

When the North Island 53 powers up the Solent under sail, she will gain the brief attention of Britain's sailing elite - brief, because according to her designer and the man who commissioned her, she will soon be out of sight.

With her plumb bow, the blunted curves of her coachroof, flaring topsides and an overall sleek, austere character the *North Island 53* could come from only one designer - Greg Elliott of Auckland.

But while that style may be readily recognisable to many New Zealand sailors, most sailors on the Solent will only recognise it as coming from Somewhere Else. In fact, Englishman George Stead has commissioned the *North Island 53* in New Zealand and once the America's Cup is finished, he will ship her back to England.

Stead first saw the distinctive Elliott look, and to some extent a New Zealand look, on the Waitemata Harbour in 1998 for the beginning of the fifth leg of the Whitbread Round the World Race. Among the spectator boats he spotted *Armini*, the Elliott 55. "Now there's a boat that's a bit different," he decided; 24 hours later, as he flew back to England, he had the plans for *Armini* in his luggage - and a developing thought in his head.

Stead has 35 years experience in commissioning, building, marketing and racing yachts, including Ocean 60 and Ocean 80 Class yachts.

Although he thought he had retired from that career, he is always open to new opportunities. In *Armini* he recognised a new concept that, with some adjustment, would be perfect for the English market. The English market was yet to know that but Stead was confident he could enlighten it.

The boat he planned was a luxury

cruising boat built in modern, weight-saving construction of a design that would give unusually good performance, especially upwind. On deck, its layout would be simple and easy to sail; it would have an enclosed, safe cockpit for shelter and an aft cockpit for fun. Below decks, it would provide the private, spacious double cabins with en suites, so important to his English and European customers but with an airy, light saloon area well removed from the darker, teak-laden interiors to which they were accustomed.

Important, too, was the overall look of the boat; Stead wanted his customers to know they were getting something different from other boats in England.

Two other aspects also drew Stead to New Zealand: what he sees as innovation in yacht design and construction, and the price. He can land the boat the *North Island 53* on English soil and pay the 17.5% VAT - that's English for GST - for significantly less than the cost of building it in England, mainly due to labour costs.

And so the *North Island 53* evolved via e-mail and fax across the Globe. "It was funny," Stead says laughing, "because Greg and I didn't meet in person for a long time. Greg is very innovative and pretty sure of what he's doing,

ABOVE: The sweeping, minimalist curves of the *North Island 53* will cut a new look on English waters.

BELOW: Greg Elliott's latest design sits on 10-11 knots up under gennaker in a moderate breeze.



Elliott goes English

and I'm a bit that way too so sometimes we'd really get stuck on one point."

The point they most agreed on though was performance. Elliott is an impatient animal and doesn't believe in hanging about on the water. Although he is bored on a powerboat, he likes sailing to be a speedy mode of travel. His lack of patience with boats that do not perform as they claim surfaces soon after meeting him.

Not only is Stead delighted with the finished result, he hopes to commission more boats on a production basis.

With typical forthrightness he expresses extreme surprise and disappointment that New Zealand doesn't build more production boats. "I see all these Beneteaus coming in here and I think, 'Why isn't New Zealand building more production boats? [New Zealand] is so good at boatbuilding and so innovative."

Stead stayed right out of the hull design - he always does - but there are some features he applies to all his boats "because I know they work". In this, the UK/NZ blend is interesting.

Take for example the requirement that the boat be easy to sail shorthanded - a commonly-heard requirement. The fully-battened, loose-footed mainsail has no



Looking aft in the saloon, to the table and nav station. Note the aft seat is for both.

roach - on a short-handed boat extra sail area up there can be more of a liability than a plus. Rather than the popular trend here for roller reefing, Stead insisted on slab reefing with lazy jacks - "This system is proven," he says, "and it's reliable no matter how hard it's blowing. With roller cars it's not too difficult to hoist and drop the mainsail."

Throughout the boat, deckgear is min-

imal but high quality and well placed for low friction. "People always used to ask me when I was putting the rest of the winches on," Stead says. "I used to tell them I didn't need any more."

All the controls for reefing, halyards and outhaul are at the mast for simple, one-person control. "This is not a racing yacht," Ellliott emphasises. "There is no need for continuous trimming of the main halyards; you set it at the mast and forget it. And when you reef the sail on a fifty-foot boat you have to go up to the mast."

To help dropping the sail, wide brackets extend out either side along most of the 6.7m boom to give a secure cradle for the mainsail to fall into. These brackets also provide the securing points for the lazyjacks, keeping them well clear of the sail. Before a hoist, they can be taken forward so as not to foul the sail on its way up.

The winch, facing aft on the mast, is placed at the correct angle to accept lines direct from the exit beneath the boom without need of a turning block for direction.

For budget reasons, the seven-eighths, two-spreader mast is alloy rather than carbon fibre, saving around \$50,000.

The helmsman's perch behind the

wheel is raised six inches higher than the rest of the cockpit floor to give good visibility over the coachroof. Similarly, the helmsman's seat is eight inches above the rest of the cockpit seating, where it also provides the step up out of the cockpit.

