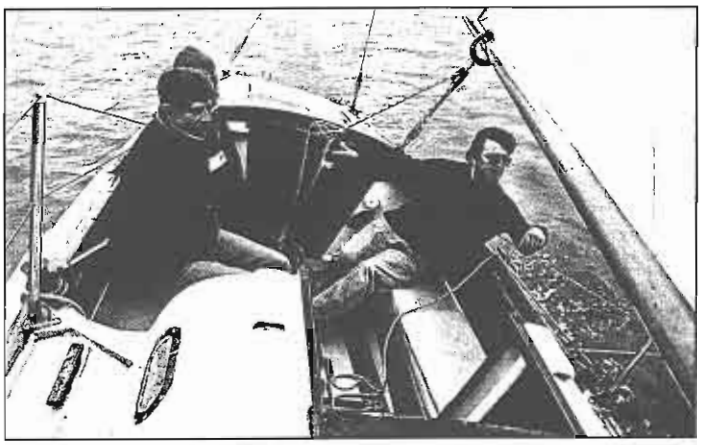
She's still way ahead of her time!

David Harding sails the unconventional Atalanta which handles like a dream



Left: her vertical whipstaff tiller provides lots of leverage without taking up valuable space. Above: high freeboard affords a sense of security

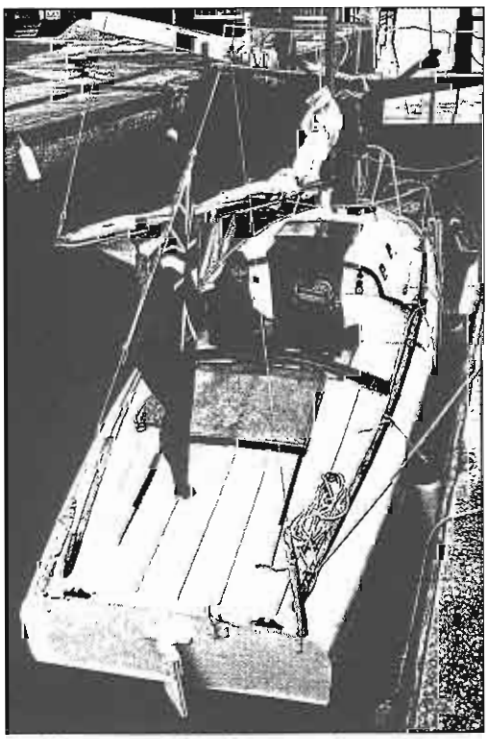
She floats in 20 inches of water, can be trailed behind a large car and handles like a dinghy. Yet she's sailed across the Atlantic and beyond – and can even sleep a crew of eight.

Producing such a boat, within an overall length of 26 feet, would be a challenge for today's designers and builders – so when the Atalanta was launched 40 years ago, it's little wonder she was considered ahead of her time.

With a price tag of just £1,500, she was within the reach of many families moving up from dinghies and smaller cruisers. And though a reasonably well-maintained example will cost at least 4 times as much today, it's still a good deal less than the cost of a new glassfibre production cruiser of similar size. But boat design has changed a good deal since the 1950s, so what does she offer today's buyer? To find out, I went to Birdham to sail Atalanta number 83, built in 1958 and rescued from neglect two years ago by Clive and Dominique Wallace.

A round figure

With her narrow beam, bluff bow, turtle decks and tumblehome she's unmistakable, curving in every direction with barely a hard angle to be seen. Her centre cockpit splits the accommodation in two, so there's no large central living area but plenty of privacy. Thanks to the cockpit tent and fold-out seat extensions converting them into berths the whole length of the boat can be used for accommodation.



Locking out of Birdham pool under tow.

She's built around the massive, sloping main bulkhead which divides the galley and chart table area from the rather dark forward cabin. It takes the compression from the mast, anchors the backing plates for the shrouds and supports both the pivots and lifting mechanisms for the twin lifting iron keels. With all the major stresses concentrated here, the rest of the boat can be kept light. *"An engineer's boat,"* is how Clive describes her.

Twin swinging plates offer a number of advantages: they're lighter to operate and distribute the loads more evenly, while the long cases are built into the cabin furniture instead of creating a central obstruction. They extend aft into the cockpit, and are open-topped to act as drain slots. And as Charles Currey, one of the founders of Fairey Marine pointed out, the sensitivity of the boat can be adjusted by sailing with one plate fully down and the other partially raised, effectively giving her a longer fore-and-aft keel area. To bring the centre of lateral resistance aft, for better control off wind in a blow, you can bring them both part way up.

