Some Moonrakers have Ford or Cummins power.

The first boats had open-backed wheelshelters, and all but a few had aft cabins rather than aft cockpits. Some of these have been modified to give them an enclosed wheelhouse.

In early 1971, Moonraker Marine introduced the flybridge alternative, initially still without an enclosed wheelhouse below, and still with or without an aft

cabin. Another 18 months on, they standardised on the arrangement that has become the most familiar one, with a flybridge, an enclosed wheelhouse and an aft cabin.

In the first flybridge models, access from the raised aft deck to the wheelhouse was through the combination of a vertical door and a horizontal hatch. This was later modified to a single, angled, sliding glass door.

There were also several interior changes made during the boat's production run.

In the most common layout, the main forward accommodation is open-plan. There are two vee-berths forward (with the option of an infill piece converting them into a double), ahead of half-height bulkheads enclosing hanging lockers on both sides. The main saloon area has a dinette which converts to a double berth on the port side, and a settee/berth (a double on some boats) and galley (usually L-shaped) to starboard. The toilet/shower compartment is to port, astern of the dinette.

In some later boats, the forward sleeping area

Mike Powell Anya

Mike Powell's wife Veronica was instrumental in his buying a 1972 flybridge Moonraker 36 last year, diverting him to view the boat on the way home from looking at another potential purchase. She liked the layout of Moonrakers,

and in particular the good visibility from the wheelhouse and the ability to see out from the raised dinette and the galley.

Anya, as Mike has renamed the boat, was in a rather sorry state when he bought her, and he has spent much of the time since then bringing her back into good condition. "She had not had any tender loving care, but she's now getting lots of it."

Although Mike had to carry out much work on the 175hp Perkins engines, they had done only 670 hours in the first 23 years of their life, and

are now running well.

Mike and Veronica will usually cruise the boat on their own, accompanied on occasion by their son James. Outings to date have been limited to trips around the Solent from Anya's base in Lymington, but plans are in hand for a trip to Brittany this summer.

"We were out in some somewhat rough stuff in Hurst Narrows and the way she went through it was very impressive," says Mike. "I am also impressed by the fact that the boat can still achieve her design speed. We got 23 knots out of her."



'I am impressed by the fact that she can still achieve her design speed'

Prices then & now

When the Moonraker 36 was first exhibited, at the second Southampton Boat Show in 1970, it cost just £8950, with no tax to pay. That was for the standard aft-cabin boat, with twin 98hp GM diesels.

In 1973, with a flybridge and twin 175hp Perkins T6.354s, the price was £19,000. By 1980, when builders JCL Marine went out of business, that had risen to over £70,000 ex VAT.

At the 1988 Southampton Boat Show, the brief resurrection called the Moonraker Super 36 cost £108,000 ex VAT, with two 185hp Perkins Range 4 diesels and a number of extras.

For an idea of the prices Moonrakers are now fetching on the secondhand market, we spoke to Norfolk Yacht Agency, who have sold a number of the boats on brokerage in recent years.

They tell us well-maintained non-flybridge boats usually sell for £30,000 to £35,000; but in poor condition they might go for as little as £20,000, and a refurbished 1971 boat with Perkins 145s recently fetched well over £40,000.

Early flybridge models, in good condition, would sell for £32,000 to over £40,000. A well-maintained Series F boat, one of the last built by JCL Marine, recently sold for £42,000.

In 1995, in conjunction with Paul Hadley Boat Sales of Haying Island, the Agency sold one of the Moonraker Super 36s for £68,000.

Currently for sale is a rather unusual boat, originally a non-flybridge Moonraker 36 but retrofitted with a non-Moonraker upper helm station. The asking price is £36,000.

For further details contact Norfolk Yacht Agency, Brundall Bay Marina, Brundall, Norfolk NR1 3 5PN. Tel: 01603 713434.



