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Is this the best British dayboat?

It's all a matter of personal choice, but if you want a tough, seaworthy open boat the Devon Yawl would be hard to beat, says Peter Poland

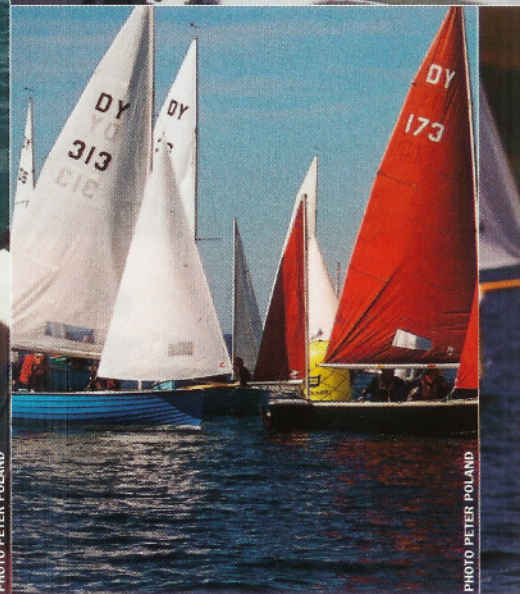
Back in 1986, a friend and I decided that walking might make a change from sailing. So, suitably equipped with knapsacks, shorts and knobby knees, we set forth from Branscombe bound for Bigbury. This southern stretch of the South West Coastal Path represents around one hundred miles of lung bursting ascents and hazardous descents, interspersed with suitably spaced overnight watering (well, not literally) holes.

As we hit the path from Start Point to Salcombe on the August Bank Holiday, our landlady from the previous night bade us farewell with the ominous and mystifying words, "Watch

out for the hurricane." We thought she was mad. We were wrong. A few hours later we sat outside a Salcombe pub, huddled against driving rain and a fearsome gale. The hurricane, we subsequently learnt, was a hangover from something called 'Charlie' that had hit the US seaboard.

As we watched yachts and cruisers scurrying for cover, a number of elegant looking yawl rigged dinghies stayed out to brave the elements. It must have been regatta week, and they weren't going to miss the fun. I was astonished that open dayboats were preparing to take on 'Charlie', but these were no normal dayboats. They were Salcombe Yawls.

Salcombe Yawls can trace their history back some 200 years to the days when they started life as inshore fishing boats. No doubt the mizzen steadied them when working, and the generous sized mainsail and jib gave them horsepower to get to and from the fishing grounds at speed and in safety – even in heavy seas. The design evolved over the years, until it reached its current and highly developed format with hull lines recently fine-tuned by skilled designers such as Ian Howlett and Phil Morrison. The hulls are still built from gleaming clinker planking and the spars are still varnished timber. A joy to behold, they sail like witches. There's only one problem.



Uncle John at the helm of his Devon Yawl. She's not a huge boat, but since she's so stable, she feels considerably larger than she actually is

A new one costs about the same as the Mercedes that might be used to tow it.

Fortunately, in 1968, a local sailor by the name of Michael Quick decided that a GRP replica could have wider appeal. So he used a Salcombe Yawl of the day to create a new hull and deck mould and produced the Devon Yawl. The pretty clinker hull looks much the same, the spars changed from wood to alloy, to save more money, but the traditional wooden bowsprit remained. The sail plan and overall design were set in stone by strict new Devon Yawl One Design rules, and an active class association soon sprang into life.

Yet even though I'd always admired the Devon Yawl from afar, I never got the chance to sail one – until recently. I kicked myself once I realised what I'd been missing.

It all came about in an unusual way. About 10 years ago, my uncle John (retired but still an

active 70 year old) phoned me. "I have a problem. I've been on the waiting list for a local mooring for decades and they've just told me I've finally been allocated one. These moorings are hard to come by. It takes longer to get one than to get into the MCC. And if I don't put a boat on it fast, I'll lose it again. So what should I buy?" This threw me a bit. So I asked: "What sort of mooring is it? What size of boat do you want?" "It's a drying mooring in Snow Hill Creek off Roman Landing in Chichester Harbour. So I want something that can live on the mud, that I can sail by myself if I want to, and that's safe enough to pop over to the Isle of Wight when the tides are right. Oh... and it's got to sail nicely and have a motor."