Seizing the chance

In fact, the keels and keel lifting screws are virtually the only new parts on *Flying Fox*, who was destined to be burned, had Clive not saved her from the ditch in a field at the edge of Ashlett Creek, near Fawley, where she had been sitting untouched for 5 or 6 years. *"When I stripped her down I found the wood totally sound underneath, but all the ironwork was seized,"* he explained. *"So I got the plans from the owners' association – who also found me a set of original 1957 Williams sails – and had new ones made."*

By doing virtually all the work himself, he had her back afloat for a total outlay, including the initial purchase price, of around £5,000, though he reckons that professional yard labour would have added at least another £2,000. *"An Atalanta is the closest thing to a fibreglass boat you can get,"* he says, *"but she'll probably outlast most of them. Sometimes you can't help wondering why anyone should want a 1970s grp cruiser when you could buy one of these. They won't get the pox and I doubt anyone will lose money on one – second-hand prices have risen sharply in the past five years or so.'*

With her displacement of just 4,000 lb – on the light side for a boat with a waterline length of 25 feet even by today's standards – *Flying Fox* was easy to man-handle through the lock gates out of Birdham Pool. Her original Coventry Victor twin-cylinder petrol engine, though restored, was not yet fully operational when we sailed, but she towed easily out into the harbour behind a rowed Mirror dinghy.

Under sail

In a Force 3 to 4, she was quick and extremely manoeuvrable, yet directionally very stable even with both keels fully lowered. She showed no tendency to head up in the gusts, heeling initially before stiffening up and accelerating in true dinghy style, though she liked to be tacked fairly quickly to save losing too much way through the wind. It was noticeable how little wake or turbulence she left astern, and the whipstaff tiller remained

How might she survey?

Agba (also known as Nigerian Cedar) is a durable hardwood which is resistant to decay but susceptible to crushing. So check such areas as the pulpit feet to make sure they haven't been 'hardened down' too much and drawn into the timber. And look – or rather listen – for delamination. Tap carefully over the hull and deck, listening for the 'dead' sound of separated laminates. The timber might be fine, but the phenolic glue may have broken down.

The plywood cockpit structure is potentially troublesome, with rot forming in the edges and corners where rainwater may have penetrated. **Andrew Simpson**

light on every point.

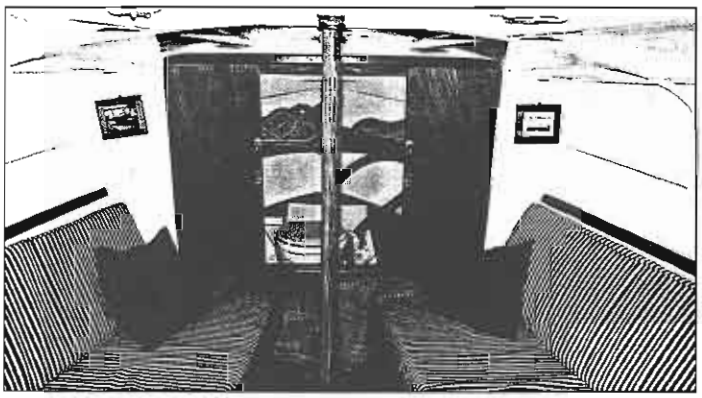
She's modestly canvassed and is reputed to carry full sail happily up to Force 8 – quite remarkable given her ballast ratio of only about 25%. But like the bumblebee, she has little truck with modern theories about how she ought to behave – she just gets on with the job, and does it very well too. Never mind that to many eyes she doesn't look as though she should sail particularly well, that her hull shape may be considered very dated and that she's both narrow and lightly-ballasted. Designed before the age of computers, a greater number of highly-trained brains were applied to her development. Her sailing ability is certainly no accident.

Easy reach

From the cockpit you can reach the foot of the mast, while thanks to the hatch over the heads in the bow, her jib can also be handled without the need to go up on deck. Forget your roller reefing gears and cockpit control systems – it seems they already had easy sail handling worked out 40 years ago. Then when you've finished sailing, you simply unclip the full-width mainsheet traveller from its position across the after cabin hatch, fit a couple of legs underneath it and it becomes a boom horse, leaving the hatchway clear. If you want more headroom back there, you simply stow one of Fairey's 7-foot Dinky dinghies on the long aft deck and open the hatch – a two-in-one solution typical of the company's approach to boat design. With the Dinky, cockpit tent and the long sliding hatches you can choose whether to have virtually the whole boat abaft the mast open or closed.

