FIREBALL

PHOTO JEREMY EVANS

When it appeared over 40 years ago, the Fireball was hailed as a sensationally different racing dinghy. **Jeremy Evans** tests the latest boat built by Guy Winder to find out if a 'Ball can still blow you away...

The Fireball still looks like a ball of fire. Designer, Peter Milne – a former editor of Yachts and Yachting – still takes an interest in the class which is rolling along nicely. More than 70 boats attended this year's nationals and there's a choice of professional builders at home and abroad. With 20 associations worldwide, the Fireball has a good international following and chooses some very attractive locations for its worlds – Thailand in 2000, Italy in 2001, Florida in 2002 and Kenya in 2003 when 20 boats made the trip from Britain. The 2004 worlds start on New Year's Day in Adelaide, come home to Teignmouth for 2005 then hop across to Canada in 2006.

The boat's scow-style hull pretty much stands alone while its pinhead mainsail and symmetric spinnaker set it apart from current asymmetrics, while delivering just as much fun. ▶

Above **A Fireball can point higher than many asymmetrics with its symmetric kite on a shy reach – the kite is stable with full vertical and horizontal adjustment for the pole.**

PHOTOS JEREMY EVANS

Above **The Fireball can point high to windward, but if it's breezy the fast crews free off and let the boat plane. Like most boats, you must keep a 'Ball flat to go fast.**

The name Fireball implies that the boat enjoys fresh winds, but it's not intimidating. Instead it looks friendly enough for any competent dinghy sailor to think 'I could handle that,' though – as with any competitive class – winning is another matter. Last year's 40th anniversary saw the launch of Fireball 14838, while the first Fireball built has been owned and sailed by the same family for many years.

Design and development

Peter Milne designed the Fireball as a low cost flyer for simple marine plywood construction. The current boat looks similar to the original, but there have been big changes in materials, hull shape and equipment. Plywood hulls stayed popular for the first 20 years until professional builders began to combine plywood decks with glass sandwich hulls and eventually abandoned wooden decks altogether. Due to the DIY aspect of Fireball building, Peter Milne had allowed small tolerances in shape which enabled the most skilled builders to tweak extra speed. This effectively came to an end when the Australian builder Peter Delange produced a Fireball with a more buoyant flared bow in the mid 1980s. No one was able to better that shape and all the major Fireball builders now use moulds from the Delange hull plugs – which makes the modern hull an effective one-design.

Guy Winder of Winder Boats began building the Fireball in the mid 1980s and reckons he's been steadily producing around 25 new boats every year. Having won 37 world, European and UK national titles in 17 years, Winder Fireballs seem to make up a large chunk of the entry at any event. Guy says his latest model is the product of 40 years of refinement, leading to the current virtual one-design hull with rig and controls that are rated by the sailors as 'totally sorted.' They are also rated to be light, stiff and low on maintenance.

Unlike the old plywood boats which stayed fast for three years at most before going floppy, Guy reckons a modern hull is so sturdy that it should be fully competitive for a decade or more. Not so good for repeat business, but great for the class which now has competitive boats spread right through the fleet. The Winder construction is not rocket science but is well proven, with an epoxy foam sandwich hull and deck that is vacuum bonded and oven baked. A standard polyester gelcoat provides good colour choice and make repairs easy, while the inner and outer skins of the hull around the bowtank are Kevlar reinforced to ensure it will keep punching through anything.

Rigging

Most standard fittings on the Winder Fireball are by Harken, with 16:1 kicker and 14:1 jib halyard tension and virtually all rig controls accessible by the helm. The jib sheeting angle is fully adjustable, with lower mast bend controlled by chocks. The boat is fully calibrated, weight corrected, measured and supplied with Pinnell and Bax Dacron sails as standard, but can be custom finished and fitted to owner requirements – the level of cost and complexity is down to you. Tacktick Micro Compass, Harken ratchet blocks for the spinnaker sheets and a push-and-pull Harken traveller strut on the foredeck are all part of the optional go-faster armoury.

The boat we tested had pretty much everything fitted and at first sight looked like it might need a lot of fiddling and twiddling expertise. Admittedly it could be a tuner's delight, but most will stick with standard settings. Just move the shrouds one pin down if it's windy, and ease the strut or blocks

to let the mast bend some more and get a flatter main. It doesn't take long to get the hang of what goes where – rigging our test Fireball at Shoreham took two people a relaxed half hour once the boat had arrived on its road trailer.