Left: a postscript to the successful Moonraker 36 of the 1970s was the short-lived Super 36, produced from the same moulds by DC Marine in 1988. Only five were built.

was made into a separate cabin. And a few of the very last boats had a large L-shaped settee/berth on both sides, and no dinette, although there was an adjustable-height table beside the port settee.

The aft cabin has either two single berths or, more commonly, a double, with a large locker and dressing table. A second toilet/shower compartment aft was an option from early on, and most boats have one.

Standard wheelshelter 36s have a single helm seat and a longitudinal settee opposite, but many were built with, or fitted later with, with a second forward-facing pilot seat. Enclosed-wheelhouse models also come with or without the pilot seat.

This was also a boat of many names, or at least of many suffixes.

Moonraker Marine originally promoted it as the Moonraker 36 Softrider, and after only a few months as the Softrider Series II, following some modifications including the addition of sprayrails. They called the aft-cockpit version the Sportsman.

When the Perkins T6.354 became the common engine installation, the numbers 290 or 350 were added to the designation, representing total horsepower with the twin 145hp and 175hp versions respectively. These tags continued to be used until production ceased.

In addition, some early aft-cabin craft were called

GT or GTS, meaning with and without the second toilet/shower compartment respectively.

JCL Marine referred to successive models as Series C, D, E and then F, as they made further modifications to the sprayrails and chine, and tweaks to the interior layout.

By the late 1970s, the Moonraker 36 was facing increasing competition from the likes of Fairline and Princess, then emerging as the leaders in the motorcruiser market. The recession, and a certain amount of over-ambition in some of the builders' other designs such as the Italian-styled Mystere and its successor the Mirage, put paid to JCL. They called in the receivers in late 1980.

Seven years later the moulds were acquired by DC Marine, again based in Bell's Boatyard, and they started building the Moonraker Super 36, one of which was exhibited by its distributors Monitor Marine (still in business as suppliers of parts to superyachts) at the 1988 Southampton Boat Show.

In layout this boat was similar to the Series F, but with the forward berths in a fully separate cabin. It was powered by two 185hp Perkins Range 4 diesels, successors to the T6.354s, and its standard of fit-out was excellent, and thoroughly modern. But only five were ever built, three of which made up one order from Norway. The resurrected Moonraker 36, however super, was by then a dated design. □

Subject to survey

As ever, we would urge the prospective purchaser of any secondhand boat only to do so subject to a professional survey. For an insight into the general condition of Moonraker 36s, and the kinds of problem that can arise, we talked to marine surveyor David Hopkins.

David has inspected a number of the boats in recent years, including some older ones which are entering their second quarter-century.

"Their standard of construction was good," he reports. "There is no question

about the quality of the hull, the structural bulkheads or the stiffening." He has not yet seen one with any signs of osmosis.

However, the deck and superstructure do not escape criticism. "The foredeck is the boat's Achilles' heel. Because of its lack of support, it is difficult to keep the forward-facing windows in the coachroof watertight, as the superstructure around them can flex." The problem can be overcome by fitting knee-type stiffening in the forward cabin.

David has come across a fuel tank problem in one older boat, a 1972 model: the GRP tanks leaked around the inspection hatches when filled right up. He has not personally come across any incidence of glass mat from the tanks getting into the fuel lines, but makes the point that in any tank that has not been well

moulded bits of mat can break off. Besides causing fuel-flow problems, this can also lead to seepage round joints and edges in the tank.

Otherwise, he finds little wrong that has not been caused by uncaring owners. Deck fittings, electrics and plumbing are generally of a high standard, as are the engine beds and installation.

The Perkins T6.354s to be found in most Moonrakers are well thought-of, but David would always recommend the commissioning of a separate survey on them, including compression tests, by a suitable marine engineer.

David Hopkins can be contacted c/o Hamble Yacht Services, Port Hamble, Hamble, Hampshire SO31 4NIN. Tel: 01703 453256.

Next month

Almost 600 Fairline Holidays were built between 1972 and 1984, in numerical terms the company's most successful model ever. The design represented the breakthrough in seagoing ability and styling that pushed Fairline into the premier league of boatbuilders.