Worth preserving

If you're looking for a boat that will be happy with little more in the way of maintenance than an annual wipe-down of the topsides, an Atalanta wouldn't be the right choice. After all, despite her legendary durability, she is made of wood – and as part of Britain's yachting heritage, she deserves to be treated with respect. But a better-engineered and more versatile design would be difficult to find. Thanks to the Wallace's *accidental* purchase – they hadn't intended to buy one – another of these remarkable boats is afloat to make sure we don't forget where trailer-sailing and popular cruising all began. ●

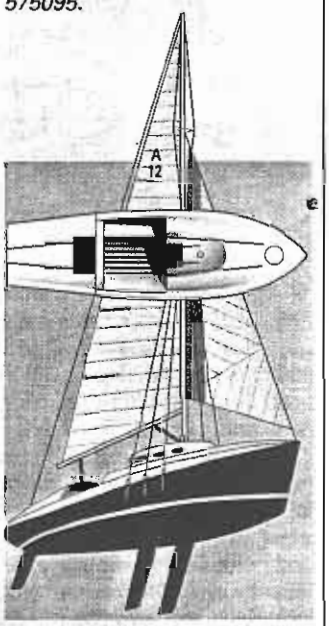


Her saloon has a functional quality rarely found in today's yachts

Atalanta 26

LOA 26ft 0in
LWL 25ft 0in
Beam 7ft 8½in
Draft - keels raised 1ft 8in
-lowered 5ft 9in
Displacement 4000lbs
Ballast 950lb
Sail areas ..... 280sq ft
Headroom 5ft 8in
Berths 6/8
Engine Coventry Victor Twin, Stuart 8, Volvo Penta MD1
Designer ..... Uffa Fox
Builders Fairey Marine Ltd, Hamble
Built from .. 1956 - late 1960s
Numbers built ... approx 200
Nos still sailing .. approx 150
Price guide ... £6,000 - £9,000

Special thanks to Charles Currey for his help with the history of Fairey Marine and the Atalanta. He can be contacted on 01243 572551 or fax 01243 575095.



Atalanta 26 on show

Anyone wanting to discover more about Atalantas can get in touch with the Owners' Association's Hon. Sec: Colin Twyford, 18 Cavendish Avenue, Sidcup, Kent DA15 9EB. Tel: 0181 300 4173.

Visitors to Bristol's International Festival of the Sea will also be able to see *Flying Fox* on the *Practical Boat Owner* Stand. She's not for sale but will give an excellent chance for anyone who might be tempted to take a close look at this lovingly restored example. The Festival is on from May 24th to 27th at Bristol's historic harbour – see page 48 for further details.

The 50th anniversary regatta, celebrating the founding of Fairey Marine in 1946, is scheduled for the weekend of July 12th to 14th and will be held at Hamble Point Marina. Further details from Linda Jones on: 01703 457155.

From small beginnings...

