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The Salcombe yawl

By Richard Donkin

Goose-winged, sailing towards the yellow marker buoy near the head of the estuary, we look up to see a Tiger Moth flying low overhead, its engine stuttering steadily.

For a fleeting second the aircraft is reflected in the lacquered mahogany grains of the yawl's deck. Then it disappears out of sight over patchwork fields and gabled houses, the sort one would leave with a knapsack of sandwiches and ginger beer to start a Famous Five adventure.

Out on the water, everything is feeling right with the world. It is as if time has stood still at some point between the two world wars, before money and professionalism exorcised the Corinthian spirit.

On land, the scene changes. Down the hill from Salcombe Yacht Club, the street is lined with shops selling casual brands, often inspired by a nautical theme – Musto, Fat Face and Weird Fish. Not for nothing do they call this tiny Devon sailing village Chelsea-by-the-sea. In high summer, the population swells from a winter low of 1,500 to upwards of 20,000 as the affluent "middles" don Crocs without socks and bounce down to their second homes to sample the quiet rural idyll – all at the same time.

Nevertheless, it is still possible to pause and savour just a hint of nostalgia for a gentler age. Step in to a traditional clinker-built Salcombe yawl and touch the wood. You will touch the wood. You can't help it. Someone likened it to a Chippendale with sails. Everyone wants one. First you buy your second home, then you buy your yawl.

"It takes 1,300 man hours to build one of these," says Bill "Scratch" Hitchen, a former trawlerman who has been dealing in yawls for the past seven years.

A distinctive one-syllable nickname seems to be synonymous with yawl-sailing. I'm introduced to Ian "Scud" Stewart, a local chandler and yawl racer. Sailors also speak in reverential tones when they mention boat designer "Spud" Rowsell, credited with some of the finest examples in the fleet. Between Spud, Scud and Scratch there doesn't seem to be anything else worth knowing about yawls.

The first thing to understand is that the Salcombe yawl isn't the copycat Devon yawl; it is the real McCoy. "It's like a classic car," says Scratch. "People look after them and hold on to them. When I'm selling one I tell the buyers that their grandchildren will be sailing it one day."

The design, with its distinctive mizzen mast and sail, was used first as a fishing or crabbing boat when the small third sail was used to set the boat in to the wind while taking in nets or pots. Today, this third sail doesn't perform any useful function except to give the boat its classic, distinctive looks. Some 80 per cent of the 185 Salcombe yawls made since the inception of the class are still around and sailing today.

So why aren't there more? The craftmanship involved in their construction is staggering, and few builders are willing to make them. "Each plank is riveted with copper nails and roved on the inside. That's a two-man job," says Scud Stewart.

Scarcity influences price. A new yawl ordered today would set you back about £40,000, with a six-month wait from order to delivery. A good, modern, second-hand one can be bought for around £25,000 – this for a 16ft two-handed yacht that equates to a hand-crafted, old-fashioned dinghy with a tag-on sail.

Most of the yachts are over-wintered in barns and usually re-varnished and painted before the start of the short racing season that runs from May to August. In spite of such cosseting, the Salcombe yawls are serious racing boats, attracting fierce competition in the two classes – red for the higher numbers and blue for the lower-numbered older boats.

"In most races you will find there will be one or two ex-national champions or former Olympic squad sailors. They're very keenly raced," says Andrew "AJ" Squire, who took me as crew in a weekend race in Zenga, sail number 166, a beautiful blue boat owned by Mike O'Brien, who let me take his place.

"How do you want to play it?" asked AJ at the start. "I want to win," I said. What's the point of racing otherwise? While a win may not always be realistic, it's best to define your aspirations from the off.

In light winds, AJ opted for what turned out to be the best tidal line and we found ourselves in second place by the top-of-the-estuary mark. Yawl sailing in the Salcombe estuary is something of an obstacle course, dodging between moored boats while trying to avoid dense clumps of weed.

Tacking back, one of these clumps stopped us in our tracks, and three yawls sailed past us as we tried to rid the weed from the rudder and dagger board – a heavy bronze plate that gives the yawl its stability. All the same, we overtook one boat by the finish to go over the line in a creditable fourth place.

"Anything in the top 10 of the newer red fleet here is a good result, so we did well," says AJ. It had been some time since I had sailed something this size that requires sharp dinghy skills and timing with rolling tacks, but a good helm gives you confidence.

Watching the start of the afternoon race from the vantage point of the clubhouse, I can see why people come here for the sailing. The slopes of the drowned valley, forming the estuary, create a theatrical view. The brightly-painted yawls with their white sails and wooden masts look quaint in the afternoon sun, a working microcosm of earlier times, busily preserving all that's best about sailing.

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The details
For more information about sailing in the area, contact the Salcombe Yacht Club 01548 842593, www.salcombeyc.org.uk