

# The Practical Sailor's Evaluation of the Bristol 29.9

## THE BOAT AND THE BUILDER

*New ideas tempered by tradition* is the current slogan at Bristol Yachts. The Bristol 29.9 is more tradition than new idea. It's now the smallest boat in a line that once included much smaller boats, and the only boat still offered by once favorite designer Halsey Herreshoff. Save the 29.9, the current line bears little resemblance to the Bristols of the 1960's and early 70's.

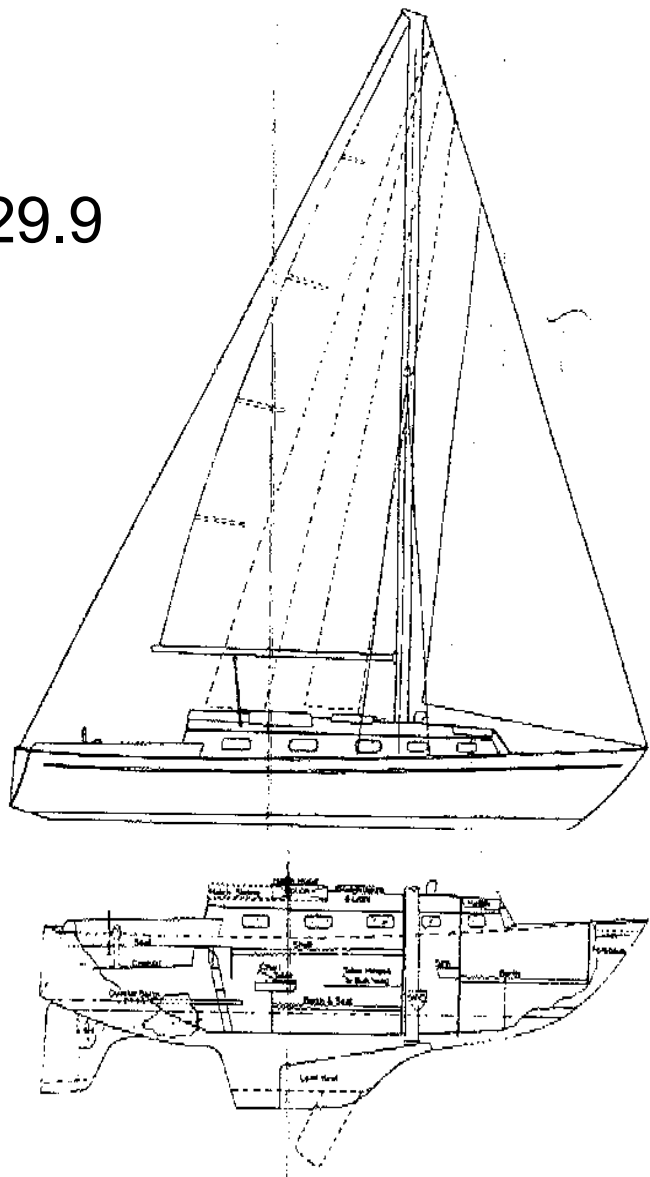
A Bristol used to be recognizable by a respectable sheer line, capped by a high, cambered, sometimes boxy cabin house. The 29.9 has these features along with a freeboard of less than attractive height aft, and a slightly "pinched" stern; "Bulky looking," as described by several 29.9 owners.

The tradition that "tempers" the Bristol line is a conservative approach to design that leans toward greater displacement, labor intensive interiors, and languid performance. The 29.9 is no exception. She has moderate displacement, a long, shallow keel and a cruising rig. What is surprising is that the builder and designer had high hopes for the 29.9 as a racer/cruiser under IOR and MORC. She was not a racing success and was quickly relegated to the role of cruiser/daysailor. Owners use her mostly for daysailing or coastal cruising.