Sailing

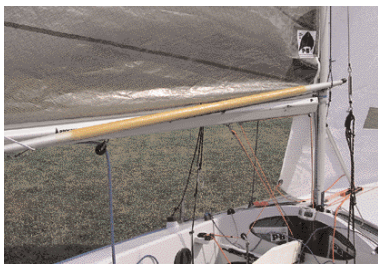
With its slim, flat hull a Fireball is easier than many to slide on and off a trailer. The hull is also pretty stable, with low freeboard and wide side decks making it easy for the helm or crew to step on board. When launching or landing, it's very nice to come back to the simplicity of a centreboard that swivels down with a quick tug, doesn't stick in its case and won't slam into the bottom if you go aground.

The Fireball is a 'sit down' style of trapeze boat with a deep cockpit, rather than the stand up asymmetrics like the RS800. Unlike most full-on trapeze boats, the Fireball is also comfortable for the crew to sit inside the boat on the thwart or down on the leeward deck, and while the narrow cockpit looks crowded by a maze of controls there's actually loads of comfortable space for two full size crew. Thirteen stone crews are often found at the front, but class chairman Phil Popple reckons mixed and all girl teams also get ample racing satisfaction with no more than seven stone on the wire. We sailed the boat in a fresh offshore wind, with the previous day's waves rolling in towards Shoreham. It was loads of fun. The spinnaker halyard has a 2:1 pump system which is great to get it up in double quick time.

Kite up, crew on the wire and we charged along on a shy reach. The boat felt really stable in the puffs, with the deep rudder blade providing pin-sharp responsiveness while being extremely light on the helm. Gybing is perhaps not quite so easy as with an asymmetric. The crew needs to be slick when it comes to swapping the pole while the helm holds the boat downwind. It's just a matter of practice to get your techniques dialled. The drop is very straightforward as the crew bundles the kite down into its bag at the front of the cockpit, without the jams that can beset an asymmetric being dragged back into its chute.

Sailing the Fireball upwind we found there's plenty of power in the mainsail. The kicker control is fed from under the mainsheet so it goes straight to the driver, allowing a quick pull to tighten the leech and prevent the boom flying up when you ease the mainsheet. Crew or helm can also trim the barber hauler – like most controls it's accessible fore and aft – opening the slot to let the Fireball drive upwind with the jib doing the work. The trick is to power off and let the boat plane to windward which it does effortlessly when the breeze is up, but you need to keep her flat while playing the mainsheet through the gusts. A split mainsheet system is led along the boom from the transom to the middle of the boat, controlling the angle of attack without over tensioning the sail. The standard mainsheet needs a fair bit of grunt – lighter weight sailors add blocks to increase purchase and make sheeting easier.

The shape of the Fireball lets it tack quickly and easily which is vital for a tactical boat, and it also felt pretty stable through gybes. However, there is plenty of power in the boat and getting it wrong may result in a swim. Four sealed tanks provide plenty of buoyancy, but the centreboard floats low enough for you to climb onto without the very tiring pull-up routine that you can get on high floating boats. Those wide side decks help ensure the Fireball comes up almost dry. As soon as you turn the power back on, any water left in the bottom streams out through the transom via two tubes with Mylar flaps.



PHOTOS JEREMY EVANS

Above Standard deck colour is silver grey with white hull. The Winder deck moulding incorporates the centreboard capping to increase stiffness throughout the boat.

A flexible rig gives the choice of racing with a stiff or bendy mast to suit different weights. Proctor Cumulus is standard on the Winder, but some opt for the Superspar M7 or M7+.

Verdict

Y&Y originally tested the Fireball in March 1962. The verdict was: 'She is good for inland water or the sea. Her performance has proved intriguing for expert helmsmen, yet she is stable enough to be kind to the clumsy novice.' Not much has changed. Everything works and the Winder boat feels easy to sail, though it will be difficult to win with so much skill in the class.

Fireball sailors have never shown enthusiasm for changing to an asymmetric kite. They rate a conventional kite as more fun for the crew who has major input into the speed of the boat. The kite is launched and stowed using a bag at the front of the cockpit. The fashion for chutes is long gone because they weighed down the bows with water. Carbon masts have also been resisted by the class, but carbon spinnaker poles and tillers may be adopted. The aim is to keep changes small and gradual, while keeping pace with dinghy developments.

