

The Sea View One Design dinghy is still challenging the best

...with a little help from its friends



Henrietta Smyth

If you visit Seaview, on the north east coast of the Isle of Wight, during the height of summer you will be treated to the rare spectacle of a host of much loved wooden dinghies bobbing confidently on their moorings in the Solent, their gleaming spruce hulls glowing in the early morning sun. Over the years these humble but beautifully crafted, traditional, clinker built boats, whose One Design class is based exclusively at Seaview, have survived and indeed thrived against all the odds since the class was first created in 1931, and they have played a major role in nurturing some world-class sailors, amongst them our own AYH President, Clare Francis.

Above: Seaview dinghies moored in front of the Sea View Yacht Club

This traditional wooden boat featured strongly in my own childhood memories of happy holidays spent with my family in Seaview, when I followed the fortunes of the keenest competitors in the evening dinghy race and annual Seaview Regatta, or shared the drama and excitement of rushing to haul the boats ashore when a gale was brewing. When I returned to the Island after an absence of many years, I was amazed to find that, despite the presence of the usual faster, more modern and efficient craft that younger generations demand, not only had the wooden dinghy held its own against the competition but its numbers had increased dramatically, and the same family names were still appearing on the trophies and winning the regattas. This led me to delve deeper into the boat's history and the reasons for its obviously enduring charm.

Although the Sea View[★] One Design dinghy class was officially inaugurated in 1931, its true origins go back to 1912 when the Boat Racing Association held a competition for the design for a small sailing and rowing dinghy with an overall length of 12 feet and a spruce planked clinker hull on bent timbers.

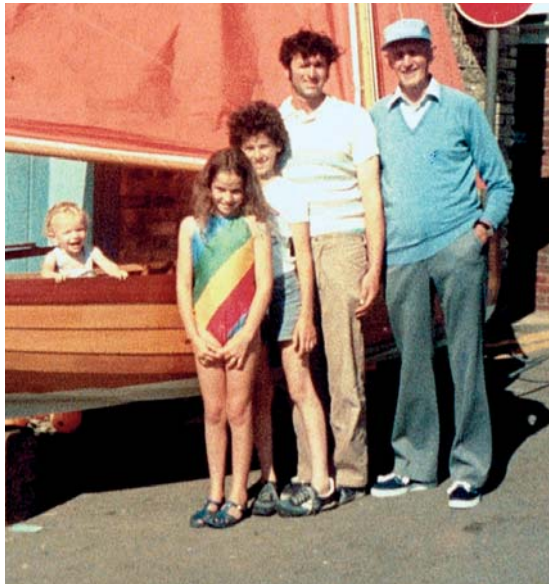
The class that grew from this was officially recognised in the 1920s by the International Yacht Racing Union (IYRU) as the International 12 Foot Dinghy Class, and was selected for the 1920 and 1928 Olympic Games. That class is still going strong around the world.

In 1928 there were already a number of 12-foot clinker built dinghies based in Seaview, comprising both IYRU International 12s and some locally designed and built 12-foot dinghies. Major Gordon Fowler of Seaview had successfully competed singlehanded in both the 1920 and 1928 Olympic Games in the International 12-foot dinghy, and it was largely thanks to his influence, and that of Lieut. Commander Norman Ohlenschlager, that a decision was taken to adapt the 12-foot dinghy to a new One Design class based in Seaview. They hoped that if a dinghy could be designed to be kept out on moorings that would encourage more families to own and race dinghies.

The story of the first 50 years of the new class has been faithfully recorded by the late Bruce Donald, a founder member of the class,

★ Editor's note: The name 'Seaview' is also written as 'Sea View' in some contexts, and the reason, I am told, is that the original spelling was 'Sea View' but local residents asked for it to be changed to one word to save money when sending telegrams! Hence 'Sea View Yacht Club' and 'Sea View One Design', but 'Seaview Regatta' etc.





assisted by his wife Pam, a former class captain and keen dinghy sailor, who also compiled a spreadsheet of all the dinghies listing name and sail number, when built and by whom, and who owned them. *The SVOD Class 1931 – 1981* makes fascinating reading, being a detailed history not only of the dinghy itself but also of the many Seaview families who have owned, loved, raced and preserved this remarkable boat.

The first of the new One Design dinghies was built by G.A. Feltham of Portsmouth in 1930, to a specification provided by Major Fowler. The boat had cotton sails and cost £28 including the sails. In 1931 17 dinghies were built, almost all by Feltham, and on 1st August 1931 the inaugural race in Seaview for seven SVOD Class dinghies took place.