In the eight years of production since 1977, over 215 Bristol 29.9s were built. A well equipped boat in 1977 cost about \$25,000. The base price in 1984 is \$53,818; with sails and a few options, that price can easily top \$60,000. Add a few other niceties like electronics and roller furling and the price, can climb over \$83,000. Although this might seem like a steep price, it positions the 29.9 midway between the Catalina 30 and the Sabre 30. According to the *BUC Used Boat Price Guide*, the average price of a used 29.9 is about \$32,000 for a 1978; \$39,000 for a 1980; and \$44,000 for a 1982.

Bristol Yachts is located in Bristol, RI. Despite their occasional allusion to "Bristol fashion", that term has its origin in an old English seaport, not in Rhode Island. The heritage of Bristol Yachts barely spans the era of fiberglass. General Manager Clint Pearson helped introduce fiberglass sailboat auxiliaries to the public as co-founder of Pearson Yachts in the late 1950's (remember the Triton, Vanguard and Wanderer?). After he sold out to Grumman Allied Industries, Clint Pearson founded Bristol Yachts. While a financial crisis brought the company to the edge of bankruptcy in the 1970s, it appears relatively stable today.

Of the seven Bristol 29.9 owners who have returned *PS Boatowners'* Questionnaires to date, all are happy with their boats. Only one had filed a warranty claim with the builder



## Specifications

LOA	29' 11"
LWL	24' 0"
Beam	10' 2"
Draft: Standard	4' 4"
Centerboard:	3'6"/7'6"
up/down	
Displacement	8650 lbs
Ballast	3600 lbs
Sail Area	391 sq ft

Bristol Yachts  
Franklin Street  
Bristol, RI 02809.

and said he was not treated satisfactorily. He recommended inspecting the boat before it leaves the factory. Of the owners who had purchased their boats from dealers, a majority of them said they were not treated satisfactorily by the dealers. One owner called one of Bristol's largest dealers "unpleasant, and hostile.

# **Although the 29.9 was designed with racing in mind, her performance has been hampered from the outset by her underbody and rig**

## CONSTRUCTION

The construction of the 29.9 is conventional and sturdy. We consider it above average for a production cruiser/daysailor, and would not hesitate to use the boat for coastal cruising. The hull is a heavy layup of solid fiberglass; the deck is cored with balsa. The counter is stiffened by a stringer. The topsides derive stiffness from the interior furniture; thus, for example the V-berth is positioned high to more evenly distribute stiffness in the flat panels of the topsides forward.

The 29.9 is atypical of the production sailboat in that all of the interior, save the head/shower and the overhead, is pieced in and glassed in place. Most production boats use a one-piece molded interior liner which, because it is attached to the hull in fewer places, offers less stiffness. Liners also have a habit of coming unglued during the later years of a boat's life, and are far more difficult to re-attach than a pieced-in interior.

The hull-to-deck joint is done in a fashion we recommend -- an inward turning horizontal hull flange overlapped by the deck and thru-bolted at close intervals. In fact, the bolts are even closer than is necessary -- only a couple of inches apart.

The joint is sealed with butyl tape, a clay-like substance which provides no chemical bond but is a good waterproofing material. We have heard of no reports of the joints leaking. For the past several years Bristol has been using 3M 5200 outside of the butyl to provide a cleaner, glued joint (3M 5200 is a strong, semi-rigid adhesive). On the older boat we looked at, the butyl had not been cleaned up where it had oozed out of the joint inside the cabin's lockers. Also, the hull flange had been cut away to allow a stanchion backing plate to lie flush against the deck. A better way would be to shim one side of the backing plate to make it lie flush against the hull flange.

The 29.9 has an internal keel, which is set into the boat with fiberglass mat and then glassed over to seal the ballast from the inside of the boat. However, it is impossible to avoid some voids between the hull shell and the internal ballast. In the event of a hard grounding, water can get into the shell and thwart efforts to make repair. We prefer an externally mounted keel.