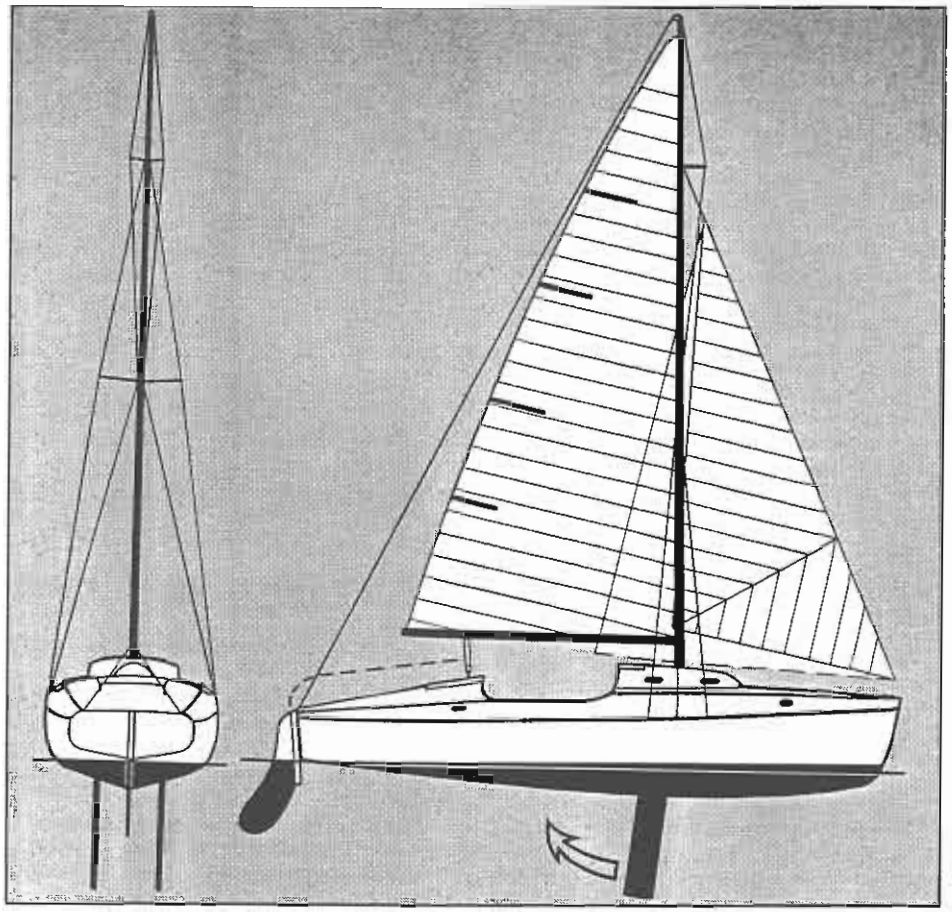
It began with a 12-foot dinghy called the Sea Swallow, designed by Uffa Fox in 1939 for the Oxford and Cambridge Sailing Society. But the design was never built under this name and didn't even take to the water until after the war.

Fairey Aviation, who built the famous Fleet Air Arm Swordfish torpedo plane and other naval aircraft (there's still a flying collection kept by the F.A.A. at Yeovil) needed something to keep them busy. So they formed Fairey Marine and, using their experience of building light, strong structures, put the design into production as the Firefly. A series of successful dinghies followed, and in 1956 the Atalanta was born out of a series of progressively stretched versions of the 15-foot Albacore.

Her lightness was due to Fairey's hot-moulded construction method: 2.5mm-thick strips of Agba (African mahogany) precut veneers laid diagonally over a wooden mould. Each layer – 3 were used for a dinghy and up to 11 for the bottom of a 33-foot powerboat – was bonded with resin glue. A rubber vacuum bag was used to press the shell against the mould before the whole assembly was pressure-baked at a temperature of 110°C in a large autoclave.

Fairey, at one time Europe's largest boatbuilder, produced nearly 200 Atalantas – named after their last flying boat – and over 15,000 moulded hulls in total. They were involved in the development of GRP construction in the early '50's, but their comparative tests showed the hot-moulded hulls, weight-for-weight, to be considerably stronger. Thanks to the glue penetrating the wooden laminates, they've proved virtually impervious to water ingress too – which is one reason why around 150 Atalantas are still sailing today.

ATALANTA



Above: An early example with varnished coachroof and decks. Note afterdeck for stowage of tender and, right, twin swing-keels which wind up flush with the bottom. Price Guide: £3,500–£5,500.

I was on my mooring in Ramsey, Isle of Man when a passer-by informed me that he and sixteen others had been rescued from an abortive mission in Norway during WW2.

"*Very good*", said I.

"*Yes, they dropped* this *boat from an aircraft and we sailed her back to Hull*".

"This *boat*?"

"*Yes. Recognise her anywhere; had a steel plate with an eye bolted to the bulkhead. Slung her under the bomb bay; wonderful job.*"

Now my boat is a Fairey Marine Atalanta, a most distinctive craft, designed by Uffa Fox from an idea by Alan Vines. I had heard stories linking the origins of Atalantas with Airborne Lifeboats, but nothing so definite as this. Despite my best endeavours to convince the fellow to the contrary, he still went away believing he had met his "saviour".

So let's put the record straight. In the early 1950s' Alan Vines and his family sailed a Firefly. As the children grew, a bigger boat was required, so he decided that something along the same lines but with ballasted keels and accommodation would be the solution.

