

From working boat to racing boat, Tim Street tells. . .

The Story of the SALCOMBE YAWL

THE MODERN SALCOMBE YAWL, built for racing and based entirely on the Salcombe Estuary in South Devon, has a history which goes back at least 200 years to the straight stemmed, transom sterned, yawl rigged, local fishing vessels. Certainly an 1806 drawing of a scene off Easton, on the Salcombe Estuary, shows a small yawl-rigged vessel of exactly such a type. Further evidence is shown by the depiction of a very similar vessel in the View of Salcombe by William Daniell dated 1823, one of a series that were done by him of the English coast. By 1823 therefore, we can accept that a Yawl rigged fishing boat had become established as the common type on the South Devon Coast.

This coast creates short steep seas on top of the long rollers sweeping in from the Atlantic and up the Channel to Bolt Head and the Start. The most suitable boats for fishing the area had to be able to sail to windward out of Salcombe estuary against a strong tide and to remain at sea, anything up to 10 miles off the coast, for long-line fishing or lobstering. The straight stem evolved very early to ease building and to enable the bows to cut through the short seas. A broad transom stern and good sea keeping was required for fishing and the gaff yawl rig was needed to enable the boat to sail against the tide before taking off the mainsail and operating easily under jib and mizzen with only one man, or a man and a boy on board.

By 1853, when the earliest painting, now in the Salcombe Yacht Club, was made, the

Yawl was clearly the direct ancestor of the Salcombe Yawl of today. The mid 1850's saw the first recorded occasion when local yawl rigged boats, then known as Licensed Watermen's Boats, raced together in the Salcombe Regatta. These were open or quarter-decked work boats, between 14' (4.2m) and 18' (5.5m) long, all owned in and worked out of Salcombe for fishing and as hire boats for picnic parties. There was one Regatta each year. In 1906 Captain Arthur Street had the *Busy Bee* built. She was the first yawl built purely for pleasure sailing and was built by the now defunct Chants' Boatyard. Chants had made its reputation for more than 70 years by building Salcombe Clippers: small swift cargo vessels rigged as schooners which made their money and reputation by carrying fruit home from the Levant or fish home from Newfoundland.

Busy Bee was 15'6" (4.7m) long, half-decked with a centreboard, bowsprit, gaff rigged mainsail and sprit rigged mizzen. Although beautifully built - she lasted until 1963 at least - she was very slow compared with the Licensed Watermen's Boats and came last in almost every race of the Salcombe Yacht Club in 1906 and 1907. Although she raced occasionally, she was not a match for the working boats and an engine was installed in 1922.

After the First World War, racing re-started in 1919 when four yawl rigged work boats raced together during the season on a handicap basis. They were various lengths from 14' (4.2m) to 15'6" (4.7m) and were handicapped

according to length. Their names were *Evelyn* (named after a Miss Evelyn Pepperell), *Carew*, *Helena* and *May*.

In 1917 Jim Stone, then aged 16, built the boat which really started the Yawl Class as a racing class. He was working as a shipwright with Edgar Cove in Salcombe and living at Portlemouth on the Salcombe estuary, where he built himself a 14' (4.2m) Yawl in a garden shed and named her *Blackbird*. As he could not afford paint, she was creosoted and after 1920 won every race for several years despite being shorter than the rest.

The Yawl Class, consisting of up to 10 privately owned or working boats, raced on a fairly regular basis until 1936. They included those named above together with *Rose*, *Blue Bird*, *Handy Andy*, *Frances* and *Kittiwake*. By 1936 they were standardised on a 16' (4.9m) length and raced on a handicap basis. Although several were still completely open, some were three-quarter decked and were exactly the same in layout and general appearance as the current Yawls. They were all built by local Salcombe yards: *Stones*, *Coves*, *Dornoms* and *Chants*.

The next major step came in 1936/7 when Mr. R.E. Morris of Batson and Captain Lindsay Smith ordered two new Yawls from the famous yard of Morgan Giles at Teignmouth in Devon. Morgan Giles, famous for his Fourteen Foot Internationals, took the design of the Teign Corinthian One Design, put on a 250lb (113kg) iron bulb keel and heavy iron centre board and built the two

boats *Edra* (Y7) and *Auburn* (Y8), out of cedar, with iron fastenings. These boats raced in the 1937 Regatta and outclassed the yawls then in existence, with the result that the other boats simply stopped racing. The Auburn Cup was presented that year and won by Y8 *Auburn* sailed by Mr. Lionel Clayton who beat Jim Stone in the old Y2 *Blackbird*.