Bristol offers a keel and a keel /centerboard version of the 29.9. Although the centerboard is a \$3400 option, the *BUC Used Boat Price Guide* shows that it does not add any value to the boat. The centerboard version draws only 10" less with the board up than the keel version, so the advantage to gungholers is minimal. The centerboard version also lacks the sump of the keel version, so water is quick to slosh up under the quarterberths. The board is hoisted by a wire pennant on a worm driven reel winch, and works with relative ease. That's good, because you'll want to hoist it whenever moored to keep the board from slotting in the trunk.

The rudder is supported by a skeg, and driven by an Edson wheel steering system. The propeller is in an aperture in the skeg. Access to the steering cables or to fit an emergency tiller is through a hatch under the lazarette.

Seacocks are used on all through hulls, but until a year ago a gate valve was used on the engine coolant intake. Hoses are double clamped and the seacocks are now bedded with 3M 5200.

The spar is a non-tapered, non-bending anodized section -- very simple, safe and low performance, it is keel stepped with

fore-and-aft lowers. Until a year and a half ago, the spreaders were simple tubes which fit into small brackets which also served to anchor the lower shrouds. Now the 29.9 is rigged with more modern tapered spreaders and a cleaner shroud anchorage. The halyards are still externally led, which simplifies maintenance, but dramatically increases windage.

The shroud chainplates are mounted on the gunwale, and are bolted to small "knees" tucked under the hull to deck joint -- a method which should be secure in any weather given the strength of the joint. This method is more seaworthy than mounting the chainplates inboard and attaching them to knees which are glassed to an unsupported panel of the hull. The price of having outboard shrouds is a loss of a upwind ability.

The main bulkhead is substantial, yet it only spans half of the boat before it is divided and staggered fore-and-aft for cosmetic reasons. It would be stronger to make the bulkhead in one piece.

## PERFORMANCE

### Handling Under Sail

Although the 29.9 was designed with racing in mind, her performance has been hampered from the outset by her underbody and rig. Her shallow, low aspect keel, outboard shrouds and under canvassed sailplan do nothing to enhance her performance in light to moderate winds. The 29.9 is available with an optional tall rig which adds 2 1/2' to the height of the rig, but only six boats have ever been ordered with this option. The placid performance of the standard rig seems to fit the cruising for which most 29.9 owners use their boats.

The centerboard option has seen greater acceptance than the tall rig, with about 25% of the boats equipped with it, yet we don't recommend it. It only reduces the draft, slightly over the standard boat when raised, and appears to unbalance the boat when down. Most owners of the centerboard model to whom we talked complained about the boat's balance. She has "extreme weather helm no matter where, the centerboard is raised to," said one owner. None of the owners with the standard keel version complained about balance. In fact, comments like "will sail unattended when the wind is forward of abeam," were common.

The rig of the Bristol 29.9 is immovable in the fore-and-aft direction, as the step and the mast partner are fixed. There is no space for partner blocks and the mast steps through a tight fitting hole molded into the head's floor pan. You can't change the rake to balance the helm.

In general, owners were satisfied with the 29.9's stability, and said the boat's overall speed was better than average for a boat of her size. However, the PHRF rating does not agree with their evaluation. The 29.9's rating ranges from 180 to 216 depending on the handicapper, and averages 193. At that rating, it is about 10 seconds a mile slower than a Catalina 30, 13 slower than a Hunter 30, 16 slower than a Pearson 30, 18 slower than a Sabre 30 and 20 slower than a Tartan 30.

### Handling Under Power

The standard engine in the 29.9 is currently a Universal 11 hp diesel, with a 16 hp Universal available as an option. Until a few years ago, a Yanmar 12 hp diesel was standard, with a 15 hp Yanmar as an option. In both cases, we recommend the larger engine. When a manufacturer offers such an engine as an option, it usually means that the smaller engine is of marginal size.