By the late 1940s demand for the new dinghies was such that Feltham could no longer supply the numbers required, and the boat building enterprise was transferred to local builders on the Isle of Wight. One family firm in particular, the Warrens, came to dominate the boat building scene, and their name has become inseparable from the class's

success. The business was founded by Michael Warren's grandfather, Vernon Warren, who passed on his skills to his son, known to all as 'Bunny' Warren, then to Michael, recently retired, and so to the fourth generation represented by Michael's son Nick.

Brand new dinghies are not being created often now, as most of the work is put into restoring and maintaining the older ones, so it was a real pleasure for me to be allowed to watch the family's homemade DVD of building this beautiful dinghy from scratch. Traditional craftsmanship is a wonderful thing, and an hour later I found myself still sitting there, totally absorbed. I was struck by the delicacy and precision of the work, carried out using many traditional hand tools as well as some machinery, and by the obvious satisfaction of the craftsmen working steadily in almost total silence. Although every dinghy has to conform to a precise specification, co-ordination by eye is still essential in the hand-finished approach, which means that each boat is subtly different.

Talking to Michael and his wife, Monica, their enthusiasm and devotion to the class are

Far left: Dinghies racing in 1939

Top centre and right: SVOD production line in Warren's boat shed. High demand in the 1990s required help from more craftsmen like Eddie Wade, shown here, who had joined the firm in 1982

Above centre: The Warren family outside the Seaview store in the mid-1980s - Bunny, Michael, Nicholas, Lucie and baby Stevie

Above right: Bunny Warren on Seaview Esplanade with dinghies safely ashore after a storm

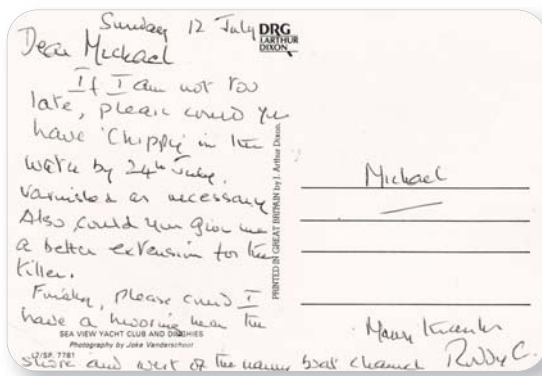




Above: Competitive racing attracts all age groups

obvious from the outset. The Warrens have provided a very high quality of service over the years, laying, removing and maintaining the moorings, always being on hand to rescue damaged craft in the short racing season, and spending much of the winter restoring, repairing and maintaining the boats. Past and present owners rely very much on that service, as one Seaview postcard, sent to Michael some twenty years ago, reveals:

[*The term 'Nanny Boat' is believed to be derived from a launch called 'Nanny' belonging to Sir William Acland, past Commodore of SVYC, who first allowed his launch to follow the races, and it is now used generally to indicate a boat used to aid the fleet, like the modern RIB.]



Sunday 12 July

Dear Michael,
If I am not too late, please could you have 'Chippy' in the water by 24th July, varnished & as necessary. Also could you give me a better extension for the tiller. Finally, please could I have a mooring near the shore and west of the nanny boat (*) channel.

Many thanks,
Roddy C.

“SVODs were a joy to sail, sturdy but responsive, and – so it seemed to me at the time – as fast as any boat needed to be.”

Clare Francis

The strong ties between local families and their dinghies go back to the earliest days, and over the years many Seaview dinghy owners have distinguished themselves both in local racing and further afield. Some have followed in the footsteps of Gordon Fowler and risen to national, international or Olympic sailing level as helmsmen and crew, as the Sea View Yacht Club 'History' proudly relates. Amongst others, the 'History' draws attention to Colin Simonds and Robert Holbrook, both of whom competed in the Olympic trials in 1976, Colin and team in the Soling Class and Robert in the Finn Class. Colin and Gavin Simonds competed in the 1980 trials and won them convincingly. Older brother Raymond Simonds was third in both the British and European Laser Class Championships in 1976. In fact, the Simonds' grandfather, Harold Stevens, served on the SVYC Committee for several years in the 1950s, and his dinghy *Bluebell* was one of the original Seagrove Bay (near Seaview) boats that formed the basis of the new One Design in 1930.

The new boats were intended for 'parents to learn to sail in and then teach their children and grandchildren to do likewise'. That ethos has held sway right up to the present day, and dinghies are passed down from generation to



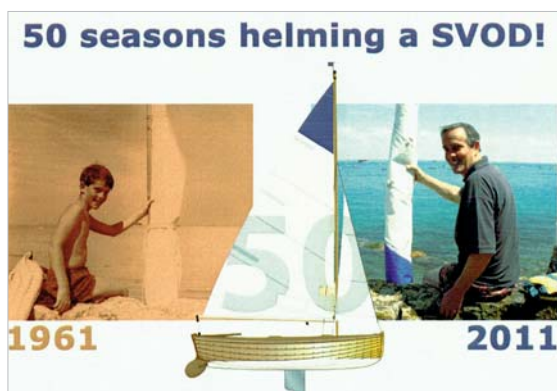


Above: Sunny shores for a colourful fleet – the SVOD dinghies in Barbados

Below left: Raymond Simonds created a special anniversary card to celebrate his long association with the SVOD dinghy

generation like treasured family heirlooms. Even when a boat has eventually to be replaced, the sail number is retained, and when the cotton sails were superseded by terylene in the early 1970s, the new material allowed owners to flaunt the personalised brightly coloured sails that characterize the fleet today.

