

**NEW  
BOAT  
REVIEW**

# Bespoke liveaboard

When an experienced boater wanted a new narrowboat for residential and cruising use, she soon decided on Braidbar Boats. **Mark Langley** explores the resulting 60-footer, *Desiderata*



**M**any customers of boat-builders these days are fairly inexperienced boaters, who, often having downsized their house, decide to use the profits to buy a boat for cruising or living afloat without much thought. Not so with this craft. Gill Gregory is a very experienced boater who has owned and cruised a variety of craft around the network over the years. Although her boats have always been for pleasure, she has spent a decade without one and, with a view to taking early retirement, she decided it was time to take the plunge and have a new boat built to live on. Having sold her house, and moved into her touring caravan, she set about searching for someone to create her new floating home.

After visiting several builders, she settled on Braidbar Boats as she found the company both approachable and willing to create what she requested (some boat-builders simply want a customer to have their 'standard' boat). It also helped that Gill's fifth boat was a Braidbar, which she had for ten years, so she was already aware of the quality of the company.

Braidbar is one of a select number of boat-builders with its own fan base,



## Fast facts

**LENGTH** 60ft  
**BERTHS** 2+2  
**ENGINE** Beta 43 hybrid  
**PRICE** POA  
**Contact:** 01625 873471,  
[braidbarboats.co.uk](http://braidbarboats.co.uk)





in the form of the (independent) Braidbar Owners' Group. A slot came up in the builder's usually packed schedule, and so the boat was completed earlier than expected – leading to its launch in November 2021. Gill has been living aboard since.

### Shell & exterior

Gill's last boat was a fully traditional-style boat, with a short aft deck, and she was initially convinced that this was what she wanted. After exploring other Braidbar craft, however, she realised that a semi-trad stern would suit her better, as it would allow easier access and cruising for her and her two West Highland terriers. With an eye to the future, she opted for a hybrid boat, with the benefit that it would be gas-free and therefore lugging gas cylinders in and out of lockers in winter would not be an issue.

The shell is by Tyler-Wilson and has its classic lines, with the steelwork superbly finished in brush-painted enamel. The black hull paint is taken up to the gunwales in a superb, non-slip finish to give safe passage around the boat. The cabin decoration is muted, with battleship grey gloss panels, white coachlines and black framing, bar the two Andy Russell signwritten aft

panels, which are in the deep red gloss that also adorns the solid handrails.

The bow is very shapely with three rubbing strakes to give a planked effect, with the bow locker used for storage. The front cockpit has a single panel glazed cratch, with a Wilson's cover neatly fitted; under the cockpit is a Vetus bow-thruster in its own watertight locker, with a false floor to allow additional storage. On the roof there is a pole and plank holder to port, and the stove chimney opposite, with a shorter flue for cruising and a longer one for when tied up. Six 120W flexible solar panels are adhered to the roof to give substantial amounts of charging. There is also a TV aerial – unusually, of the Omnimax type, which is quite low-tech but robust and fairly discreet, unlike some systems fitted to boats. The matt grey-finished roof has large non-slip panels for the odd time you might need to step onto it. A lovely diamond-patterned centre panel is in front of the hatch, along with some poetry that really sums up canal cruising!

The aft cockpit has two spacious lockers under the seats, and they are shaped to allow the cabin doors to swing back fully. As this is a semi-trad boat, there are doors at the end of the cockpit – this allows Gill's dogs to have the space to themselves when cruising – and Braidbar has fitted a couple of dog mooring points, so they can be secured if needs be. The rear deck has the chute-like weedhatch that Tyler-Wilson specialises in, which eliminates any chance of accidentally flooding the engine room and is easy to access for clearing the prop. To deal with the dogs after a trek along a muddy towpath, there is a fitting in the aft bulkhead to allow a shower hose to be clipped in, with a trigger spray and thermostatically controlled warm water to rinse the dogs off before they come back inside.

