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BOAT REVIEW: Chesapeake Light Craft's Skerry

This 15-footer is fun, functional, and easy to build

Small, simple-to-build boat designs—the type most likely to be tackled by a beginner—rarely end up offering the on-the-water performance and virtues necessary to actually satisfy their builders. While there's potential for these rudimentary boats to be a gateway to more building and sailing, many don't serve any realistic waterborne need and end up being used once or twice and unceremoniously decommissioned. The "family skiffs," once so full of promise, end up as garden art, full of sand.

The trick then—and it's much harder than it looks—is to design a small, simple boat that offers some of the advantages, performance, and versatility of larger, more complex designs. The goal is a "big" little boat. And if it can somehow be a handsome-looking craft, so much the better.

One of the rare boats we've seen that appears to tick these boxes is the Skerry, designed by John C. Harris at Chesapeake Light Craft. Sold both as plans and in kit form, the Skerry has proven immensely popular since its release in 2002.

"About 600 have been built from kits," Harris says. "The number built from plans is harder to pin down, but there must be a bunch. These aren't kayak-kit numbers, but for a small sailboat that's not a white fiberglass sloop, it's an impressive tally."

What first caught our attention was her pleasant appearance which, while not reminiscent of a particular traditional boat, seemed somehow rooted to history. Harris says Skerry combines elements of traditional working craft of the British Isles and Scandinavia, with a little bit of American Swampscott Dory thrown in.

"The starting point for the design was in fact a peapod," Harris says, "and the early prototypes had more burdensome lines. But I realized at once that the essential character of a true peapod is, above all, its enormous weight. Which of course isn't consonant with a mail-order boat kit." Knowing a stitch-and-glue Okoume plywood boat built to these lines was going to be light, Harris went the opposite direction, looking more closely at Scandinavian small craft for



inspiration.

As for the final product, the designer is delighted. "I was startled by how well the boat handled both as a sailboat and as a rowboat," Harris says. "It's tricky and rare to combine those qualities." He's quick to acknowledge, though, that none of the individual design elements were particularly original. "I wish I could credit my genius as a boat designer," he says, "but all I really did was collect a grab-bag of features long known to work well: a narrow waterline to make her easily-driven, flaring sharply to a broad beam up at the rail for solid secondary stability. The boat can be driven fast without much sail area, and you rarely hear of these being capsized. The flare makes her dry in chop. It's a very forgiving sailboat but fast enough to keep the dinghy-racers happy. And of course you can row it all day."

We asked Harris if there was anything he'd do differently or anything that came to surprise him about Skerry.

"Among the critiques of the boat is that it has a rather spare fit-out. The interior, for example, is simple bordering on austere. Serious builders who look forward to laminating frames, fitting thwart knees and assembling spaced inwales are apt to be disappointed. But the modest parts-count was a deliberate design choice, and in fact probably explains the boat's success."

The current base Skerry kit—which includes computer-cut hull parts in Okoume, Spanish cedar rubrails, Sapele breast hooks, the daggerboard trunk assembly, an epoxy kit, fiberglass for the hull, one pair of bronze oarlocks and sockets, and a spiral-bound assembly manual—sells for \$1,425. A sailing kit is an additional \$1,269.

"More importantly," Harris says, "the Skerry is quick and easy to build, so amateurs are likely to make it all the way through to completion." And whether it's the French fleet of 50 Skerries gathering for their own messabouts or Skerries entering the Watertribe races, these boats are getting out on the water for serious use. All the more impressive when you consider that at 95 pounds, Skerry, as John Harris points out, weighs less than some German Shepherds.

We were pleased to get a chance to row, sail and review a well-built Skerry with owner Jonathan Patton.

PERFORMANCE:

"Moves nicely even in light air." Jimmy Vitale, *Victory*

ABOVE—Skerry's hull is a sort of fusion of traditional design ideas.

RIGHT—Jonathan Patton testing his Skerry's new balanced lug rig.