The cockpit area is quite deep which provides good shelter and safety in bad weather. My only misgiving about the boat was that I found sitting up on the side of the cockpit coaming a little uncomfortable due to the generous curves, and some movements around the boat awkward.

The starboard side of the boat beside the cockpit area is a deep well dedicated to the workshop, another money saving idea of Stead's. Some cruising boats have their workshops forward where the weight of tools is unwelcome, as is the motion if the boat is underway.

The traveller runs athwartships behind the centre cockpit, and is managed by winches well clear of the cockpit. Stead used to have a fixed block for the mainsheet but has gone to a traveller in the interests of performance. Aft is one of the *North Island 53's* best features: the aft cockpit area which doubles as a great place to sit while under sail, a good party area, and an ideal platform for the inflat-



The spacious aft cabin and en suite have the comfort and privacy suitable to the European market.

able or launching point for water sports.

The overall impression on deck is of a vast, ultra modern compilation of curves rather than the more traditional, well-defined edges and corners of gunwales, cabin top, coamings. It's going to be a while before it dates.

An aspect of *Armini* which really appealed to Stead was the light, airy saloon, high enough to give all-round views through the windows. *Armini's* saloon was on the same level as the cockpit; the *North Island 53* has steps down but retains the same indoor/outdoor feeling and is a similar layout.

The galley is to port with a servery bench that also keeps the cook safely

enclosed while underway and a comfortable place for people to stand while the boat is on starboard tack. A neat idea in the galley is the plate stowage: plates are stored vertically directly from the sink into a rack which drains into the sink outlet. "There's no drying up on this boat," Stead says.

The saloon table is to starboard with continuous seating on three sides; the aft "leg" of the seat is backless so that it doubles as a seat for the nav station, built into the cockpit bulkhead. The pilothouse configuration provides all-round sloping windows so that there is a dry, sheltered view of the sails and the action on deck.

Just inside the companionway to port,

steps lead aft. A crew berth is in the port quarter, for when sailing short-handed, and aft of this is the generous double aft cabin and en suite.

Forward of the saloon, are two stacked berths to port in a private cabin, a head to starboard, and another double cabin for'ard with ensuite.

Adding much to the charm of the boat is the high standard of workmanship brought to it by Darren Schofield and his team at Custom Yachts. Apart from an obvious high standard throughout the boat, extra details include the softly-radiussed corners of cabinetry which, apart from being easy to clean, are attractive and kinder in the event of unplanned contact.

The boat carries 1000 litres of fuel - more than enough to motor to Fiji - and 400 litres water capacity. As Stead says, "Why carry all that weight when you can carry a water maker and be sure about what you're drinking?"

Elliott describes the *North Island 53* as a combination of ideas from *Armini* and two of his previous performance cruisers, the 50ft *Kotek* and the 53ft *Kamakaze*, and then a development of the result "because it's quite a different hull".

"The hull is narrower on the waterline and with a less bilgie type mid section than *Kotek*. She is quite fine forward for upwind performance."

The keel is long fore and aft, with a bulb. The rudder stock is carbon fibre/foam with a carbon fibre rudder stock for weight saving, no leaking and no electrolysis.

Fully laden for cruising, the boat displaces 12 tonnes which Elliott says is "pretty respectable for a fifty-three foot cruising boat." To achieve that, construction is E-glass and Kevlar laminates over PVC foam core built on a female mould with an internal grid of solid glass. The boat has localised carbon fibre reinforcing in areas such as chain plates and bulkheads. "Usually I use more high-tech fabrics in the laminate," Elliott says,

"but we did the weight studies and stiffness studies and it came out a hundred kilograms different. It's not worth it for \$50,000."

Also accounting for speed performance is the hydraulic vang and backstay: "It makes a huge difference to speed," Elliott says. "You can adjust the load and get it a lot tighter."

We left Bayswater Marina and motored at 8.5kts up the harbour into a perfect 15kt northeasterly under the 100hp turbo diesel Yanmar driving a feathering, three-bladed Maxprop propeller. The engine is installed with an Aqua drive, anti-vibration system and sound proofing. Engine noise was negligible throughout the boat.

All sails went up easily as claimed and we came on the wind as we cleared North Head. The performance was great and the helm perfectly smooth and finger-light, even as the boat powered up into the breeze. The Elliott/Stead philosophy on having only the best deckgear extends to the bearings in the steering.