## ***The cockpit of the Bristol 29.9 is small but uncluttered. Save the sheets, there is nary a line to tangle underfoot***

Owners report that both the Yanmars and Universals are reliable and that power, especially with the larger engine option, is satisfactory. One owner says his 18 hp Universal pushes his boat at 6 ½ knots. Maneuverability is good, as the boat has a propeller located in close proximity to the rudder. However, docking in a strong breeze can be a problem due to the windage of the high cabin house.

Most owners say that engine accessibility is mediocre. To check the oil in both the Yanmar and Universal engines you have to remove a panel inside a cockpit locker, which means emptying that locker of whatever gear is stowed in it. The engine has no noise insulation.

The aluminum fuel tank has a capacity of 18 gallons, which is more than adequate. Prior to 1981, the fuel tank was made of steel; one owner had to replace his due to internal rust. On the boat we looked at, the straps which hold down the tank were not padded to prevent chafe. The fuel fill is in the floor of the cockpit, which will make the floor slippery should there be any overflow during fueling. There is no oil pan under the engine. The owners of older boats often mentioned problems with engine mounts and shaft misalignment.

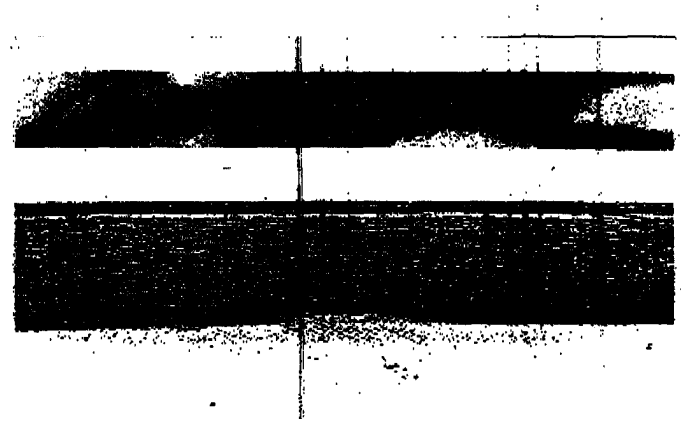
### **LIVABILITY**

#### **Deck Layout**

The cockpit of the Bristol 29.9 is small but uncluttered. Save the sheets, there is nary a line to tangle underfoot. The halyards cleat on the mast (the standard mast is equipped with only one halyard winch; you'll want to add at least one extra). There is no mainsail reefing system. The traveler is short and is mounted forward of the companionway. To compensate for the poor purchase of a traveler mounted so far forward, the mainsheet is led forward to the mast and then aft to a winch on the cabin house.

The cockpit is wide -- a tad too wide for many people to comfortably brace their feet against the leeward seat -- yet it is not long enough to seat more than four in comfort. The seat backs are straight, and the coaming is of wood trim -- attractive in appearance but uncomfortable to sit on should you want to sit on the rail while sailing to weather.

The Edson steering is equipped with a 22" wheel to allow free movement fore-and-aft through the cockpit. One owner commented how much easier the boat was to steer when he installed a larger wheel. Despite the high cabin house, visibility from the cockpit is adequate.



Scuppers in the teak toerails are much too small, causing water to back up into the cockpit