"The Skerry is a fun boat to sail. It gets me where I want to go. That said, it does not point into the wind well.... it goes back to that sprit sail. I suspect the other rigs offered would perform better." Steven Roberts

"Fast enough! It reaches hull speed, then maxes out. Fine for my needs, as a recreational cruiser. Points well, not as well as a main-and-jib rig, but does well. It sails like a large boat. To tack, you have to maintain forward speed. The rudder is totally effective, but not to 'horse' the boat around if you run out of speed tacking, like in a Laser or small dinghy." Dave Barton, 2014 Tritone Substitution

"It rows easily and, being 72 years old, I have no problem maintaining a steady pace. Under sail the boat moves in very light air." Henry Wing

We met Jonathan here in Washington, at Marrowstone Island's Mystery Bay, where he'd already offloaded his Skerry and set it down on a portable dolly-cart trailer. He wanted us to have the "complete experience," so we walked the boat down the ramp ourselves, launched it, removed the strapped-on dolly trailer, and pulled the boat over to the adjacent beach. Simple.

Next we grabbed the oars, slid the oarlocks into the center sockets (Skerry is designed with two rowing stations) and headed toward open water. The svelte Skerry slipped along effortlessly. Movement was so smooth and it carried so well we decided she's a boat you might actually choose to take for a row, as opposed to merely acting as a secondary propulsion option. We weren't surprised to discover later that owners laud her rowing prowess—with a few mentioning even having performed well in rowing races.

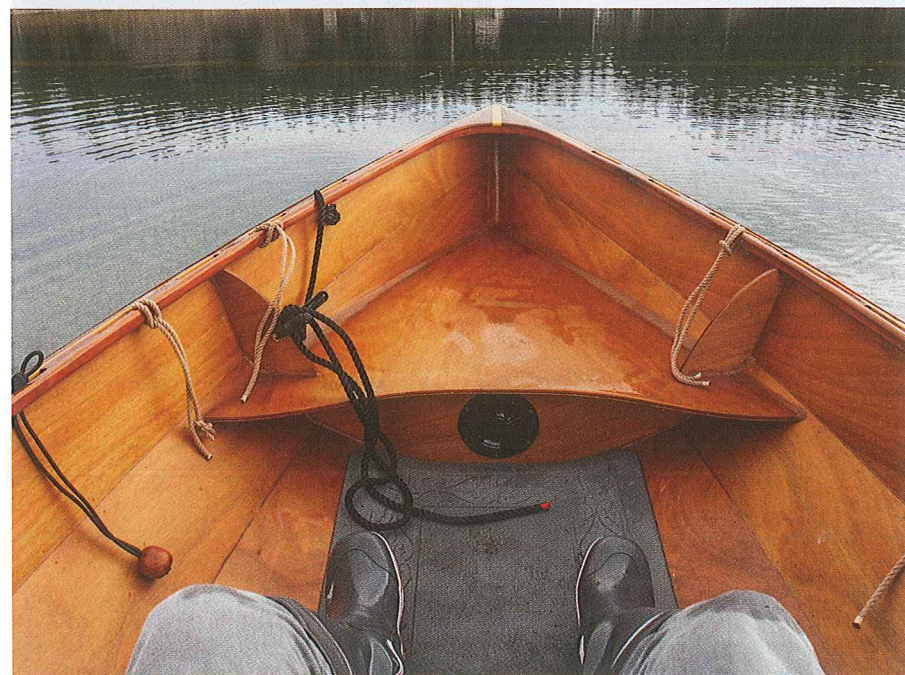
After returning to shore it was time

ABOVE LEFT—Looking down into the Skerry's hull.
Photo courtesy Cheaspeake Light Craft

LEFT—The view aft while rowing.

OPPOSITE TOP—A sprit-rig-with-boom Skerry charging along in 20-knot wind.

OPPOSITE BOTTOM—Rowing with two aboard.
Photos courtesy Cheaspeake Light Craft



to rig Skerry for sailing. We stabbed the lightweight mast into the mast partners and attached and hoisted the cream-colored lugsail Jonathan had ordered from Duckworks. There's a single halyard to raise sail, a downhaul, and one sheet—this simple and effective rig is forgiving both in terms of setup and handling under sail.

Pushing away from shore with our foot—you can do this sort of thing on a small boat—we sheeted in and sailed from the shallow channel until it was deep enough to drop the daggerboard.