John used to sail RORC offshore events in his youth and later owned an X boat. So I guessed he would be less than happy with a plastic 'retro' gaffer. But he's also a big man – well over 6ft tall –

and he weighs in at somewhere between middle and heavyweight. And although his new hips are fine, he's less agile than he was, so anything too tippy would be difficult, if not dangerous, to board from a rubber dinghy. After a brief rumination I grasped the nettle and said: "There's only one answer. Get a Devon Yawl. Look for an elderly one so if it doesn't fit the bill, you'll easily get your money back." He'd never heard of it, but took my advice.

Ten years later, when John was hosting his eightieth birthday party, he invited me to come and sail her. "She's wonderful. She still lives on my Snow Hill Creek mooring. When I bought her, she was the only Devon Yawl there. Now there are five. She spends the winter in Birdham Pool Marina and I sail her from the creek all summer." Relieved that my initial suggestion had obviously been a success, I accepted with alacrity.

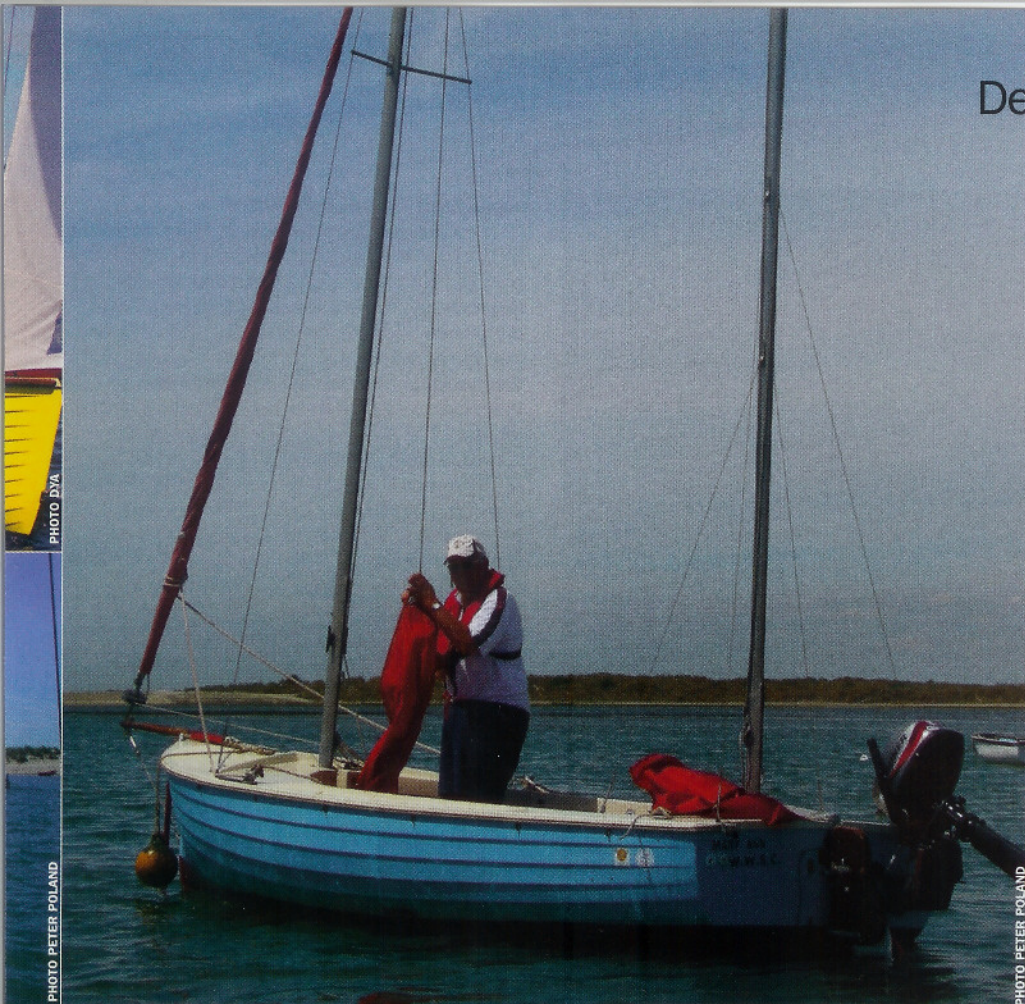


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In fact getting out to the boat proved more of a challenge than sailing her. Picturesque though Snow Hill Creek might be, you need a dinghy to row out across the mudflats as the incoming tide begins to cover them (and vice versa on the way back). So a small Avon inflatable was extracted from the car boot, unrolled onto the grass and inflated by means of a diminutive electric pump connected to the car battery. It looked mickey-mouse, but worked like a dream. Then, after skimming over the shallows (he rowed and I, to my shame, watched), we came alongside.

It was at this point that the Devon Yawl demonstrated the first of her many sterling qualities. She was bobbing happily on her mooring with a cover rigged to keep rain out of her cockpit. The centreplate was up. "You stay in the dinghy while I clamber aboard." As John heaved himself onto the sidedeck, I nervously

awaited the inevitable lurch sideways. I was astonished to see that the boat hardly moved. "Steady, isn't she?" he asked with a grin.

As soon as I joined him on board (also without causing the boat to tip over onto its ear), I began to discover why. Even though the substantial 175lb plate was raised, its weight (combined with the 144lb-worth of fixed internal ballast) was more than enough to keep the boat on an even keel. With an all up weight of 950lb, the Yawl is substantial and her ballast ratio approaches a reassuring 35 per cent. Compare this to the 370lb all up weight of a Wayfarer or the 640lb of a Laser Stratos 'keel' and you'll appreciate just why she feels so stable. She's no featherweight, and herein lies much of her appeal.

