

DEVON YAWL



PHOTO: JEREMY EVANS

The Devon Yawl is a 35-year-old classic based on the Salcombe Yawl. **Jeremy Evans** tests a boat that combines great looks, unbeatable stability and racing performance for all ages...

The Salcombe Yawl is lovely to look at and expensive to own, not unlike some of the smart ladies who drop in on Salcombe for a few weeks of summer each year. The Salcombe Yawl actually originated as an inshore fishing boat about 200 years ago. None of those fishermen would recognise the modern version, tweaked by Phil Morrison, beautifully built using traditional clinker wood construction and raced very hard by enthusiastic amateurs. Apart from being mainly local to the waters around Salcombe, the biggest problem is that the Salcombe Yawl must have the highest price tag of any dinghy on the market with something in excess of £25,000 for a new boat.

Price is one reason why the first Devon Yawl was launched as a glassfibre version in 1968, using the Salcombe Yawl to make hull and deck moulds, and fitting aluminium rather than wooden spars. Since then the Salcombe Yawl has enhanced its

performance with modified hull shapes by the likes of Ian Howlett and Phil Morrison – Phil also helped convert the class to a high roach mainsail. Meanwhile, the Devon Yawl has stayed pretty much the same, using the original hull and deck mouldings to make a one-design hull. Sails and fittings have obviously improved along with detail refinements, but the only major changes have been a number of different builders.

The class association has always ensured that the Devon Yawl stays in production. I first sailed the Devon Yawl in the days when red sails were a mandatory class rule and thought it a really nice boat. It's great looking, solidly built, good to sail with a pleasant turn of performance. It's not one of those retro-kitsch traditional boats, the Devon Yawl looks like a boat that has a real contemporary purpose, living up to its reputation as a performance day sailing and racing boat for all weathers.

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Construction

For the past decade, John Lack has built a handful of new Devon Yawls to order each year at a small boatyard a short stroll from Christchurch Harbour. He makes a beautiful job of it. The boat we sailed was his 'demonstrator', on loan from its owner who sails and races with the fleet at Exe SC. John gives the boat a complete annual makeover in return for occasional use and the result is a three year old boat that really does look like new. John, who is clearly something of a perfectionist, was muttering about a little grazing as a result of some crazy person jumping up and down on the deck, but I couldn't see any problem. The boat looked immaculate, extremely durable and built to last for any reasonable lifetime.

The Devon Yawl is a heavy displacement boat, with not far off a 40 per cent ballast ratio provided by the 175lb cast iron centreplate, plus 144lbs of lead under the floorboards. So, is it a dinghy or a dayboat? In some ways it has the best of both. You can leave the Yawl on a mooring or beside a finger berth, with a cockpit cover to keep out the rain. That's what many owners opt to do in the main season, though it's equally possible to dry sail or trailer the boat. All you need is a good break-back trailer and preferably a two-speed winch, as recommended by class secretary Gill Atkins and her husband who are both in their 60s and regularly trailer-sail their own boat.

Layout

The first thing you notice is that the Yawl is rock-steady when you step on board. You step down into a cockpit that is really spacious with none of the usual dinghy clobber to get in the way of your feet. The cockpit should have more than enough room for using the Yawl as a family picnic boat – two adults and three or four kids no problem – and there's also a large watertight stowage compartment in the forepeak, plus room to store a small outboard under the aft deck.

An outboard motor provides alternative propulsion, as do a pair of sweep oars, but the Yawl is first and foremost a sailing boat. Remember that the forerunners of the Yawl were developed to be fast, functional, easily handled and manoeuvrable in difficult waters around

PHOTOS JEREMY EVANS

Above The Devon Yawl looks like a boat that has a real contemporary purpose, living up to its reputation as a performance day sailing and racing boat for all weathers.

Right The Yawl is rock-steady when you step on board.



Salcombe. The Devon Yawl has retained all those abilities and can be sailed with pretty much any variation on its quaint sail plan that includes a small mizzen mounted on the aft deck. There are a few Yawls with a Bermudan sail plan – not legal for class racing – but the vast majority of owners like the mizzen which balances the boat both in terms of performance and appearance.

Sailing

We went sailing on a seriously windy day – offshore and gusty! The local sailing club race was experiencing serial capsizes and abandoned boats, and while the Devon Yawl was coping there was a lot of power to contend with in its full 167sq ft racing mode with genoa. The old pinhead-style sail plan is standard for the class, with any sailmaker allowed – our boat was fitted with Rowsell Sails. White or cream have taken over as the preferred choice for racers, as coloured sails are more expensive to buy.

The Yawl may have the weight of a true displacement boat, but in that much wind it went like a train and there was no way the photo launch could keep pace. Mud on the bottom of Christchurch Harbour and shifting channels did provide a few problems. The Yawl centreplate has a big drum winch to pull it up and let it down with minimal effort, but you don't pull 175lbs of cast iron up in a jiffy when you hit the mud! One quirk is that the super-keen Exe SC fleet likes to race with RS400 rudders, which may provide a small performance enhancement but looks a bit odd on the boat. The blade is also deeper than on the standard rudder made by John Lack, which looks more appealing in laminated wood and has an updated profile from the original design.

