

ARCHIVE

SAILING THEN AND NOW



Solent based dinghy sailor David Henshall is now a well known writer and speaker on topics covering the rich heritage of all aspects of leisure boating.



Classic Revival

A look back at two of the major events this year which mark a growing popularity in vintage sailing...

IN a recent issue of All at Sea, this column described the growing attractions of the Pannera Classic Yacht event at Cowes and in doing so, pointed out how the growing interest in this genre of sailing was fast-catching up with its onshore equivalent, the Goodwood Revival Meeting.

For those who do not know it, the Goodwood event is an amazing spectacle of old cars, motorbikes and planes and is made all the more special by many of the spectators attending dressed in period attire. A wonderful weekend this may be, but it is a harsh truth that in keeping with so much of the classic scene - be it on the road, in the air or on the water - is very much the domain of those with deep pockets.

However, there is one part of the world of classics that really is in reach of pretty much everyone and in particular those in possession of little more than household DIY skills. It had seemed for a long time that the idea of classic dinghy sailing was something of a joke, with many questioning why people would even want to bother sailing in a boat that might well require painting and varnish work, when a maintenance free GRP dinghy would allow more time for sailing and less time fiddling about in the boat yard.

Yet it seems that 'boat bimbly' - the relaxed act of messing around with a boat - is highly attractive and for over 10 years now, the Classic and Vintage Racing Dinghy Association (CVRDA) has been championing the cause of

classic dinghy sailing. In recent years, this idea has been picked up elsewhere and developed into a sophisticated and highly enjoyable subset of the dinghy racing scene.

GOODWOOD FOR DINGHIES

Nowhere can this have been better seen than out on the waters of Chichester Harbour recently, where Bosham Sailing Club held their Classic Dinghy Revival Event. Instead of the modern GRP dinghies, the Bosham Revival event offered a wealth of sailing history, from small boats such as the Tideway, Christchurch Coot and Aldeburgh Lapwing, through classic Merlin Rockets and International 14s, right up to the stately National 18s and Jollyboats.

Even though this event is still in its infancy, the lure of 'real' sailing dinghies provided a power attraction that even caught the organisers at Bosham a little by surprise when the entry list topped out at 80 boats. If ever there was proof of the message is getting out that classic dinghy racing is fun, one only had to see how many beautifully restored dinghies turned out, some of which had initially cost nothing to purchase, as they would otherwise have had a Viking funeral on a November 5th bonfire. Stripped down, revarnished and now restored, these boats looked as at home out on the race course as they would have done 40, even 50 and some 60 years ago!

The Saturday of the Bosham Revival had seen the fleet sailing comfortably in early autumn sunshine and gentle breezes, but the Sunday was wet and windy enough to cause problems for even the best of modern dinghies, yet nearly half the classic fleet still went afloat and raced with only minimal damage being reported.

SPECTACLE ON THE THAMES

The success of Bosham was echoed a few weeks later when Ranelagh Sailing Club, at Putney on the Thames, hosted the running of the famous Tideway Race.

Although open to dinghies both new and old, once again there was a very strong classic dinghy presence at this event which, like Bosham, had placed particular emphasis on having fun afloat (something that many people feel is fast being lost from the mainstream competitive world of dinghy sailing).

The course for the Tideway Race could not be simpler, as the start line is at Putney, with the gun timed to coincide with the last of the ebb tide. This helps the fleet progress downstream, past

Chelsea and on towards Westminster, by which time the tide is just starting to turn. At this point a buoy is dropped, the fleet rounds it and then with the help of the new flood tide, sails back upstream to the finish line at Putney.

The course may sound simple but the Thames is a busy waterway, with a good deal of commercial and pleasure boat traffic, not to mention a significant number of bridges that have to be negotiated. At some of these there was insufficient gap to simply sail through, and instead the dinghies had to be heeled over so that they could wriggle their way under the arch spans.

Some of the boats that raced in this event were even older than those at Bosham and came complete with wooden masts and cotton sails; nonetheless, they still sailed the same course as all the other more modern entrants, albeit at a more leisurely pace.

FUTURE OF THE CLASSICS

What is clear is that the Bosham Classic Revival, the Tideway Race and many other classic events that are now being planned at clubs all around our coasts are laying the foundations for a bright future for the classic dinghy scene.

It may be that this is just a reflection of the demographics of dinghy sailing, as a growing majority of older people seek to get more fun from the sport and less in the way of neoprene-clad athletically-honed superstar competition; or it may be that people actually prefer the older varnished boats to their GRP super-skiffs.

Whatever, the future looks fair for classic dinghy sailing and with the emphasis on fun - as well as healthy competition - All at Sea will be watching the classic dinghies with interest for next year's events!