### Saloon

Bucking the current trend for reverse-layout boats, Gill has sensibly selected



### SHELL & EXTERIOR

**Above left:** The canvas-covered bow cockpit provides storage.  
**Left:** Excellent signwriting by Andy Russell.

### SALOON

**Below:** The large sofa-bed in the saloon gives proper lounging space and allows guests to sleep aboard.



The amazing Stirling engine fan atop the Lockgate diesel stove.







## SALOON

**Above:** Ash T&G below the gunwale in the saloon is attractive, and a cute sheep footstool adds character.

**Above right:** The saloon is comfortable and spacious; not having a dinette avoids a sense of separation.

the forward-saloon, aft-bedroom layout, which many experienced boaters prefer. The forward cockpit leads down via two shallow steps into the saloon, with the covered cockpit being a year-round extension of the cabin. It also gives good views out through the glazed front doors and cratch.

To port of the front doors is a low-level corner cupboard, with a couple of fiddled shelves above. Opposite is a Lockgate drip-feed diesel stove, finished in stainless steel, which Gill finds perfect for heating the entire boat – in winter she only fires up the central heating for a couple of hours each day. Helping move the warm air from the stove is a stove-top fan – nothing unusual in that but this is a Warpfive Stirling engine fan, which is a work of engineering and art in itself (for more details see New Products on page 55).

## STORAGE

**Below:** The pull-out cupboards are really thoughtful.



The breakfast bar is practical and creates a huge worktop space in the galley.

## “THE OWNER IS A KEEN COOK, SO THE GALLEY IS A BIT LARGER THAN ON MANY BOATS”

As Braidbar is a particularly thoughtful builder, there are no vents in the front or rear doors to allow screaming draughts through. Instead, ventilation is taken through grilles in the bulkheads and fed at low level into the cabin, behind the stove and cupboard, and through the classical Braidbar ‘peephole’ cut-outs above the steps.

*Desiderata* is finished in oak, with white painted panels on the cabin side and ash T&G under the gunwale in the saloon for contrast. The joinery is stunning, with every joint being perfectly neat and matching grain patterns where appropriate. Lighting is by LED, both roof spotlights and under-gunwale strips, which gives a very warm light. The Karndeian flooring is attractive and practical – Gill

originally wanted solid wood floors but Braidbar convinced her that Karndeian would be more scratch-resistant over time, particularly from dog claws.

Instead of a couple of easy chairs and dinette combination, Gill has opted for a large, very comfortable free-standing sofa (by Sofabed Barn) which converts to a bed. This avoids a ‘railway carriage’ look and gives somewhere decent to lounge in – many dinettes are not that comfortable long-term to use as seating. The downside is, unless you want to eat off your lap, you need some alternate provision – so, there is a decent breakfast bar at the end of the galley to provide a dining space. There is a TV unit opposite the sofa which has more storage inside. The double-glazed portholes let in a lot of light but there is also a pair of glazed side doors





### GALLEY

**Far left:** The neat induction hob sits to starboard in the galley, freeing up the work space opposite.

**Left:** A large galley is ideal for enthusiastic chefs.

**Below:** The wine locker in the galley floor.



### APPLIANCES

**Above:** A large fridge and separate freezer are fitted.

**Above centre:** Cupboards, microwave, oven-grill and fridge all make good use of the aft bulkhead.

further aft. The folded fabric blinds are neat and there are slot-in wooden shutters for the side door windows, making the boat very snug at night.

### Galley

Gill is a keen cook, so the galley is a bit larger than on many boats. As the boat is gas-free, there is also more flexibility of layout. The Neff induction hob, which has two 'burners', can also provide a gradient of heat across the surface rather than just two zones. This is, unusually, fitted to the smaller starboard galley cupboard but it works well for the cook, with plenty of space to avoid catching pan handles. The granite worktops add a sparkle to the interior and are very well installed. In the aft bulkhead there is a large Neff microwave at the top, with an oven/grill underneath to make it almost eye height, plus a slide-away door for space efficiency. Underneath that is the large fridge.

