

A History of the Leader - along with two rival GP 14 footers - Wanderer and GP14

The GP14 was designed by Jack Holt in 1949 and has been hugely popular, despite its boxy, hard chine appearance. So, the prospect for a double chine version, that sailed better, looked promising in the sixties. The Leader was first unveiled at the 1962 London Boat show to wide acclaim. It returned in 1966, after 300 boats had been sold, a remarkable beginning. Why then are there still fewer Leaders around now than the GP14, or the Wanderer, which only turned up in 1978? The answer lies with marketing and designers/builders history

The designer was Gordon Pollard, owner of SmallCraft, a highly regarded wooden dinghy builder. He was already co-copyright holder for the Wayfarer with Ian Proctor, its designer, so he was well placed to launch a smaller, lighter version. There were many differences of design to justify his copyright, but the hulls do look remarkably similar. Smallcraft built the Leader until 1968, when Pollard closed the Southampton factory. Sail numbers had reached 400. He remained on the LCOA committee until his death in 1991 but the future now lay with GRP, principally, and other builders.

The boats were now composite, with GRP hulls and wooden decks, built now by a man called Ron Trowbridge, in Winchester. Sail numbers are from 400 to 500. A few wooden boats were still built, by Mason and later Marsh, near Grimsby which had numbers around 500-600. The GRP hulled boats sold steadily, and an all GRP version was unveiled at the Dinghy Exhibition of 1974 where 25 were sold. The all GRP version (with wooden side benches) started with Sail number 1000. Numbers 600 – 999 were allocated to a Canadian Licence holder.

It is then surprising that Ian Proctor should design another similar GP boat in 1978, stating that there was a gap in the market place for a GRP General Purpose 14 footer. I have looked through back issues of "Leader News" since 1990, which included a history that Pollard himself wrote, and cannot find a particular incident that could justify it, but it seems that the marketing of the Leader was no longer keeping the boat in the public eye. It seems that the builder built only slowly, on request and relied on the LCOA for marketing. The marketing of a boat by its builder seems necessary for success, as all financial aspects are aligned. What is clear is that Ian Proctor would now be the copyright holder for the Wanderer, and thus receive the royalties that he had not for the Leader. His commitment, and a good marketing effort by the Wanderer's builder, meant that it stormed into a marketplace the Leader should still have been star in.

But it was not until 1984 that Anglo Marine became the Wanderer builder, and the marketing was most effective. Very soon after that, in 1986, the Mk11 Leader was designed and built by Sapphire Marine. This was an all GRP version, had good reviews in the Yachting press, and was well marketed by Jeremy Southcott, the builder. Sail numbers started at 1102 and Pollard noted an active 3 years for the class. So both classes were modern, with a good, all GRP boat. However times were hard with a recession and Sapphire did not survive into the 90's, but Anglo Marine did.

At sail number 1160, in 1991, Ian Porter took over the Builders Licence. Porters continued to build other dinghies beside the Leader. In 2002, Anglo Marine had ceased building the Wanderer, so it was now also without a committed builder, and its class association looked to Porters as well. Porters began to build Wanderers in 2003, and there was an obvious commercial rivalry, in which they came down in favour of the Wanderer. The last Leader they built was 1260. John Parker had been an agent

for Porters Leaders in Norfolk, selling many, so now stepped in and built a few. However, the MK11 moulds made a good, but expensive boat, and GRP technology was moving on.

A builder called Hartley redesigned many classes into a cheaper production technique, including the Wanderer. It had survived over the Leader which now had no builder. Ian Porter thinks its lack of sportiness helped it, and also floorboards for those who want to sleep aboard. We who sail Leaders know its sportiness is a virtue, of course. As to the boxy GP14 – I am amazed at its success

But we continue as a lively class, with many Leaders cruised and raced. The quality of the Leader11 means that there are plenty of good used boats available for a long time to come

Mike Sherwen

Notes :

This research was made with the help of John Parker, John and Chris Wharmby , and Ian Porter

The design date can be inferred as 1961, since the Earls Court Boat Show has always taken place in early January

It is my own opinion only that the Leader “insignia” derives from a draughtsman’s symbol of the same appearance , called a leader