Once the cover had been stowed under the foredeck and the main and mizzen made ready, it was time to fire up the 4-stroke Mariner 4 on her

A cuddly version of the Devon Yawl was also produced. Called the **Devon Dayboat**, she has a small cabin with a coachroof that stretches back about two feet aft of the mast, which is deck stepped in a tabernacle on top.

The rig, hull shape, keel and rudder etc are the same and Devon Dayboats can also take part in Devon Yawl rallies and events.

transom and leave the mooring. Her spacious cockpit had made it easy to move around and her seats looked comfortable. John's relatively elderly Yawl (number 85) has an outboard bracket on the transom, while newer models have a neat integral mounting position moulded into the stern deck.

Under power she moved easily and fast. The trim had no effect as I wandered around the cockpit searching for my camera and a bag full of beer cans. Anyone looking for a dual purpose dinghy that can also troll for mackerel under power or drop anchor off a sandbank to catch a few sea bass on a hand line or rod will find she makes an excellent fishing boat, which, given her ancestry, should of course be no surprise.

Once clear of the narrow creek, we raised the main and mizzen and unrolled the genoa from its furler attached to the end of the bowsprit. And the boat came alive. Sadly the wind was light, so I was unable to sample the Yawl's much vaunted heavy weather performance. "What's she like in a strong breeze?" I asked. "Fantastic. She's fast and stable, although I'm not a racing man, so I reduce sail if necessary. I've never felt near to capsizing. She always feels so safe and reassuring." "What happens if you take a big one over the bow?" "I have a bilge pump."

In the prevailing light conditions, she was no slouch, even though she still has the now far from shapely original sails. ("What's wrong with them? There aren't any holes and she's sailing nicely," said John.) She slipped along at a speed that belied her weight. With the wind on the nose, she pointed high and 'talked' to her helmsman. This



The hefty casing that houses a chunky 175lb centreplate. There's a further 144lb of internal ballast

is no dead or heavy helm, it feels steady and positive and as the wind gusts, it tells you the boat wants to point higher. Not with an arm-wrenching or urgent demand, but in a gentle yet nonetheless persuasive way. The boat is balanced and she knows when she can sail a bit closer. So she tells you – and if you do as she suggests she lifts and accelerates. Then, when the breeze drops, she suggests you free off to keep the sails full and the speed steady. Some boats are skittish, some are so cumbersome that they feel dead, while others, like this one, sense the wind and speak to you. She's a proper boat that makes sailing rewarding and satisfying, as opposed to a stressful or even scary way of getting from A to B.