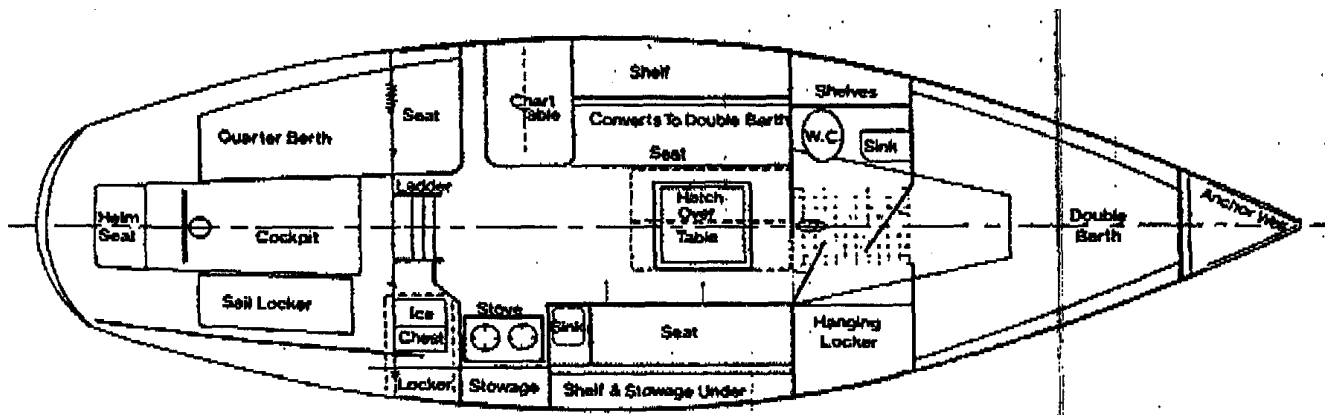
Teak trim is standard on the 29.9. On the boat we looked at the scuppers cut into the teak toerail were too few and too small. Because the cockpit coaming doesn't extend to the stern, water on deck would find its way into the cockpit before the scuppers could drain it overboard.

The companionway sill is lower than the cockpit seats, which means that the lower drop board must be kept in place whenever sailing in rough weather. The taper of the companionway is gradual, so there is little tendency for the boards to float out should the cockpit be pooped. There is no coaming molded into the deck to accept a dodger; this means that a dodger will be less than 100% effective in keeping water out of the cockpit.

The non-skid on the deck is of a "woven" pattern and is less effective than the "pyramid" or random pattern non-skids found on other boats. Single lifelines are standard, double are optional and only necessary if sailing with children.

The 29.9 is equipped with black-painted Bomar hatches. On the six-year-old boat that we examined, the paint was flaking off.

Until 1982, the forward running lights were deck mounted Perkos. Now they are Peters and Bey stanchion mounted lights -- more visible and watertight.



## **While Bristol has sold over 200 29.9s since the boat's inception, you can't call her a big success. Perhaps it's her appearance**

The standard primary winches are Lewmar 30s, which although marginal for racing, should be adequate for cruising and daysailing.

There is a locker for the ground tackle in the foredeck. It is shallow so as to hold little water when beating in a sea, but on the boat that we looked at, the drain was not pitched enough to keep the locker completely dry:

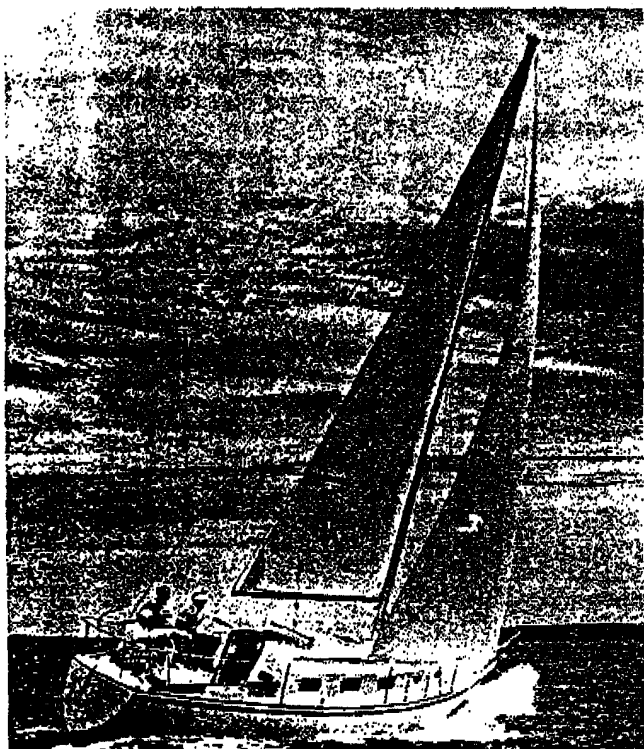
### **Belowdecks**

The Bristol 29.9 has a well-built and reasonably livable interior. The piece-by-piece attachment of the interior (except the head) results in a better bonding and reinforcement to the hull, and makes it easier to repair or modify than a one piece liner. Until 1982 the interior was built of quality lauan mahogany marine plywood. Now it is built of teak veneered plywood. While the mahogany may require more maintenance, we prefer its appearance to teak. The cabin sole is teak and holly. A worthwhile option is ceiling battens in the quarterberth and V-berth.