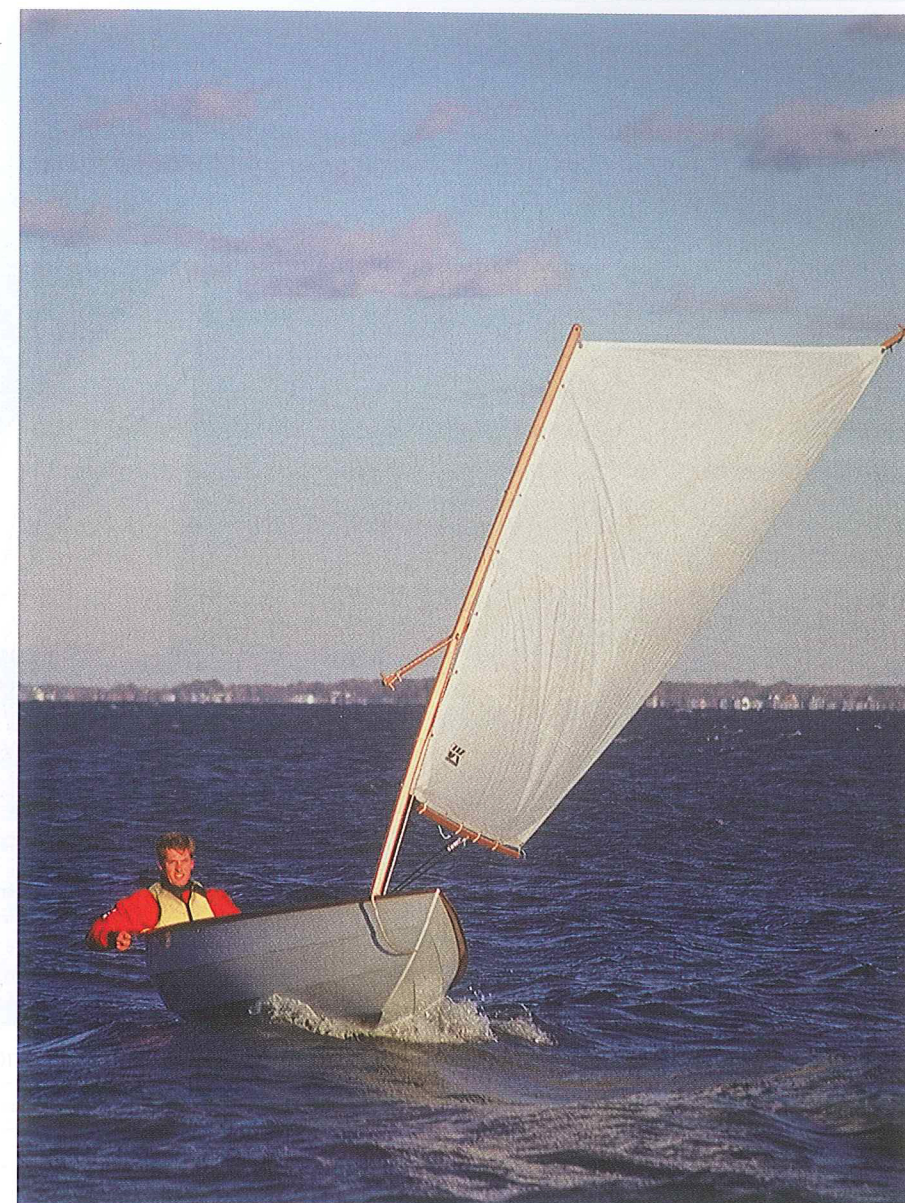
It was clear almost immediately that light air performance was excellent. Even in the gentle zephyr we were able to make way. As the wind increased we got a better feel for speed and, again, the hull felt slippery and footed right along. We enjoyed the "dinghy sailing" feel of Skerry and shifting our weight to advantage. For a portion of the photo shoot we chased the Skerry from a 19-foot Lightning and, especially off the wind, the Skerry matched speed with us for a surprisingly long stretch.

Skerry has three optional sailing rigs: sprit, balanced lug and gunter sloop. As you might expect, the simple sprit rig is regarded as the least satisfying in terms of pointing ability and overall performance. We're fans of the balanced lug generally, and the Skerry's rig didn't disappoint. Like other balanced lugs Skerry's was easy to set, tame during jibes, and fairly weatherly. The sloop rig apparently offers exceptional performance as well, but also means the boat is somewhat overpowered (see below).

Harris says of the last 50 Skerries built, 32 opted for the lug rig, 13 for the sloop rig, and just 5 for the sprit.

The Skerry features a traditional Scandinavian type push-pull tiller that takes some getting used to. Instead of a conventional tiller and rudder, Skerry's rudderhead has a yoke arm mounted perpendicular to its starboard side, to which a long pole is lashed. The helmsman pushes the pole or "stick" aft to turn to port or pulls it forward to steer to starboard.