Raymond, Colin and Gavin Simonds, and their cousin Robert Holbrook, are still passionate about their Seaview dinghies: the boat is in their blood, they race every season (and frequently win over their younger rivals!), and their homes in Seaview are full of dinghy memorabilia. Raymond celebrated his 50th season of helming a SVOD in 2011, but he is just one of several locally well-known names with long track records in their dinghies, including Jasper Blount (alias Sir Walter Blount, nephew of Gordon Fowler), who won nearly everything in his dinghy for decades.



Pippa Walker and Chris Simmonds, both past captains of the class, are well aware that it takes much more than nostalgia to ensure the dinghy's survival, namely the hard work and enthusiasm of those responsible for keeping both older and younger generations interested, with cadet training weeks, regular, competitive racing, regattas, fun events, parties

and special winter programmes. Ambitious trips abroad have been planned and executed, showing off the dinghy's pedigree at major events in Kiel (1998), Australia (2000), New Zealand (2003), and Barbados (2016). There may even be a return visit to New Zealand in 2021.

To maintain the class's relevance today, it has also been essential to ensure that the dinghy produces optimum performance, so whilst the One Design specifications are strictly adhered to, there has been room for certain modifications over the years, especially where safety is concerned. Improvements such as buoyancy aids and self-bailers (the latter tried out first by Robert Holbrook) have certainly eased some of the problems faced by Clare Francis in the early days:

'I started sailing in SVODs at the age of nine, crewing an up-and-coming class champ when he needed a little extra weight, and progressed to racing my own dinghy at eighteen (Number 82 'Claribel'). It was said that once you'd learnt to sail a Sea View Dinghy you could sail anything. In terms of seamanship there was a lot of truth in this. With no decking and (in those days) no buoyancy bags or bailing systems, just a metal scoop, you quickly learnt to ride the waves and ship the minimum of water, and never under any circumstances to capsize, even in the Heavy Weather Cup, sailed in Force 6 and boisterous seas. The price of getting it wrong was waterlogging, a long wait for the nanny boat and a slow ignominious tow back to your mooring.'

But Clare also recognised the essential seamanship skills gained from learning to handle the unique challenges of the dinghy: *'In light airs, racing SVODs against the strong tides and sloppy seas often found off Seaview demanded a character-forming level of patience and perseverance. But for every race that had to be*





Courtesy of the SVOD Dinghy Class


abandoned, there were others where close-tacking along the shore, allied with a canny knowledge of the local rocks and an ability to maintain some sort of boat speed against the slop, would eventually get you to the windward mark and a wild sense of achievement.'

Those challenges are still attractive to sailors today, but although dinghy class sailing at Seaview continues to be competitive, it is also carefully regulated to ensure that all comers and abilities are accommodated, and 'it never detracts from the friendliness and desire to help each other that has been a feature of the Class from the beginning'.

Bruce Donald wrote in 1981 that 'it is doubted if the Class will get beyond the '100' stage' [referring to the sail number] but today, on the contrary, the total fleet numbers 201, and it is commonly recognized that the class is the largest classic racing dinghy fleet in one location in the world. There could not be a 'much finer sight than 186 colourful SVOD dinghies crowding the start line off Seaview

A day to remember – the Sea View One Design dinghy 75th Anniversary Race in 2006. 'An amazing experience for all concerned. I loved that race so much.'

William Edwards, SVOD Class Captain 2006-2010, whose family's connections with the class go back to 1931.

in 2006 to celebrate their 75th Anniversary Race – a proud moment for one and all. But perhaps the greatest accolade lies in the casual remark made by another famous Olympic sailor, Sir Ben Ainslie, who recently moved to Seaview and became a member of SVYC, that one day he too might be persuaded to test the merits of this personable little craft 

Further reading and information

The SVOD Class 1931–1981, by Bruce Donald

Classic Boat magazine, February 1990 'The Sea View One Design Dinghy' by Dr Robin Gates

Classic Boat magazine, November 2000 'Taking in the Sea View' by Dan Houston

A History of the Sea View Yacht Club 1893-1977, by Lieutenant Colonel A.C. Whitcombe, MBE

www.svod.org.uk

