

If you're not a hard-core RIBster with Hypalon in your veins and an encyclopaedic knowledge of jockey seats, you could be forgiven for thinking that there are an infinite number of RIB companies producing a limitless number of RIBs. Certainly the UK RIB industry seems to be booming, as high demand sees new builders emerging with astonishing frequency.

But in the past, the consequences of this trend have proven mixed. On the one hand it has been reassuring to know that there is still a British motorboat industry beyond the likes of Sunseeker, Sealine, Fairline and Princess. On the other hand, it has also meant that some very poor boats have given the punter a need to be intelligent and selective in his browsing of the shelves.

As a result, relative newcomers to the scene tend to be viewed with caution and that's a problem for JCraft, just as it is for any new builder. They could have a state-of-the-art manufacturing facility employing only the very finest Norwegian craftsmen, building platinum-plated, military-spec RIBs personally endorsed by Alan Priddy and the Pope, and still, people would be wary.

This circumspection among punters is a shame because sticking with well-known, long established manufacturers through ignorance of the unknown can cause you to miss out on some very fine boats. And so it is that we head for the south coast with an open mind to take a look at two RIBs from relative newcomer, JCraft.

“ These RIBs are built in Portsmouth on 1980s race-derived hulls ”

Jamie Dobson, the Managing Director of JCraft, has been in the RIB business for over a decade and previously worked building Blue Water Marine RIBs and Ballistic RIBs, so he has some pedigree. The specific boats we are here to look at are the 580 and 680. Both are built in Portsmouth with hulls derived from a 1980s race boat. He has adapted them with scalloped chines for a drier ride, better suited to the leisure market. But are they any good?

Well at 6.8 metres in length, the 680 is pitched as an all-purpose all-rounder, capable of working as a recreational RIB, a dive boat or an offshore cruiser. ➤

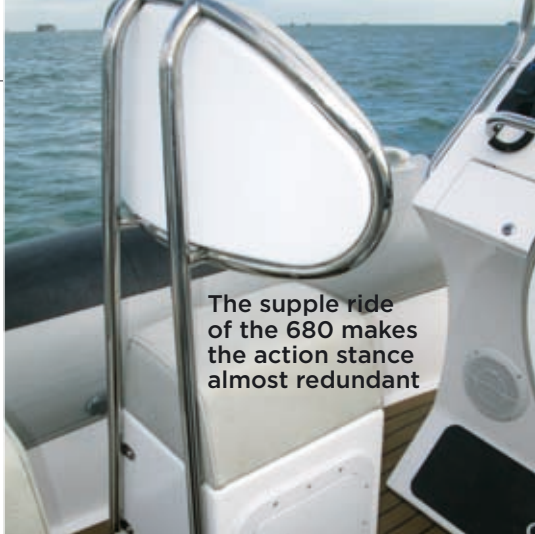
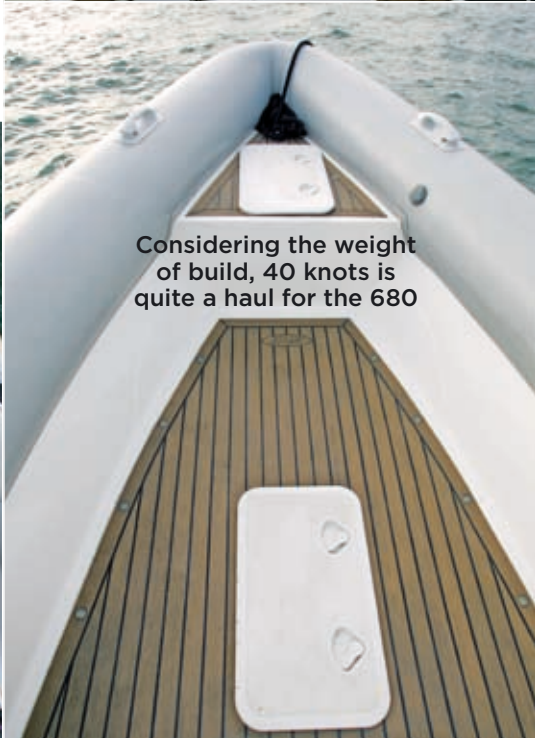
J MARKS THE SPOT

JCraft, the Portsmouth-based RIB builder, has a simple philosophy. Build them heavy and load them with power. Sounds good to us. Tom Isitt heads south to test two offerings from the JCraft range . . .

Not so long ago, a seven-metre RIB was considered pretty large but by today's standard, this is pretty much the norm. As with most RIBs, there is a no such thing as a standard layout. There are almost infinite seating options available, but the test boat configuration will probably prove popular. Behind the centre console there are two rather unusual single seats and behind that there are a pair of double jockey seats, giving total seating for six. The forward seats are a JCraft design and feature a curved backrest to keep you firmly in position, while the actual seat is like a single jockey seat that you sit astride. It's an interesting design, which offers support without locking you too firmly in position.

The 'Atlantic Console' is large and wide, allowing you to fit even a relatively large chartplotter as well as all the other

necessary instruments. The concave shape means that you can tuck your legs under it, allowing a more comfortable driving position than some. This example comes with rocker switches for bilge pump, deck lights, VHF radio, nav lights, and sound system. There are instruments for the Evinrude engine (speedo, tach, fuel gauge, electrics and trim), a Navman 5110 Tracker, a Navman Fish 4430 fishfinder, and a Navman 7100 VHF, as well as a small glove-box. A good-sized Plastimo swinging-card compass is fitted to the top of the console. ➤



The 580's waspish energy forces you to concentrate hard

the navigator, and a meaty grab rail that runs around the sides and top of the console. Forward is a teak-effect deck with a deck locker and a bow locker. Personally I'd prefer the locker access to be at the front face of the bow step rather than on the top of it, both for better waterproofing and a freer arc of swing. In fact that's exactly what they've done on the smaller 580, so it's something you can discuss with JCraft.