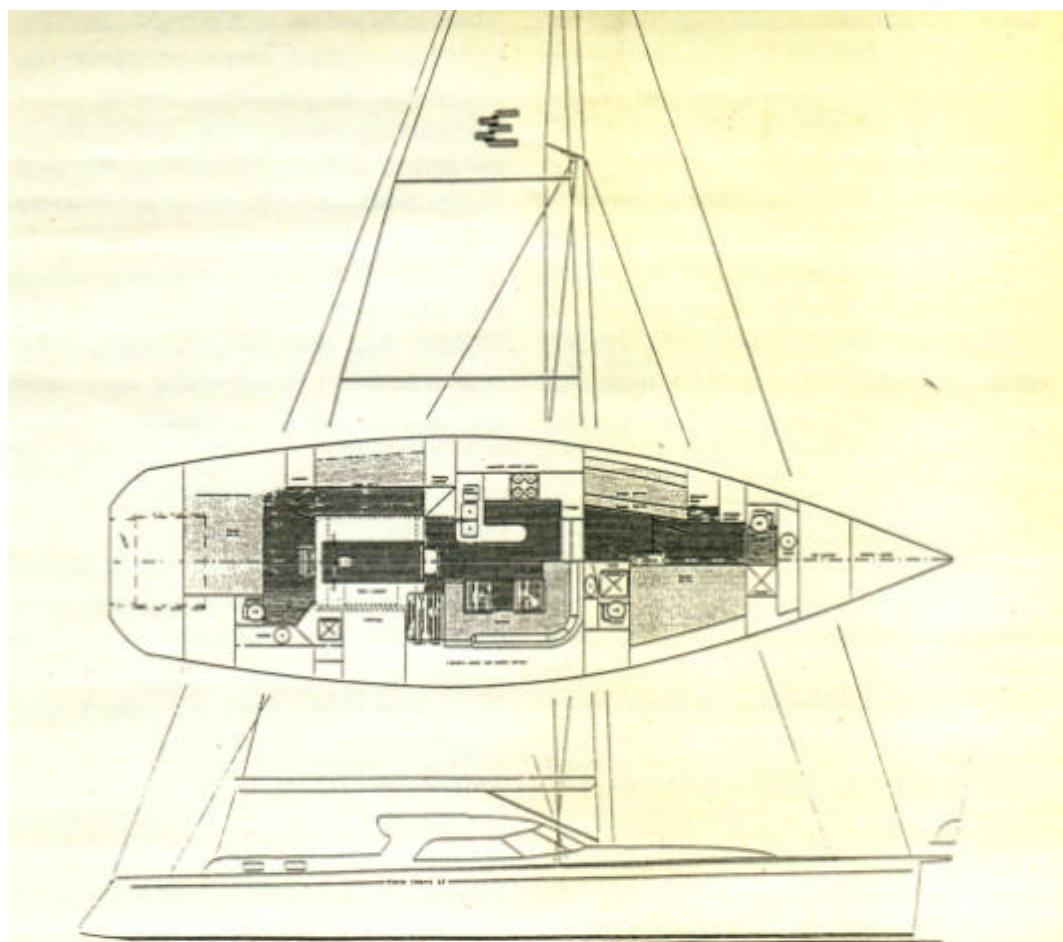
At 20kts and 30 degrees apparent, boat speed was 9kts. That's what the numbers told us but they don't describe the feel of a big boat powering along in a perfect breeze. I was having a good time but Stead and Elliott were just about doing the jig.

We turned downwind for the trip home and prepared to hoist the gennaker. This operates in a snuffer and for some reason this part of the deal didn't quite go according to plan but no doubt that small teething problem will be remedied soon.

Once up in its rightful place, the gennaker took the boat over the water at a satisfying 10kts boatspeed, in 90 degrees and 14.5kts apparent. The handling of the boat was secure, well balanced, dry and a quiet boat. Really nice.

Postscript

Unfortunately there is one fly in the ointment in this story which means the North Island 53's first major sail is going to be longer and sooner than planned - to



Norfolk Island. As we go to print, the boat, with Stead on board as skipper, is headed north. On arrival at Norfolk, he will have his passport and the ship's papers stamped, clear Customs and return to New Zealand.

He's not making the voyage as a shakedown, but to satisfy New Zealand's trade regulations. To avoid paying 12.5% GST on the boat when he ships it to England, Stead has to take it out of the country, under sail, clear into an offshore port and return. He's not impressed.

Suppliers to North Island 53:

Coast Marine Stainless (Silverdale): 1000L alloy fuel tank; 400L stainless steel water tank, rails, traveller, blocks, hatches; Power & Marine: Yanmar 100hp engine, Whitlock Premier wheel; Pinzon: engineering; Mast & Spar Services: mast, rigging; Furllex: furling; Kiwi Yachting: Lewmar winches; Lusty & Blundell: Raytheon chartplotter, VHF, log, radar, toilets, Autohelm autopilot; Advance Trident: ICOM SSB; 121 Marine: Force 10

stove; Serada Marine: SS sink; Hardware House: Dorf taps; Benchmark: formica benches; Courtaulds Coatings: Interspray 900 deck paint and topsides, Reaction laquer non skid and interior paint, Epivor varnish; Altex: ABC anti-fouling; Adhesive Technology: E-glass foam, carbon, epoxy resin; High Modulus: engineering; Nuplex: (F61): foam core, gelcoat internal grid, polyester resin; Custom Yachts: cabinet work; Ply Tech: all plywood including flooring; BEP Marine: switch board, lighting; Fridge Tech: fridge freezer; Timpon City: timber.



Specifications

loa16m, 52.43ft
lwl14.5m, 47.56ft
beam4.8m, 15.75ft
draft2.7m, 8.85ft
mast, I19.6m, 64.3ft
P19.15m, 62.8ft
boom, E6.7m, 21.98ft
fore, J5.65m, 18.53ft
disp, laden12,000kg