Against the cabin side on the aft bulkhead are two slide-out cupboards, which pack an awful lot of storage

space into an often poorly used area. Under the cupboards are wine bottle storage compartments, which are deep and angled up so that, in the event of a collision, the bottles will not become missiles. Under the floor is another wine locker, neatly illuminated, lined with carpet but still allowing the base plate to keep wines suitably chilled.

Having the hob to starboard means that, apart from the deep sink and grooved drainer, there is nothing else on the port worktop, giving lots of room for food preparation. Under the worktop, next to the sink, a drawer drops open to reveal a small, six-place setting dishwasher, with a pan cupboard below. Originally designed for a full dishwasher, supply issues meant only a compact unit was available but it has been fitted so it can be upgraded in the future. The breakfast bar overhangs the end of the cupboard, so there is decent legroom under the two stylish bar stools. One cupboard here houses a full-sized freezer, accessible from the galley, while the corner cupboard contains an 8kg washing machine,

with its door opening into the saloon. Overall, the galley has a very practical layout, with a huge amount of storage.

### Bathroom

The walk-through bathroom is spacious, with a large shower on the centre line, complete with very attractive Mermaid lining. There is another slide-out unit between the shower and cabin side, to allow towels to be stored, while the space against the hull gives a surprisingly big cupboard. In here is the vertical, 55-litre twin-coil calorifier, and Gill requested a short length of finrad in the central heating line to keep the cupboard warm, so it can dry out cloths and mops. There is easy access here to the plumbing and pumps, and it is good to see that there is an expansion tank on the hot water system, to reduce strain on the calorifier as the water expands when it is heated; this is in addition to the pressure vessel mounted after the water pump.

What type of toilet to go for is an eternal question for boaters, but Gill had an easy answer: a ceramic Thetford



## BEDROOM

**Right:** The aft cabin is comfortable.  
**Far right:** A small dressing table and shelves in the back cabin.  
**Below:** Plenty of mixed storage in the aft cabin.



## BATHROOM

**Left:** The bathroom has plenty of space, with the ceramic bowl cassette loo being practical for living afloat.  
**Below:** Useful towel storage in the bathroom.

cassette loo, which has its access from under the bed behind. This is plumbed in to rinse from the boat's water supply and is very easy to maintain – unlike more complex systems. It is also far cheaper for a residential boater than a pump-out and has no disposal issues like dry (composting) loos. A spare cassette is carried. There is also a circular washbasin on a granite worktop and plenty of storage underneath, plus a heated towel rail and an additional radiator, which is sensible for year-round boating.

## Bedroom

An aft bedroom with a fixed double is quite unusual these days but it is very practical. Having the bed at the back of the boat means that the head is towards the bow, which is often trimmed higher, particularly if the water tank is not full. This can give

a better night's sleep. There is a lot of space under the bed, plus easy access to the toilet cassette. The bed itself extends with a pull-out section, and there is a shelf above its head with reading lights underneath. A neat little shelf for a cup of tea and phone is under the port gunwale. There are also three cupboards along the roofline, giving useful storage but not making the cabin feel small.

Right aft there is a large wardrobe, with shelving in the top section, drawers in the middle and hanging below. A low-level cupboard, with mirrored bulkhead, is to port, acting as a dressing table. The steps at the back of the boat are wide and shallow – they had to be 'Westie friendly' and they certainly make it easy for anyone, not just the dogs, to get in and out. The steps are topped with hardwearing carpet, which provides

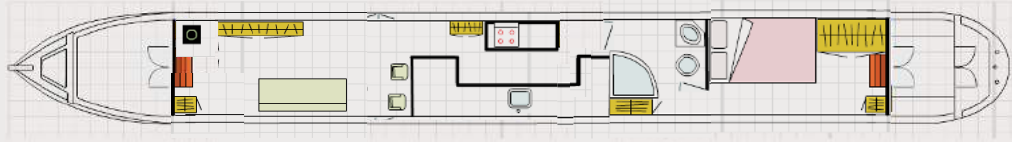


excellent grip, and the lower two are curved. The top step removes to give access to the battery bank, and there are electric cupboards and more storage either side. Thankfully, fire blankets and extinguishers are not hidden away in cupboards, which seems to be a trend for modern boats, and so are readily accessible.