Guy Winder claims a Fireball can be sailed to its full potential on any water in almost any wind strength. Unlike many of the hot trapeze boats, he says it's equally at home racing on the sea or working the shifts on a small lake – this year's national and European champions are both based on a gravel pit near Nottingham, but used their pit skills to win on open water.

It's also good for almost any weather. The Fireball might look sticky in light winds, but can

PHOTO JEREMY EVANS

Above National champions Kevin Hope crewed by Rob Gardner.

skate along quite nicely if the water is flat – predictably, that uncompromising bow will not cope so well with insufficient wind and chop. Best of all, Fireballs love to plane which is the root reason why many people love to sail dinghies. On a smooth surface you should get lift-off from around Force 3 on both downwind and upwind legs. Further up the wind scale, Fireball sailors reckon they are still racing when everyone else has gone home. Guy Winder remembers finishing one race in a recorded Force 7 during the Fireball worlds in Ireland 1995 – a good result when he was well into his 60s!

That's what sailing a Fireball is about. A boat for everyday sailors that can provide enjoyable racing from about age 16 to 60 plus. Forty years on our verdict is that the Fireball is still a load of fun to sail. ■

ANSWER **BACK**

from **Guy Winder**

Firstly I must thank Jeremy for his very positive report and UK Fireball Association chairman Phil Popple for arranging the test. Secondly I must correct the impression that I am personally responsible for this great product. Being semi retired, the credit must go to my partners, David Winder and Richard Wagstaff, and our dedicated workforce – all of whom sail our boats and supply the continuous feedback vital for keeping our boats ahead. Every feature of the boat has been refined by 40 years of intense competition, not least the spars and sails which, unlike most new classes, can be sourced from several competing sailmakers. The report gives the impression that spinnaker chutes are out of fashion, but we still fit them for owners who sail on small lakes. The wet spinnaker is stowed in a sock well back in the cockpit so performance is barely affected.

So why does the Fireball retain a steady growth rate while newer dinghy designs fall away? I think it must be attributed to the voluntary hard work which is done by the class's committees. They supported the construction rule changes enabling ourselves and builders worldwide to make the vital change from wood to all moulded construction. They also organise all the great Fireball events such as the 2004 worlds in Adelaide.

New sailors to the class are always welcome. The days have gone where the top helmsmen rarely talk to those struggling at the back of the fleet. Now the Fireball class has training weekends and a hugely successful buddy system to encourage satisfactory performance across the whole fleet.

FIREBALL SPECIFICATION

DESIGNER:	Peter Milne 1962
LENGTH:	4.93m
BEAM:	1.73m
HULL WEIGHT:	79.4kg
UPWIND SAIL AREA:	14.3sq m
SPINNAKER:	13.01sq m
LATEST PN:	984
OPTIMUM CREW WEIGHT:	140-170kg
PRICE:	£7,773-£8,935

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THE OPPOSITION...

Where does the Fireball fit in? Here are three alternatives...

PHOTOS DEBORAH HILLER/NSY*

BUZZ

Single wire asymmetric dinghy designed by former Fireball champ John Caig with Ian Howlett in 1994; best suited to lighter weight crews.

GUIDE PRICE:	£6,295
LOA:	4.2m
BEAM:	1.92m
HULL WEIGHT:	98kg
UPWIND SAIL AREA:	12.85m
ASYMMETRIC KITE:	17.4sq m
LATEST PN:	1005

RS400

This twin crew hiking dinghy suits similar crew weight. Provides excellent racing and is the biggest class with an asymmetric kite.

GUIDE PRICE:	£7,795
LOA:	4.52m
BEAM:	2m
HULL WEIGHT:	85kg
UPWIND SAIL AREA:	14.76sq m
ASYMMETRIC KITE:	13.94sq m
LATEST PN:	952

PHOTO LASER CENTRE*

LASER 4000

Single wire and adjustable racks are used to 'equalise' crew weight. The Fireball can catch up in Force 4-plus when the fully battened 4000 becomes more demanding.

GUIDE PRICE:	£7,695
LOA:	4.64m
BEAM:	1.5-2.3m
HULL WEIGHT:	80kg
UPWIND SAIL AREA:	14.7sq m
ASYMMETRIC KITE:	17.1sq m
LATEST PN:	906