

Nordkapp førti

Taking Sea Kayak Design “Back To The Future!”

2015 will be the 40th launch anniversary of undoubtedly the most influential sea kayak ever produced, the Nordkapp! Designed specifically for a 500 mile sea kayak expedition up the Norwegian coast, to the northern most point of Scandinavia, the Nordkapp marked the beginning of sea kayaks being designed specifically for extended recreational sea kayak trips.

Whilst, in these intervening years, the Nordkapp cemented its reputation as the benchmark “Expedition” sea-kayak, there were still some who believed it had, had its day. For the kayak’s 25th anniversary it went through a major face lift, in part this was to make it more user friendly, as it had gained a reputation for being unstable, especially with lighter paddlers or those paddling predominantly unladen. This Nordkapp Jubilee, as it was called, again proved very popular but some traditionalists felt that it had lost some of the originals soul. The release of the LV, some years later, gave back the liveliness those traditionalists felt they were missing but there were still those who missed something intangible, about the original.

In these past few years, whilst archiving some of Valley’s history and recording the evolution of its range, we were able to systematically look at the chronological development of the Nordkapp model. What came to light was quite revealing and has ultimately led us to produce this new 40th anniversary version!

Before starting, we looked at, measured and paddled the Nordkapp ‘Classic’, effectively the last production version of the ‘HS’ version, supposedly the original version and a model still in production until relatively recently in Valley’s ‘classic range’. Whilst it was responsive and agile on the water, both primary and secondary stability were poorer than the current model. In itself, that wasn’t surprising, given that the ‘Jubilee’ version set out to improve on the stability of this design. What was apparent, however, was that the stability was less than would be appropriate, for a kayak designed as a rough water expedition kayak. At first, we just thought this might be us being unduly critical or not taking into account, how far designs had advanced over the years. However, other things weren’t quite ‘right’ the back deck was quite rounded and high. Surely, this couldn’t be, the low rear decked, easy rolling original Nordkapp that older paddlers fondly remembered! Then we noticed the hung glass seat was quite high off the hull. Slowly but surely we started to realise that the design must have changed noticeably from the original.

In hindsight, the reasons are fairly obvious. This model was one of the most popular kayaks of all time and had been in constant production for over thirty years. Over those years many features had been added or changed; different hatches, deck-line recesses, areas for fitting compasses added etc. these improvements, coupled with the need to change moulds, as they became worn-out, had led to countless rounds of: producing a new plug from the mould, modifying it to add a new feature and then making a new mould. Even taking the upmost care, the shrinkage in resins meant each round of this process results in a slight pulling-in of radii and surfaces, this tends to accentuate all features i.e. over time a slightly rounded rear deck, becomes more noticeably rounded. The keel ‘V’ becomes more acute. The gunnels pull-in and show less flare etc. So each incarnation is very slightly different than the one before, an incremental process repeated again and again, over the years!

Whilst the changes above were unintentional, The Jubilee changes were very intentional but again, in hindsight, many of these were probably only deemed necessary because of those incremental changes that had crept in unnoticed. In short, the recent Nordkapp classic or HS as it was originally called, wasn’t the true original Nordkapp design. Yet it was this mutated design that was used as the basis for the Jubilee and then the later LV. Given all the change, popular though these new models were, is it any wonder, some felt it had lost something of its soul.

With the 40th anniversary approaching, we wanted to do something special but given the above, we equally wanted to understand what made the very original model such an instant success. Neither the original blueprints nor the original mould survive today, so the next best thing would be to track down and paddle the earliest possible example we could.

Earlier this year, following a chance approach, we purchased back, a Nordkapp from the very earliest mould. Paddling it was a revelation; tracking, stability and trim on the water, were all felt to be better than either; the current version or the 'Classics' that were recently in production. When viewed next to the current model, visually the later appeared to have become a caricature of the original, features had clearly been emphasized; the fish-form was more pronounced and had moved further forward, the ends thinned more dramatically in plan-view and there was much more rocker, especially in the bow above the waterline. In contrast, if you looked beyond the original's metal hatches and ocean cockpit, the actual lines were, if anything, more contemporary, cleaner and more flowing. Just a very 'sweat' look.

From that very first paddle, we decided, the 'New' Nordkapp could not be based on the current model but instead would be based on that very first incarnation. The hull we've hardly touched, the deck, only to incorporate the modern hatch layout and cockpit.

Effectively the Nordkapp Førti, is the kayak that we'd produce today, if we were given the original blueprints and the original design brief. After all, the sea hasn't changed!

Is it better than the original? No, put simply, it's just as good as ever!