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CLASSIC BOAT

AND
The BOATMAN



A Tale of Three Yawls

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Devonshire Cream

In the temperate airs and clear waters of Kingsbridge Estuary, one racing class reigns supreme. Patrick McKenna takes his hat off to a pretty West Country lass — the Salcombe yawl — and meets a man who has long courted her. Photography by Tom Benn



FOR A SCHOOLBOY growing up through the 1950s in East Portsmouth, opposite Salcombe in the beautiful waters of the Kingsbridge estuary, life was an idyllic business. Young Bill 'Scratch' Hitchen was messing about in boats and immersed in the ways of the sea pretty much as soon as he could walk. The summers weren't long enough for a boy to pursue all the important things — like sailing, swimming and fishing. Only thing was, school did get in the way a bit.

Mind you, Scratch couldn't do much about that. Playing hookey wasn't really an option — his mum was the head-



***Inset:** Bill 'Scratch' Hitchen has a thing about Salcombe yawls — he owns three of them. **Above:** The strong Yawl Owners' Association fights to keep modern boat building technology at bay. Nevertheless, the class is raced as hard as any of today's so-called 'sportsboats'.*

The Class and the Club

Salcombe Yacht Club has an international reputation, besides hosting annual events such as the national Wayfarer and YW Dayboat championships. Every year it stages Salcombe Week for the Merlin Rocket fleet, the most popular event on the Merlins' calendar.

Since the 1930s, one boat has dominated racing in the harbour: the 16ft (4.9m) restricted Salcombe yawl. This class evolved, like so many, from fishing-boat origins.

The Salcombe Yawl Owners' Association jealously guards this heritage from modern boatbuilding technology; the class retains many of its original features and fittings, including wooden spars and mast, rudders and tillers.

Perhaps the most compelling testament to the yawl's enduring charm is the annual influx of international yachtsmen who come to Salcombe to pit their skills against local yawl specialists. More often than not, the pilgrims come off second best, which keeps them coming back for more.

Almost seven decades after the first yawl appeared, sail numbers have reached Y160. Of these around 115 to 120 are still racing or cruising. Every Saturday afternoon from March to October, 15 to 20 yachts turn out, and at spring and August bank holidays an open meeting is attended by 25 to 30 yawls. Yawls built in the 1960s, 1950s or even 1940s appear among the top places.

The Salcombe Yacht Club Regatta is held every August, frequently attracting as many as 40 yawls. Given the club's narrow start line, the fleet often has to be split.

Owners have an additional incentive to maintain their yawls in pristine condition: the annual concours d'élégance award to the best-looking boat in, arguably, Britain's most beautiful sailing harbour.



mistress of the village primary school. "But," he admits, "of all the daily priorities, school was still probably the last. Growing up on the estuary was a schoolboy's dream."

Salcombe has always occupied an important place in the racing calendar, from the national Wayfarer and YW Dayboat championships, to Salcombe Week for the Merlin Rocket fleet. Since the 1930s, however, one boat had dominated Salcombe harbour: the 16ft (4.9m) restricted Salcombe yawl. And so every season from March to October, the schoolboy would watch and cheer on his favourite yawl. It would certainly not have occurred to Scratch that these boats would later occupy an important part of his life.

He left school in 1962, when he was just 14, and found a job peeling spuds and shovelling coal on the coal-fired steam yacht *Norian*, then moored at Salcombe. Two years later he joined the Island Cruising Club, where he eventually became mate on board *Provident* and *Hoshi* after spells as launch driver and dinghy instructor.

In 1966 Scratch joined the merchant navy, sailing mainly with the Blue Star Line to Australia, New Zealand and South America. He then spent four years in the oil industry, offshore South America and West Africa, among other places, before coming back to Salcombe in 1973, his travelling days over.

His days at sea, however, were far from over and — after marrying Jane — he achieved a life-long ambition by taking up sea fishing. Originally, he worked for Richard Murray, son of the first owners of Y22 *Kittywake*, a Salcombe yawl. In those days, Richard owned the 40ft (12.2m) Cornish crabber *Ibis*, but in 1974 Scratch and Richard bought the 60ft (18.3m) French crabber *Kenavo*, which they fished around Britain for three years.

Richard and Scratch parted company in 1977 and Scratch bought the 70ft (21.3m) French crabber *Burutu* which he fished successfully until 1981, when he came ashore to spend more time with his family. (*Burutu* was lost in bad weather off the west coast of Scotland in 1990.) Scratch's next boat was a 33ft (10m) Lochin, *Prospector*, which Jane reckoned would keep her husband within ten miles of home. Except for one quick trip to the Scilly Isles, she's been proved correct.

Though Scratch finally retired from fishing on health grounds at the age of 45, he recruited a young skipper and crew and continues to run his fishing business. Nowadays, however, he is able to devote more time to yachting. He does the occasional yacht delivery, but he is chiefly involved with giving sailing tuition on those same craft he watched as a boy in Salcombe harbour: he is the proud owner of three yawls, and he teaches in them at all levels from beginner to race training. He



Above: Hitchen at the helm. Left: Belying their age, Salcombe yawls are not only raced hard but attract international sailors to their annual regatta. America's Cup sailors have been known to come off worst against the local hotshots. Here, *Shoveler's* helmsman dips a starboard tackler's stern. Note the fully-battened mizzen, sheeted slightly more to weather than the big roached mainsails, with full-length, Merlin Rocket-style top batten. Below: The start line in Salcombe harbour. Hot work afloat as the holidaymakers sun themselves ashore.

also hires out Y50 and Y22 — "though definitely not for racing". He leaves that to the racehorse of his trio, Y61.