When it was time to turn round and head for home (before Snow Hill Creek emptied and reverted to mud), she settled onto a leisurely reach. The crew can just relax in the boat (as opposed to perching on its side), pull the tab off a beer can and listen to the bow wave chuckling along the clinker planking (even if it is made of GRP). The clinker may be 'bogus', but it's worth having just for the noise it makes. And, thanks to the ease with which one can pull up the centreplate with its beefy drum winch, the boat can scuttle up the shoreline close to the wildlife, away from the convoys of noisy gin palaces and out of the tide. Simple sailing doesn't get much better than this.

Having picked up the mooring again, I had more time to look at her comfortable cockpit. Being an older model, she has a traditional wooden floor with a shallow, flat bilge beneath. There's plenty of stowage space under the foredeck and in the space beneath the stern deck. The central centreboard case takes up less space

than one would imagine and there's ample room for a family crew to spread out without getting in the helmsman's way. All in all, a perfect dayboat – even if she's on the heavy side for launching and recovering from a road trailer. But, judging by the amount of travelling the dedicated band of Yawl owners does from rally to rally and regatta to regatta, this can't be too much of a problem. Anyone unsure about trailing a Yawl will find an excellent five page article on the subject in Newsletter No.41. The relative merits of 'A' Frame, break-back, multi-roller and Combi trailers are explained in detail. The article is accompanied by a table with a list of no fewer than six different

suppliers of Devon Yawl trailers.

This brings one to the second major appeal of the Devon Yawl. She's not only still in build (in both the UK and the USA), she also benefits from an extremely active Owners' Association. There are annual rallies for the pottering fraternity and numerous regattas for the racier folk. Every year they produce a substantial class magazine, so there's no excuse for owners not knowing what's on offer. The 2005 issue talks of rallies on the Orwell, Rutland Water and at Poole. Active fleets of Yawls socialise and race in fleets on the Exe, at Topsham, Bewl, in Chichester Harbour, at Newport (the Welsh one not on the Isle of Wight), on Rutland Water and on the Yealm. And even though not many *ST* readers are racing aficionados, open meetings with as many as 30 Yawls travelling to take part sound like a lot of fun. After all, you don't have to end up on the podium to have a great time.

Then there's the 'back up' – not just from the Class Association but also from the current builder. John Lack is based in Mudeford, Christchurch, and, in addition to building new Yawls, offers a full service for spares, maintenance and even upgrades. As an example, he can 'retro-fit' new outboard well kits to older boats.

Perhaps I can leave the final assessment to a publication called *House's Guide to Dinghies 1970*. The author quoted the designer's assessment that "With her iron plate and lead ballast she has the feel of a keelboat, great stability and seaworthiness and a very good sailing performance. She's remarkably lively in light airs and can sail safely when all other dinghies have given up. In a real blow she comes up on the plane or can be sailed single-handed on jib and mizzen alone."

Maybe I should have read this before recommending a Devon Yawl to John; it would have saved me a lot of trouble.

But is she really Britain's best? As I say, it all depends what you want and I've no doubt that many will disagree. If so, why not write in and tell us? In the meantime I should perhaps add that while the opinions here are purely personal, I've been impressed by the reactions of professional boat testers, none of whom had a bad word to say about her.

Either way, she'll takes some beating.

To contact the Devon Yawl Association (for news and for details of new or secondhand boats), log on to www.devonyawl.com.

Specifications

Length excluding 2ft (0.6m) bowsprit	16ft	4.87m
Beam	6ft.2ins	1.88m
Draught (plate up)	11 ins	0.28m
Draught (plate down)	4ft 6 ins	1.36m
Weight	950 lbs	432 kg
(inc cast iron aerofoil centreplate)	(175 lbs)	(79.45kg)
(inc fixed internal lead ballast)	(144 lbs)	(65.38kg)
Sail area with genoa	167 sq ft	15.5 sq.m
Sail area with jib	150 sq ft	14.2 sq m

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