The arrangement of the interior is conventional with berths far six, although sleeping with that many on a boat this small would be short of pleasant. The quarterberth is tucked almost completely under the cockpit to make room for a good sized navigation table. (Part of the reason the 29.9 has such high freeboard aft may be to provide a modicum of clearance above the quarterberth.)

Headroom throughout the cabin is 6' or more, which is greater than necessary for most people, especially on a 30-footer. The galley is convenient, with a deep sink. Hot pressured water is an \$800 option. Storage bins are numerous, but small, throughout the boat. All of the bins and shelves have doors on them to prevent contents from falling out as the boat heels.

"We could use more ventilation on rainy days." is typical of



comments from owners. We agree. On the boat we looked at, there was excessive mildew in the bilge. The companionway is angled forward so the drop boards must be left in to keep rain out. While the boat has a good sea hood keep water from getting under the companionway hatch and into the cabin, the mast boot is only a cloth gasket. Owners report that the mast is difficult to seal. One owner had the builder install optional dorades, yet complained that they were positioned to snag on the jib sheets when tacking. The storage lockers in the cabin are also poorly ventilated.

The head, shower and wet locker lie between the main cabin and the V-berth. Although there is a hatch above the V-berth, it inevitably smells like the head. Opening ports in the V-berth are a recommended option. The icebox drains into the bilge, but the shower does not.

The 29.9 carries a whopping 63 gallons of water in fiberglass tanks in the cabin and under the V-berth. The sheer weight of this much water will affect the boat's trim. The vent for the water tank is in the topsides, which makes it possible for salt water to find its way into the tank.

Exposed wiring in the cockpit locker and a fuse panel on the starboard bulkhead just inside the companionway may prove vulnerable to water. Bristol has just recently begun installing circuit breakers. An interior headliner hides the wiring that runs forward from the fuse panel, and makes that wiring inaccessible for repair.

Perhaps the most commendable part of the interior is the cabin table. It is both rugged and is rigidly held against the main bulkhead with a screw-down hatch dog, so it won't rattle when folded out of the way. Like the galley, it is covered with Formica.

The joiner work of the interior is also above average. It's not as fancy as some boats coming out of Taiwan, but more workmanlike -- simple, sturdy and just well done.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

While Bristol has sold over 200 29.9s since the boat's inception, you can't call this boat a big success. Perhaps it's her appearance. She is not as modern looking as most of the popular 30-footers on the market today (including the Bristol 31.1). Yet her stern, topside height aft, and high cabin house give her a boxy enough appearance to turn off many traditionalists. She is not the offshore cruiser of the likes of a Southern Cross or a Nicholson, yet her underbody and rig are too conservative to make her an exiting daysailor either. Also detracting from her daysailing ability is the meager size of her cockpit.

For the most part, owners are quite satisfied with their 29.9s. The complaint of most merit is that the centerboard version doesn't balance well upwind. Most of the comments are positive, for example, "She inspires confidence and will carry a tot of sail comfortably," or "She is sturdy and has a good use of space."

Bristol Yachts is not a large boatbuilder. They build 29.9s only to order and, with the pieced-in interior, customization is possible. The Bristol 29.9 is on the verge of being discontinued, due to competition from it's larger and newer sister -- the 31.1, which has a base price of only \$8000 more than the 29.9. However, the 29.9 is not a bad value at a base price of almost \$54,000. She is strongly built and well finished -- a capable and comfortable coastal cruiser.