## Propulsion & services

*Desiderata* has a parallel hybrid propulsion system, with a Beta 43

## BOAT LAYOUT







### PROPULSION & SERVICES

**Left:** The hybrid engine installation is based around a Beta 43.

**Far left:** A 5kW combi inverter, solar charge controller and easy accessed switches and breaker. Note the decent indirect ventilation, which avoids draughts and keeps electrical equipment cool.



The dogwash is attached into a recessed fitting on the aft bulkhead.



diesel driving through a PRM 150 gearbox, with a 10kW motor-generator mounted above. The engine is designed to run quietly in either mode, with a large hospital-generator-type attenuation silencer and a lot of sound insulation in the engine bay. There is a water-lubricated stern tube which will keep maintenance down and dry bilges, though a pump is fitted as usual. The diesel engine has a large baffled skin tank fitted, while the electric motor has its own separate skin cooling tank.

The engine bay is quite empty, apart from a pair of batteries to act as the engine starter and domestic buffer banks, with the compact Webasto diesel heater mounted on the starboard hull side. This means that there is plenty of extra space in here for spares, folding bikes and so on, if ever needed. As you would expect, the engine and electrical installations are very neat, well labelled and protected from damage.

The main battery bank is under the extended aft step inside the cabin and has 24 x 800Ah lead-acid batteries at 2V each, giving 38kWh capacity at nominal 48V supply. This is also charged by a 5kVA Victron Multiplus combi, as well as the engine alternators – the 10kW unit recharging the bank

quickly when running on diesel. The 48V supply is stepped down for the lighting, water pumps and general systems aboard, with the 230V supply for the larger domestic appliances. Having 720W of solar capacity is also useful, not just for maintaining the bank but to supply most, if not all, of the domestic load when tied up for a few days. The full Victron electronics and monitoring system keep everything controlled, while the batteries have an auto top-up system to minimise maintenance. The lead-acid bank is a good compromise to lithium cells and is more easily recycled at the end of its life, compared to other battery technologies, though at the expense of useable capacity. Throughout the boat are plenty of 12V, 230V and USB charging points, all well placed, and there is even a docking charging point for the Dyson vacuum in the aft electrics cupboard.

### Underway

Moving off under electric power, the boat picks up speed quickly without pulling any significant wash. Tyler-Wilson shells are known to have good underwater profiles, and this is no exception, cleanly cutting

through the water. The tiller is firm but not uncomfortable and there is a good view of the engine instruments from the helm. A current draw of around 40A from the battery bank (just under 2kW of power) gives the boat a good canal cruising speed – and, at this speed, a useable range of around eight hours or so before the batteries need charging.

Under electric, the boat stops as well as under diesel, and manoeuvring the boat is easy, with the powerful bow-thruster being a useful addition but not essential. However, the addition of the thruster enables another very useful trick for the solo boater... there is a remote control. As well as engaging forward or reverse under electric power, you can manoeuvre the boat with the thruster on the remote-control transmitter, making lock flights a lot easier.

Having the hybrid design means long sections of canal can be cruised under diesel, with flights of locks and the pounds in between being covered purely on electric. Or a few hours cruising out and back from a mooring can be done entirely on electric, with the battery bank being recharged from shore power or the solar between trips. This can really reduce the emissions and running costs of cruising.

**Above left:** Access to the 2V traction cells. For full access, other panels open up, and an auto top-up system is fitted. **Above:** Running on electric power at a good cruising speed and pulling about 40A.

### WW's verdict

Braidbar's boats are always incredibly well finished and *Desiderata* is no exception. With precise joinery and fantastic attention to detail, the boat serves as a quality home and comfortable cruising craft that can be operated solo or with family and friends. The hybrid installation works very well, the remote-control system is useful for single-handed boating and the forward saloon provides excellent views of the canals on three sides. It's no surprise to hear that Gill is delighted with the boat.

You can find out more about *Desiderata* when it is exhibited at the Crick Boat Show in June.