The following year, Jim Stone built a new *Blackbird* (Y14) out of mahogany and the class consisted of her, *Marie Louise* - Miss P. Chase, *Edra* (Y7) R.E. Morris, *Blonde* (Y4) G. Dornom, *Becas*, R. Glover and *Auburn*. These were joined in 1939 by *Endeavour* (Y11) and *Genista* (Y12), designed by Lionel Clayton of East Portlemouth. These boats, together with *Elaine* (Y5), *Kittiwake*, *Arrow*, *Evelyn* and *Globe*, formed the class of Restricted Yawls up until the 1939-45 War although they did not race on a regular basis.

During the war *Auburn* was bombed and *Blackbird* and *Edra* were used for fishing and working boats. In 1946 racing re-started and the class consisted of *Blackbird II*, *Choice* (formerly *Edra*), and *Priscilla*, - which had been converted from an existing 16' (4.9m) long 'B' Class dinghy by Edgar Cove father of the then owner, Richard Cove. They were joined occasionally by *Elaine*, *Blonde*, *Endeavour* and *Blackbird I* who raced as a separate class for separate prizes.

In 1947 Jim Stone built the first of the 'new' yawls: *Kingfisher* (Y15), for R. Triscott. She was a direct improvement on *Blackbird* and originally had no bowsprit. However during 1947 *Choice* was fitted with a bowsprit to give her better balance and later, after the death of her owner Frank Cole, was purchased by Richard Cove when *Priscilla* was banned from racing for being undecked. Although *Priscilla* remained gaff rigged with a sprit mizzen, she had won the Championship with Richard Cove at the helm on several occasions prior to her ban.

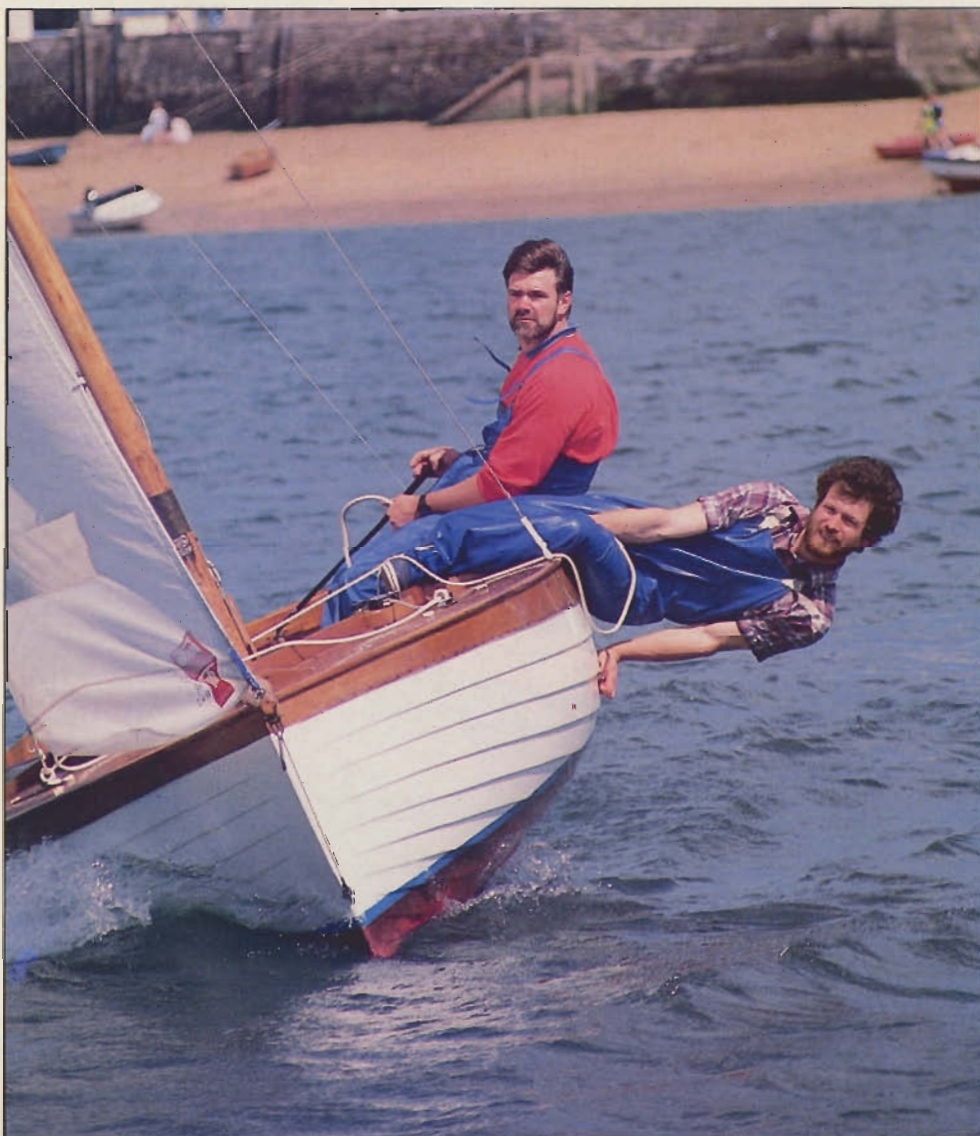
In 1948 the class was joined by *Ariel*, W.H. Thorning and the yawls raced in two classes. The old yawls consisted of *Elaine*, *Sea Maid* and *Genista* and the season was won by *Priscilla*, with *Blackbird* second, *Choice* third, *Kingfisher* fourth and *Ariel* fifth.