Scratch also winters and stores another eight yawls for owners and boasts an exhaustive knowledge of Salcombe yawls. He is easily found, seven days a week, at his fish store-cum-boathouse on Salcombe's Fish Quay.



Kittywake

Built in 1952 by Jim Stone & Sons of Goodshelter, East Portsmouth for town resident Tom Murray, Y22 *Kittywake* was in a sorry state when Scratch bought her in 1990 for £200. "That's why she took over four years to restore," remembers Scratch.

Salcombe shipwright Mike Atfield renewed the decks, fitted new gunwale and top strake, replaced eight starboard planks, installed 27 new frames, put in new timbers, new floorboards, and a new rudder. New sails graced the original masts and spars, and the vessel boasted new fittings throughout.

Murray and his wife Anne raced *Kittywake* in her early years, until 1956-57 when they sold her to Major Ted Pierce's mother in Salcombe. After one season, the young Ted — later secretary of the Island Cruising Club — persuaded his mother to sell her yawl to the ICC's new dinghy section. To spare the club's precarious financial situation, she accepted three bottles of gin as payment. It marked the start of *Kittywake's* 30-year career with the ICC. Although she retained her original name throughout, she was more widely known as the 'gin yawl'.

Today *Kittywake* is fully restored and Scratch uses her exclusively for instruction: "She's the kindest of all my boats. Perfectly balanced." Not bad for three bottles of gin.



DoDo

Also built by Jim Stone & Sons, this time of 1962 vintage and for Bob Northcott of Salcombe, Y50 *DoDo* is reckoned by Scratch to be a supreme example of Jim Stone's boatbuilding genius. "She's almost exactly the same today as she was when Jim first let her sail away from Goodshelter back in 1962. The rig, the sails, the spars, the centre-plate and rudder are all original. She even carries her original whisker pole and paddle."

The fact that *DoDo* has survived all these years in such good condition — and the fact that she still gives such great pleasure to so many people — speaks volumes for Jim Stone's skill. And as Scratch points out: "Jim's heyday came well before computers took over yacht design."

Scratch bought *DoDo* in early spring 1995. "I gave her a quick coat of paint," he recalls, "and put her straight to work." She had been out of the water for a number of years and leaked very badly that first season. Nevertheless, she quickly proved her worth among hire and tuition customers alike. "Bored children took particular pleasure in manning her bilge pump," chuckles Scratch.

But it was obvious that *DoDo* needed major surgery if she was to continue her career as a working boat. Scratch carried

out a thorough survey, found her structurally sound, and opted for a complete refastening under the waterline using slightly bigger nails. "This transformed her," he says.

Next winter, Scratch plans to complete the restoration with a new centre box. "And she'll then be as good as new. Just as Jim created her."



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Opposite page. Main picture: Running repairs to a cracked plank keep this yawl in the thick of the fray. *Lower left:* Kittywake, Y22, otherwise known as the 'gin boat', is the oldest and 'kindest' of Scratch's yawls. *Lower right:* Mike Atfield replanks Kittywake at his yard in Salcombe.

This page, below: New decks and coamings give Kittywake a new lease of life. *Above:* Nuffin, Y69, tell-tales from her Hyde jib streaming parallel, beats up the Salcombe shore. *Right:* Tease makes a short board into a tree-lined cove to dodge the worst of the tide.



Taylor Maid

Built by Peter 'Bungy' Taylor of Salcombe, Y61 *Taylor Maid* is, according to Scratch, the fastest of his three yawls. "She was Bungy's first attempt at yawl building, and caused quite a stir." *Taylor Maid* was the first yawl built to maximise off-wind per-



formance. She proved to be unbeatable. *Taylor Maid's* owner Roy Hall, of Salcombe, kept her in Chichester harbour but eventually took her home around 1990 where he sailed her single-handed, and at one time fitted a self-tacking jib. Eventually he sold *Taylor Maid* to Ian Brown, also from Salcombe.

Ian raced her for another two seasons. Recalls Scratch: "She was beginning to show her age. A lot of timbers and planks at the bottom were going soft — although the centre box remained sound." Ian eventually sold her to Scratch's son, Robert, then 16 who couldn't afford to spend money restoring his new acquisition, but raced her successfully for another two seasons. "He finally brought her ashore," comments Scratch, "because she refused to float any longer. In her last race, in 1993, the transom — rotten by this stage — fell out. And she sank."

Robert, who had just passed his driving test and needed a car more than a rotting yawl, swapped his yacht for dad's Morris Minor. Scratch stored *Taylor Maid* in a barn for the next two years until he completed her restoration last winter. With ten new planks she was almost completely retimbered and fitted with a new transom. As Scratch remarks: "She could hardly go to the starting line without new racing sails, so local sailmaker Jon Alsop made her a brand new set." *Taylor Maid* is now set fair to begin the next chapter of her charmed life. 