

Elsie is a gas-free boat, so does not have a foredeck locker.



Does practice MAKE PERFECT?

Middlewich Narrowboats are best known for their long-running hire fleet – but build bespoke boats, too.

Mark Langley takes a look at a new 57-footer

**NEW BOAT
TEST**



Middlewich Narrowboats have been in the hire business for almost 40 years. In that time, they have built up a large following of boaters, attracted by keen pricing and quite unique boats. They have also been quietly building high standard bespoke narrowboats for owners who like having the robustness that come with experience of hiring out craft to all and sundry.

Elsie is a 57ft cruiser style narrowboat, built on a hull designed by Middlewich Narrowboats, to a very competitive price of around £65,000. The owner's brief was a modern boat that would be accessible to elderly relatives, and be comfortable for extended cruising. This means that extra grab rails were provided by the fore and aft cockpits, to help get on and off.

Exterior

The shell itself is very cleanly fitted: the very high gloss paintwork did show the odd panel wobble, though only on close inspection. A very large auto-tracking satellite receiver unit is mounted on the cabin roof, standing quite tall and very obvious in its bright white plastic case. It can however be removed, both for security and for passing under some of the low bridges and tunnels in this area.

The forward cockpit is noticeably missing the conventional forepeak locker. Instead, an area just big enough for the chrome finish T-stud occupies the very tip of the bow. This hints at the lack of a gas locker: this is an LPG-free boat, as are all but one of the Middlewich hire-boats. The rest of the cockpit has been left open for free-standing furniture. A large polypropylene water tank sits underneath.

Saloon

Entering the cabin, the modern exterior continues inside. The step and TV cabinet can be easily removed to allow access to the fitted 3KW Vetus bow-thruster. A solid fuel stove is to starboard. This alone would not be enough for heat to easily spread down the rest of the boat, so a Webasto diesel heating system is fitted with ample radiators throughout the rest of the boat.

The saloon is currently home to two easy chairs, and a folding table. The LCD TV unit is mounted very discreetly under the gunwale, and can swing out to different viewing directions, or be stored away inside the cupboard. The controls for the satellite system are also in here, as well as other entertainment systems.

The hire-boat pedigree extends to all the plumbing and electrics. Everything is very easily accessible – often

not the case with bespoke boats, though attitudes are changing. If something goes wrong, hire-boat engineers need to be able to fix it quickly; and this is an approach we would like to see find its way onto private boats.

Interestingly, a 12V cigarette-lighter type socket is fitted for the floor lamp: unable to find such a unit in chrome finish, the builders used a blanking plate and drilled it to accept the socket, so matching the rest of the switches.

Galley

The galley is a very spacious affair, with a fair mix of stainless steel and chrome. A divider between the galley and saloon breaks up this quite large area. The hob is a flush-fitted ceramic diesel-fired Wallas unit, which gives a very quick heat – much like a domestic electric hob. This and the Wallas diesel oven vent to the outside through a balanced flue.

A microwave is also fitted, powered by the 2.5KW inverter, along with a large sink and large 12V fridge. Under the 'hidden' corner of the galley unit (which also serves as a breakfast bar) is a small 230V freezer.

All the units in the galley were bought-in units, except for the one opposite the main galley worktop. This is an economical solution, but they are nonetheless well crafted units, not cheap MDF versions. They do not look out of place with the quality standard of the woodwork throughout the rest of the boat.

Opposite the galley is a very large glazed sidehatch – fortunately with a good diverter above to prevent water running from the roof trickling into the cabin! The windows throughout the saloon and galley are quite large 60in x 24in Wesley Marine units, with rounded corners and large matching portholes aft. Inside, aluminium venetian blinds effectively manage the light entering the cabin – with plush covers for the portholes and the Houdini glazed roof hatches in the galley and the saloon.

Bedroom

The master cabin includes a large double bed, which pulls out to 5ft width. The mattress itself is high-density foam, which Middlewich consider longer-lasting than a sprung unit, and which lends itself to having a section which folds away.

A large wardrobe, with ample storage, conceals the fittings for the pumpout toilet. This discharges to a massive tank under the berth, with capacity for about a month before emptying – although the effect on lateral trim might be noticeable when nearing full! More storage and another large LCD TV are fitted around the bed. ➤

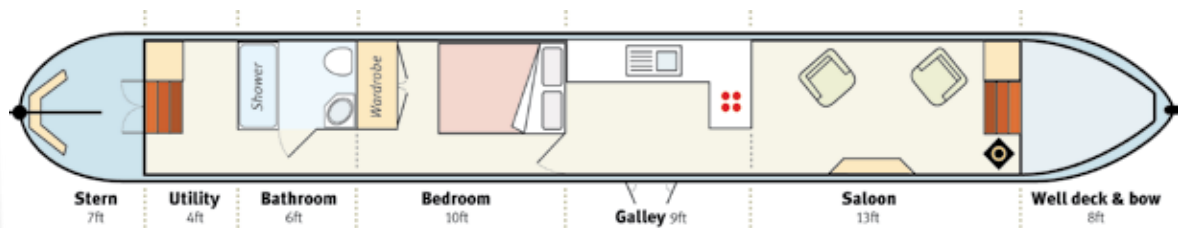
Opposite page, clockwise, from top left: Simple divider separates galley from saloon. Very wide glazed side doors contribute to spacious feel. Diesel oven with matching fridge and microwave. Bright interior with simple furnishing- and 230V freezer in galley corner. Below, from left: Large master bedroom. Sat dome very noticeable, but otherwise pleasing modern lines.