In 1949, with *Priscilla* banned, the class virtually died out. *Choice* and occasionally the old *Blonde* raced in the Handicap Class until the Regatta when they were joined by *Blackbird* and *Ariel*.

Although Jim Stone started building yawls in his small yard at East Portlemouth as early as 1946, he was only able to complete a few each year and until 1960 only two others were built, by Douglas Winter. Despite the steady output of lovingly built boats and the constant improvements and refinements in design, *Choice* and *Blackbird* remained the best two yawls, year in and year out. It was not until *Taylormaid* was built by Peter "Bungay" Taylor as his first attempt at yawl building, that *Choice* and *Blackbird*, by then nearly 30 years old, were outclassed. *Taylormaid* was a direct improvement on *Choice* (Y7), with broader buttocks and much straighter and finer lines aft to improve the downwind performance. Up until then, in the tidal conditions at Salcombe, all Yawl races had been



Above: Y78 *Topaz*, built by David Gibbens. This and following pictures: Mark Fishwick. Facing page: Y3 *Evelyn* sailed by B Pepperell in May 1930. Photo courtesy Tim Street.



Salcombe Yawl racing is taken seriously, with regular crews, quality equipment and large fleets.

won on upwind performance and reaching had been of very minor importance.

In 1963/64 two yawls were built to the Salcombe rules by Leichie Alameia in Belize for local racing. One was designed by Leiche Alameia, reputedly a direct descendent of one of Christopher Columbus's crew and one by myself, by then owner of the old *Choice*.

In 1966 the Salcombe Yawl Association was formed under the presidency of Dr. Breach of East Portsmouth. It was decided then to keep the Salcombe Yawl purely traditional and retain wooden masts. Successful yawls were built by yards other than Jim Stone and several other builders, such as Edward Cove, Powercraft, David Gibbens and Michael Atfield, all small specialist boat-builders, started building racing Salcombe yawls.

In 1967 the first two Devon Yawls appeared, taken from the mould of a Yawl, built by Jack Damerell of Powercraft, which had shown great promise. At the Salcombe Town Regatta of 1968, for the first time, two Devon Yawls raced in the open sea together with 26 Salcombe Yawls with some success. The Devon Yawl has now spread all over the country and has its own independent and active Class Association.

Since 1968 both the Salcombe Yawls and the Devon Yawls have gone from strength to strength. The Salcombe Yawls have now reached approximately 140 in sail numbers and race in regular series. They are also used for picnics, sailing lessons and fishing up to five miles out into the English Channel. Thus they have become amongst the most popular of family boats, with a first class sailing performance, as well as evolving into really high quality classic traditional racers.