Fairey Marine built him a 22ft. moulded-ply hull with twin ballasted daggerplates, a centre cockpit, two berths in the fore cabin, two in the after and two under a cockpit tent. *Sujanwiz*, as she was named proved most successful as a weekend cruiser. A good seaboat with full bow she was dry and buoyant in a seaway. In the 1952 Round-the-Island race, conditions were somewhat severe, yet *Sujawiz* finished with ease in a better time than many larger yachts.

Uffa Fox had taken a great interest in the boat and suggested that Fairey Marine might develop it into a full blown cruiser. To that end, he redrew the lines keeping the bow full for safety when surfing. This works well and makes possible the use of the forehatch when sail changing in heavy weather. Fairey Aviation did the engineering for the keels and in 1955 *Atalanta* was launched — so named after the last flying boat built by Fairey Aviation (is this the root of the airborne lifeboat myth?)

In the early 1950s Fairey Marine and Fairey Aviation were involved with the design, development and production of articles in g.r.p. and other plastics. They both carried out comparative tests between plastic and wood laminate structures. The result showed that wood veneers, hot moulded under pressure were stronger and more rigid than g.r.p. (weight being equal). At 0.7 the specific gravity of mahogany is less than half that of g.r.p. Similarly, due to shrinkage of the resin when curing, the glass fibres can be exposed and will take up water when immersed. Osmosis or boat pox were expressions yet to be coined.

The Atalanta hull is built with four laminations of $\frac{1}{8}$th agba; the deck and superstructure with three. All the wracking and wringing, stresses and strains of a sailing vessel in a seaway are concentrated on a massive bulkhead that takes the loading of the mast, and via backing pads. the shroud plates as well. Two lifting bilge keels are housed in cases, the forward ends of which are let through this bulkhead, the after ends passing through the cockpit bulkhead into the cockpit where they perform the additional function of cockpit drains. The bolts upon which the keels pivot are carried in steel tubes welded to a steel plate athwartships and bolted to the bottom of the main bulkhead.

Nearly two hundred 26 foot Atalantas were built plus a dozen or so each of A31s, T26s and Fulmars, the vast majority of which are still in commission — the hull and deck structures giving every indication of remaining tight and sound indefinitely. This must confirm Fairey's research and the conclusion they reached. My own Atalanta "*Melanion*" has shown only one small area of rot, in way of the after cabin doorstep (what's the name for a nautical doorstep?). The decks were a different story, some misguided previous owner had covered them with g.r.p. (goddamn rotten plastic?). Water will always find its way between any "impervious" coating and the wood it's supposedly protecting. The state of my poor decks when I summoned the courage to lift the sheathing was horrendous. The upper laminates were saturated. But wood has remarkable powers of recovery, and a week or two of fresh air brought about a transformation; that which had been soft and soggy became sound and solid. Some laminates required replacing and were fastened with staples until the rescorcinol glue had set. I was now faced with the maintenance of a wooden boat, which is nowhere near the problem purveyors of plastic will have us believe. I'm greatly assisted by my company which is involved in the development of protective coatings, and I have been able to use my boat as a trial horse for one of our new products. The decks, coachroof, cockpit, hatches, mast and boom have all been treated with Burgess Woodsealer. This is basically a fine particle resin suspended in an aqueous solution — with the great advantage of penetrating and sealing wood against further absorbtion of water even if the wood is wet when applied. Any free water remaining in the wood after the resin has coalesced is able to evaporate, since the molecular structure of the resin is such that water in its gaseous state can pass through, but not in its liquid form. When dry, woodsealer can be left as a non slip finish for decks, painted or varnished

FAIREY ATALANTA

L.O.A	26.2ft
L.W.L.	25ft
Beam max	7.7ft
Beam @ W.L.	7.0ft
Draft (keels up)	1.5ft
Draft (keels down)	5.75ft
Displacement	4,000 lb
Ballast	940 lb
Sail area main	155ft²
Genoa	135ft²
Righting moment @ 15°	4,500ft/lb
Sail area: wetted surface	1.9
Sail area: immersed maj. sec. area	53.53
$\frac{L}{\sqrt[3]{D}}$	1.5
$\frac{\Delta \times B.W.L}{LWL}$	1120

Note 1: Light Displacement is 3,700 lb. I have used 4,000 lb; more when loaded. 2: Sail area = Main + Genoa. 3: Masthead rig option sports a Genoa of 150ft² (I believe).