The advantage of this setup is significant, as there's no need to accommodate the sweep of a conventional tiller over the stern, freeing up valuable space for crew or possibly gear. And because of the steering stick's length, the skipper can





ABOVE—Jonathan and his Skerry working their way to weather along the Marrowstone Island shore.

move all the way forward to the mast to attend to things or adjust trim and still have control of the helm—much like a tiller with a tiller extension employed.

Still, although we concede with more use the push-pull tiller would become second nature, we don't believe it would ever be as sensitive or as dead reliable as a traditional tiller. The helmsman's hand is further removed from the water, and while there's no tiller sweeping the cockpit, the long rudder stick is akin to having another oar aboard.

Ultimately, we think of the push-pull tiller as kind of like chopsticks: You can get pretty good with them, and they have a certain exotic charm, but when you're really hungry you'd still probably choose a fork. A few owners have built Skerry with a conventional tiller.

Helm balance was mostly neutral and the boat was plenty responsive. We fought with the daggerboard some, as it wanted to float up in the trunk during

tacks or in lulls, but that's a problem easily resolved with a bit of bungee cord.

TRAILERING AND LAUNCHING:

It's hard to overstate the advantages of a boat this light. Not only is trailering, rigging and launching totally manageable, Skerry is even potentially cartoppable. Two people can carry it to the beach. One person can push it off a sandbar or drag it ashore. And the minimal forces involved in trailering, rigging, launching and sailing mean just about everything can be handled with rope and a few knots.

SEAWORTHINESS:

"At first boat seems tippy, but it is actually quite stable. When tilted to the side, the farther it is heeled the more stable it gets. I understand people expect that sooner or later in a small boat like this they will find themselves in the water, but my experience has shown me that it isn't really very easy

to flip this boat." Henry Wing

"Initial stability is a bit skittish. My mast is a bit taller than spec, so it's tricky to rig up in large swells. The only time I capsized was getting in the boat in 3-4 foot swells—shouldn't have been going out then anyways! Under sail I feel confident. In 3-4 foot swells I felt safe with a reefed sail. My first launch was rowing in large swells, and it felt fine when I was rowing from the center seat of the boat. It rode the swells well, with no water over the front. The dory shape helps with this." Dave Barton, 2014 Tritone Substitution

"Seems quite stable...Never dumped it." Jimmy Vitale, Victory

Skerry's seaworthiness is constrained by whatever limitations come with it being a very light, unballasted, open boat. For one thing it means the skill of the crew and the placement of their weight will

SKERRY

LOA: 15'
BEAM: 54"
DRAFT: 5'7/30"
SAIL AREA: 56 sq ft
WEIGHT: 95 lb



be a bigger factor than they would be on a much heavier boat. She'll need to be actively sailed when the wind is up at all—meaning a hand on the sheet and switching sides promptly.

Skerry is moderately tender initially, but her wide beam (54") provides good secondary stability as her dory-like hull resists excessive heel. In the event of a capsize, Skerry should stay afloat due to her fore and aft sealed flotation compartments. While Skerries are occasionally capsized, the consensus seems to be that she's fairly forgiving and that her handling in rougher water inspires confidence. And although some owners contend she ought to have additional flotation, her sealed chambers and high centerboard trunk appear to make her self-rescuable in most circumstances. As with any boat though, we suggest owners perform their own controlled capsize to test righting, bailing and reboarding.

Skerry's excellent performance under oars also adds significantly to seaworthiness as she could likely row her way out of some trouble.

The choice of rig is another factor. The sprit rig is not easy to set, douse, or reef while underway, so not our favorite choice. The balanced lug is better in both regards. The sloop rig—which is transplanted from CLC's Passagemaker Dinghy—offers great performance, but as John Harris told us, it's also a lot of horsepower.

"Just by the numbers I would expect the boat to be spirited and tricky with that much sail area, firmly in racing dinghy territory," he says. "The people who have them say they like the rig a lot, but I work hard to inform those builders ahead of time that they're trading the Skerry's noteworthy docility for something a lot more high-strung."

Of the Skerry owners who have set off on adventurous cruises, the most remarkable must be John Guider, who rowed and sailed the entire Great Loop, more than 6,000 miles, on his specially designed Skerry.