At the back is an Evinrude 175hp eTec outboard, which is just about the perfect engine for this RIB. It's smooth, quiet, and relatively economical, yet still delivers in excess of 40 knots from this boat, with a standstill to plane time of under four seconds. Also back here is a fold-down boarding ladder on the port side and a substantial A-frame on which is fitted the nav lights, GPS aerial, and VHF aerial.

Out on the water the 680 is impressive. Acceleration is brisk and exciting without being frightening. Topping out at just over 40 knots, the 680 performs very well. It's not a fire-breathing racer, but it is certainly quick enough and lively enough to be fun. Even in fairly rough conditions the 680 is well planted and solid, with the kind of neutral handling and light steering that will suit the leisure crowd.

“ The Mariner 150 hustles you onto the surface of the water in under four seconds ”

JCRAFT 580

At a metre less in length, the 580 feels surprisingly compact and sporty compared to the 680. This is a more recreational, less 'worky' RIB aimed at a slightly different market. The Atlantic centre console is the same as on the 680, and it has the same forward seats with stowage inside, but there are no seats behind for passengers. Personally, I'd opt for double jockey seats instead of JCraft's custom-made single forward seats so that you could get at least people sitting down, but you can have what you like (assuming it will fit).

The console has instruments for the Mariner 150 Optimax, rocker switches for bilge pump, nav lights, radio, 12v electrics and horn. There is a swinging-card compass, and like the 680 the ➤

Interestingly (and sensibly) JCraft has positioned the throttle to the left of the steering wheel in the centre of console. For me this is far more intuitive and comfortable than a side-mounted lever, particularly as it allows most of us to use the stronger of our two arms for the wheel. There's a solid grab handle for

steering wheel is on the right with the throttle in the middle of the dashboard. This model had a dummy Raymarine C80 colour plotter to show what you could have fitted.

Like the 680, the 580 has a Tek-Deck sole with a locker in the floor of the foredeck as well as one in the bow step. There are handhold/cleats at the bow and stern, but not amidships, and there are safety lines on both tubes. There's an A-frame over the engine for nav lights and aerials.

“You owe it to yourself to look outside the established ranks and consider the talented newcomers”

On the water the 580 feels completely different to the 680. The Marina 150 Optimax is a beast of an engine, and it will power the 580 to the naughty side of 45 knots, getting onto the plane in under four seconds. The 580 feels far more of a drivers boat, meaning that you need to know what you're doing if you're not to get things horribly wrong. Response from the throttle is instantaneous (bordering on brutal) and at high speeds there is a tendency for the 580 to chine-walk.

The driving position is excellent, and encourages you to drive this boat hard, but with only two seats, any other passengers will either be standing behind the two seats or perched on the tubes. Neither position is particularly satisfactory if the helmsman is giving this thing some welly, but with the 580 flying off waves and hopping from chine to chine trimmed out and flying on the

flat stuff, it's a flighty and exciting ride, better suited to the adrenaline junkie than to the family cruiser.

The thrill-ride feel of the 580 is reinforced by the fact that, by modern standards, the Mariner is quite a gruff and throaty engine. It lets you know when you out the hammers down both in terms of sound and speed. But in reality, even the hardest sports driver would admit that 150 is about as much as you'd want on this boat. If speed is not your thing, choose something a little less powerful and a little more refined. Otherwise, hold on and enjoy...

VERDICT

JCraft has made a good start with these two RIBs. The build quality appears to be very good, with very few rough edges even in places you don't normally get to see, and the quality of fit-out is excellent. Styling-wise they're pretty middle-of-the-road, although the 580 is styled more towards the recreational RIBster.

Of the two, the 680 is a more complete all-round tool, partly because of a more supple and forgiving ride, partly because of a more useable balance of power-to-size and partly because of the benefits of additional space. The 580 is a fun boat, but it demands a bit too much of your attention to be relaxing, and is better suited to the performance enthusiast than the family boater. But both boats are very individual, very well built and more competitively priced than you might expect. Equipment levels are excellent and, with a 'build-your-own-boat' tool on the website, the buying process is very simple indeed.

If you are in the market for a RIB, have courage. Look outside the ranks of safe long established brands and consider the newcomers. The JCraft RIBs are waiting.

Details

JCRAFT 680

LOA: 6.8m
Internal beam: 1.53m
External beam: 2.5m
Tubes: Five-chamber Hyperlon
Tube diameter: 380-460mm (tapered)
Weight (ex engine): 700kg
Fuel capacity: 250 litres
Deadrise: 17 degrees at transom
Max horsepower: 300hp
Engine: Evinrude ETEC 175
RCD category: C
Price from: £12,420
Price as tested: £24,950 including engine and trailer
Top speed: 40.7 knots
Time to plane: 4.0 seconds

JCRAFT 580

LOA: 5.8m
Internal beam: 1.53m
External beam: 2.5m
Tubes: Five-chamber Hyperlon
Tube diameter: 380-460mm (tapered)
Weight (ex engine): 600kg
Fuel capacity: 150 litres
Deadrise: 17 degrees at transom
Max horsepower: 150hp
Engine: Mariner 150 outboard
RCD category: C
Price from: £10,147
Price as tested: £26,508 including engine and trailer
Top speed: 45.5 knots
Time to plane: 3.7 seconds

JCraft has integrity and Britishness in spades

CONTACT

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