With the big genoa set on the bowsprit that extends the length of the Yawl from 16 to 18ft, the main role of the mizzen is to keep the boat tracking and prevent it paying off. Upwind in this kind of breeze the main weapon to depower the mainsail is easing the mainsheet. Cunningham and kicker adjustment are available, and a new owner has recently fitted a fully adjustable outhaul, but it's not the kind of rig where you expect total control over sail shape. Looking at the sailing photos you might also notice the genoa luff looks a bit saggy. There is a standard 2:1 wire swivel on a block with a cascade system to get the halyard as tight as possible, but the crew had let it slip with fiddling cold fingers due to the icy easterly on this December day! You will also notice that the guys opted to sit in the boat, which is normal cruising style. Racers will sit on the side decks without hanging out. Like us, they will also tend to push the Yawl hard upwind so they get a fast offwind ride with full sail. But cruisers will take in a reef or drop the mainsail inside the boat and just use mizzen and headsail. We did that when it seemed unseamanlike to have too much sail, and the boat felt well balanced, fully in control and still travelling at a surprisingly good lick. Spinnakers are not class legal although a few owners like to play with them – on light wind days a symmetrical kite would no doubt provide a cruising bonus.

We got nowhere near capsizing on our test. Capsizing shouldn't be part of the game in a boat like this. John Lack says he's heard of a Yawl being knocked down and flooded on a couple of



PHOTOS JEREMY EVANS

Left The Devon Yawl has a really spacious cockpit with none of the usual dinghy clobber to get in the way of your feet.

occasions. Both times the crew were pushing the Yawl beyond its reasonable limit when racing, got caught by a bad gust on open water which laid the boat over and filled it up. The Yawl will not sink, with more than enough sealed buoyancy under the foredeck and in the side benches. But the water in the cockpit will slosh over the top of the centreboard case and run through the transom slot for the tiller, which has to be there with a mizzen. So it's no good bailing the boat out until you get it aground in shallow water, preferably on a falling tide.

Overall

If you're in the right part of the country, the Devon Yawl can provide some good racing. It may not be a huge fleet – 22 boats lined up at the 2003 nationals – but the class is enthusiastic and keenly fought. The association is keenly supported with a current membership of 240 owners and

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Topsham, Exmouth and the River Yealm have keen fleets in the West Country. Bosham, West Wittering and Emsworth have Yawls racing in Chichester Harbour, while moving east you can find them at Bewl Water in Kent and up in Suffolk on the River Orwell. Go upcountry and the main fleet is at Rutland Water, or cross to Wales where the Yawl has been adopted at Newport, Pembrokeshire.

The Devon Yawl is not exclusively for oldies. It won't be everyone's cup of tea, but pretty much any age could race the boat so long as there's sufficient adult muscle to trim the main and pretty much any weight could be carried although two-up is the racing norm. The Devon Yawl is just a beautifully built boat that can provide good sailing or racing for all ages, with rock solid stability and a good turn of performance that make it seem pretty much ideal as a family fun boat. It's not the sort of boat you buy for a season then move on – you'll stick with it for a long time. ■

Below The Devon Yawl can provide good sailing or racing for all ages, ideal as a family fun boat.



ANSWER BACK

from John Lack

As a boat builder I have always admired the good looks of the Devon Yawl, so when I saw an advert for Devon Yawl moulds for sale, I jumped at the chance to acquire them and we exhibited our first 'baby' at the 1991 Southampton Boat Show.

Interest at the show was good and we subsequently received an invitation from Topsham Sailing Club to demonstrate the Yawl on their waters on the Exe estuary. That evening we celebrated the signing up of four orders, and have not looked back since.

The Topsham fleet quickly grew to 38 Yawls, some new and some second-hand. The increasing interest in the Devon Yawl encouraged the Class Association to organise the first National Championship in 1997, with an entry of 60 Yawls. This led to a number of new fleets being established and signs of others in the making, also interest from Sailability. I am also pleased to say that the Devon Yawl is now in production in the USA.

The increase in racing the Yawl has had a good effect on the development of the boat, both new build and older versions have enthusiastically adopted many improvements to masts, spars, sails, and the use of Harken fittings to enhance the already acknowledged performance of the Yawl.

The Yawl is a forgiving boat to sail, but she encourages one to improve one's skills to get top performance. The article describes her performance in a blow, but she is also very slippery in light winds as the weight enables her to be coasted along when other lighter boats have come to a dead stop in the water.

A Devon Yawl will be on display at the Dinghy Show on March 6 and 7 so please come along and look her over!

DEVON YAWL SPECIFICATION

DESIGN: Michael Quick
LOA: 4.87m (5.47m with bowsprit)
BEAM: 1.88m
DRAUGHT: 0.28m-1.36m (lifting plate)
SAILING WEIGHT: 432kg
SAIL AREA: 15.5sq m

PRICE: £10,847

THE OPPOSITION... Where does the Devon Yawl fit in? Here are three alternatives...



SALCOMBE YAWL

The Salcombe Yawl is without doubt a lovely boat - if you can't buy new, second-hand ones of all ages are available.



WAYFARER

Classic Ian Proctor design from 1959 that remains popular for racing, cruising and schools and is available in several versions.



LASER STRATOS KEEL

Modern solution for a high-stability dinghy, which can also be sailed with gennaker and trapeze options.

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GUIDE PRICE: £25,000

LOA: 4.87m

BEAM: 2.032m max

HULL WEIGHT: c.290-310kg

UPWIND SAIL: 16.72sq m

SPINNAKER: N/A

GUIDE PRICE: from £6,820

LOA: 4.82m

BEAM: 1.86m

HULL WEIGHT: 168kg min

UPWIND SAIL: 15.9sq m

SPINNAKER: 13.5sq m

GUIDE PRICE: from £8,975

LOA: 4.94m

BEAM: 2.00m

HULL WEIGHT: 290kg min

UPWIND SAIL: 14.53sq m

SPINNAKER: 12.54sq m