Bright ideas

- ✦ Coded locks allow access without keys
- ✦ Blank electrical plates have been adapted to give matching fittings
- ✦ There are separate diesel tanks for domestic (heating/cooking) and engine use, both with locking filler caps



Bathroom

The bathroom itself is lined in a waterproof panelling material, with several large glass panels around the raised washbasin and shower cubicle. The dark blue marble effect lining, combined with the mirrors, makes the space seem much larger than it actually is.

More chrome fittings make this a very modern take on what is a functional space while remaining practical – easy to clean and again, with all services accessible. The shower tray (like the water and holding tanks) was made by Goodwin Plastics to Middlewich's own design, as in their hire fleet.

Back cabin

The aft cabin is also a utility room, containing a washing machine and the controls for the various electrical systems. The aft steps are removable for access, so the LED lights set into them can be detached via a simple plug. The small blue LEDs are also set into the kick plate along the corridor layout, giving enough light to move around at night without turning on the main cabin lights – essential for the owner's expected guests.

All the wiring was done by Loomtech, so that the system is designed properly rather than an ad-hoc, spaghetti system. Every wire is correctly sized to avoid voltage drop, and encased to avoid potential damage in the future.

Cruiser stern

Moving up to the aft deck, the instrumentation includes gauges for fresh water, toilet waste level and the two diesel tanks. One tank is for the engine, the other for heating and galley appliances. Now that boaters can declare their own split of domestic and propulsion diesel for tax purposes, this is not as essential as it was feared, but still a good bit of future-proofing in case

any further changes are made. Also, if contamination happens (such as diesel bug, see page 68) in one tank, it should not affect the other – and cheaper fuels, such as kerosene, could even be used for the domestic equipment.

The aft deck is enclosed by a canopy, added by the owner and beloved of many boats on the nearby Bridgewater Canal. This makes the boat stand even taller, and needless to say, would have to be lowered for many of the bridges on the Trent & Mersey around Middlewich.

Under the deckboards, a Barrus Shire 45hp diesel is fitted with a hospital silencer exhaust, and a 175-amp alternator to charge the 675 amp-hours of domestic battery capacity. *Elsie* performed well out on the water, reversing particularly neatly with the aid of the bow-thruster.

The fuel filler caps, in chrome to match the bollards and studs, are lockable, with a simple key-lock fitting. The aft cabin door (again as in Middlewich's latest hire-boats) uses a coded lock, where you punch in the number to gain access. This means a lost key is not a problem, and avoids keys being snapped off in the lock – a surprisingly common occurrence on hire-boats.

Elsie's interior has a pleasing look. The robust approach inherited from Middlewich's hire fleet should mean that she stands up well to the rigours of extended cruising, and the new owner is justified in being proud of her. One note, though. The blue ensign on the taff rail may match the overall colour scheme, but as the owner is not a member of a Royal Yacht Club, he may have to settle for the red duster like the rest of us!

Find out more

Middlewich Narrowboats (01606 832460, www.mbnarrowboats.co.uk, www.middlewichboats.co.uk)

Below, from left:
TV system discretely mounted in locker.
Aft utility room with multiple gauges for tanks.
Bespoke shower tray set in cool marble-effect bathroom.



Right: Substantial tug lines of *Larch*.
Below: Traditional feel to interior of *Larch*.
Middle: Large galley and saloon for 9 people on *Beech*.
Bottom: *Beech's* exterior.



The hire fleet

We took the opportunity to look at two very different boats in the Middlewich fleet. *Beech* is a 65ft modern semi-trad, while *Larch* is a 66ft tug-style boat – and those who started their boating career on Middlewich's more basic hire craft might be surprised to learn that the latter is the work of 'name' builder Steve Hudson!

The fleet does still offer older boats for short breaks at very cheap prices out of season: £285 for a week on the four-berth *Almond*, for example, or £335 on the 12-berth *Poplar*. Middlewich buck the increasing trend of extra charges: quoted prices still include fuel, car parking and damage waiver.

Beech was new in 2008 and can accommodate up to nine people across the saloon, mid and aft cabins. Drop-down bench seating allows additional space for the entire crew to sit for meals, with ample preparation room in the galley. As in all but one boat in the fleet, *Beech* uses a diesel-

fired hob, with a separate oven: these are quite popular with hirers, and more user-friendly than they first appear.

There are also a number of 230V appliances in the galley, including kettle, toaster and microwave. These are supported by a 2.5KW inverter and large battery bank and corresponding alternator. LCD TV, with Freeview box and CD players throughout the boat provide entertainment of an evening.

Beech is at its most comfortable for six people, with two toilets and two showers, plus plenty of storage space. Radiators are sensibly placed to spread the heat from the Webasto unit through the boat. *Beech* costs from £455 for an out of season short break, to £1,745 for a week in high season.

Larch is a very different boat. Its very purposeful lines, with a large tug deck, are quite unlike most hire boats. The short traditional aft deck leads into a proper boatman's cabin, complete with range. The table cupboard does contain a washbasin as a concession to luxury.

Forward, the engine room contains an air-cooled Lister SR3, controlled by a traditional speed-wheel and gear-rod arrangement. A spacious toilet and shower offset to port then leads to a large galley, with the only gas cooker in the fleet. The dinette in the saloon faces another solid fuel stove, and with diesel-powered central heating available as well, this is a very cosy winter boat. Another toilet compartment then leads to a forward cabin with double bed, and side doors give access to the gunwales and tug deck.

This is an ideal boat for two or three couples, but affordably priced from £390 (short break) to £1,365 (summer week).