"After some cajoling I drew a revised version of the Skerry for him," Harris says. "I added six inches of beam, for more payload and reserve stability, and decked over two-thirds of the hull. I swapped in a pivoting centerboard (always appreciated in beach-cruising) and increased the size of the lug sail. That

boat really got put through the ringer, often experiencing violent weather in exposed crossings. I think the split was about 60% sailing and 40% rowing. You could sleep aboard, just barely, though more often he camped ashore as was originally envisioned." (Chesapeake Light Craft also offers a kit for this larger decked version they call the Skerry Raid.)

The basic Skerry scores 109 on our SCA Seaworthiness test.

ACCOMMODATIONS:

Skerry can handle two adults and some gear on a daysail (450 pound capacity), which is pretty remarkable for such a small boat. In her rowing configuration she can potentially be even more accommodating, as one owner describes taking two adults, two children and two-nights worth of camping gear on a three-mile cruise.

When sailing, skipper and any crew typically find a spot in the bottom of the 20-inch-deep hull, either between the aft flotation chamber and the midships thwart, or forward of the thwart and abaft the mast. It's not luxurious, but as with most dinghy sailing, a well-placed cushion makes a big difference. There is no designated spot for gear stowage.

QUALITY:

"It was our first boat build, not too complicated, and really enjoyed the process. The guys at CLC were extraordinarily helpful answering questions by email or phone whenever we called." Jimmy Vitale, Victory

"The quality of parts and materials is superb and CLC is available to answer builders' questions. There is also a builders' forum at the CLC site where one can pose a question or state a problem." Henry Wing

The owners we interviewed were unanimous in rating the quality of the plans, kit components, building manual—and even CLC's customer support—as excellent. And we agree with owners that the resultant boat is well engineered and stout. There were no reports of weak links or failed materials.

With regard to construction time, most owners told us they invested somewhere between 100 and 250 hours.

COMPROMISES:

"It's a beautiful dinghy and it does beautiful dinghy things. It's not made to cross oceans or spend weeks on, but one could, I imagine." Michael Burwell, *The Skerry*, 2001

A few owners mentioned speed as a compromise. We thought she moved well, but we suppose it's true that if one weren't set on Skerry's sail-and-oar versatility and old-world looks, they could find a still simple but racier design to build.

With regard to fit-out, Skerry was intentionally kept simple, but gingerbread can be added at the builder's discretion.

MODIFICATIONS:

Among the owner modifications mentioned were: The addition of a brailing line to douse sail, adding holes in frames for lashing points, and adding cockpit drains. Jonathan added custom inwales and gunwales to the review boat.

One owner, Everglades Challenge competitor Marian Busko, has made major modifications, including the addition of fore-and-aft cuddy cabins and a second mast and ketch rig.

VALUE:

"I love this little craft. I have bought and sold other boats...but this one remains." Steven Roberts

One owner who built from plans told us he has less than \$1,500 total invested in his Skerry—that's a lot of boat for the buck. And regardless the cost, it's also a lot of versatility per pound.

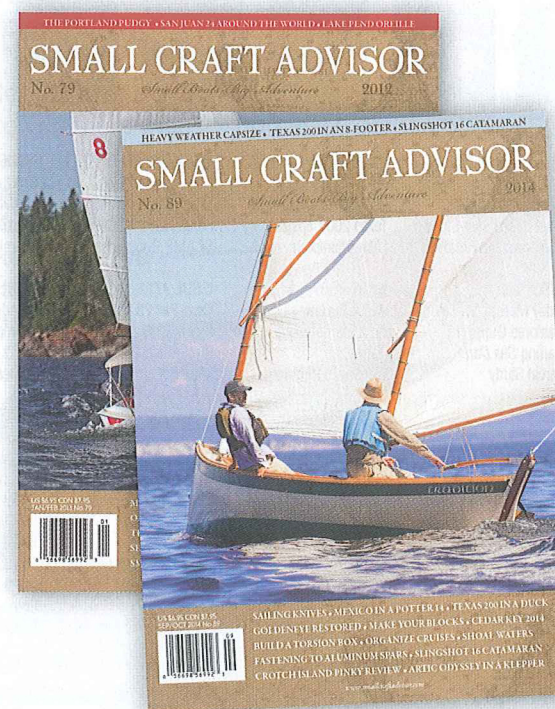
Whether it's sailing or rowing, with or without crew, or even doing more adventurous beach cruising, Skerry offers even the novice builder a fun and functional boat design that will actually get some use. •SCA•

Resources:

Chesapeake Light Craft
www.clcboats.com

CLC Builders' Forum
www.clcboats.com/forum/

Skerry Yahoo group
www.groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/CLC_Skerry/info



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