

Coppet Week at Fifty

A long time ago on a beach not extremely far away, a group of sailors and their families from Greensforge Sailing Club set in motion a chain of events which has led to what is one of the best family sailing weeks there is and has become a mainstay of the sailing and holiday season at Saundersfoot. Courtesy of Covid no racing took place in 2020 so we are in the strange position in 2023 of marking both the fiftieth anniversary and the fiftieth running of the event, so double the reasons to celebrate.

But let us get back to the start of our story, Greensforge sail on Calf Heath Reservoir tucked between the A5 and M6 at Gailey junction in the heart of the Staffordshire Midlands, despite this location and the occasional need to tack on the shifts caused by lorries parked in a layby off the A5, it is a pretty and peaceful oasis and home to this friendly family sailing club. It was that family atmosphere that led to a group of members getting together to arrange a club holiday week at Saundersfoot in the early seventies, and so they set off to the seaside with many of them stopping at The Old Mill Caravan site and keeping their boats on Coppet Hall Beach for the week with easy access through the meadow.

After a spell enjoying some casual sailing, thoughts of course turned to a bit of racing, we all know that whilst one boat might be sailing two boats are always racing, even if they do not admit to it! So, Keith Jones was persuaded to take on the role of committee boat in his Enterprise and competition began, soon others with dinghies on the beach asked if they could join in and the fleet grew. These activities were spotted by George Hutchings, then Commodore of Saundersfoot Sailing Club, and he offered the use of a safety boat and the club race box on the harbour wall to make life a bit easier, and so the seed was sown. Discussions took place, doubtless over a few beers during the week and the following year Greensforge returned, this time with a few more friends from other Midlands clubs and the very first official Coppet Hall Dinghy Week, to give it its full title, took place in 1973.

Most agree that first and foremost this is a family holiday week at the seaside with a race a day thrown in for good measure, mind you that does not stop the racing being taken seriously, but not too much so, at least not off the water. The week has been the cause of many long-standing friendships over the years, not to mention several marriages, also long-standing I am pleased to say, so there must be something in the sea air. For some families it is a chance for an annual reunion with family members coming from far and wide on their annual pilgrimage, and some still come year after year long after they have swallowed the anchor, or just leave their boat at home to concentrate on the holiday instead.

The atmosphere builds as everyone arrives, conversations are struck up on the beach as if a year has not passed and topics such as who is crewing for who, who has a new boat, and the inevitable which way did you come and how long did it take, dominate the early exchanges. Over the years caravanning and camping have been replaced for many by seafront holiday properties and the dinghy park has now largely moved from Coppet Hall Beach to the main Saundersfoot Beach, where the fleet makes a fine sight both ashore and afloat. But the regatta will always remain Coppet Week in recognition of its origins as Coppet Hall Dinghy Week.

Fifty years has seen a huge change in the dinghy scene in all sorts of ways, just with the number and variety of dinghy classes to start with. The week is no longer dominated by GPs, Ents, Grads, and Solos with a plethora of new classes appearing along with the latest high-tech version of old favourites. Mind you, a good old one can still have its day as the results over the years have shown and it is great to see the older classes still holding their own with the latest plastic, kevlar and carbon creations.

Then the sailing clothing being worn, with the days of Peter Storm cagoules and cut off denims being replaced firstly by the all-in-one dinghy suits with the ubiquitous beer mat sewn on the backside, then high-tech breathable sailing gear and dry suits, bringing levels of warmth, dryness and comfort that would never have been dreamt of by those early competitors with damp tea towels round their necks.

No longer are allegedly waterproof stop watches on a lanyard kept in plastic bags in a futile attempt to keep the water out. Now competitors do not even have to look as the beeps count them down to the start and they know their elapsed time almost as well as the official timekeeper. Whose life has also moved on hugely from the days of the dreaded Langstrom Tables, who can remember them? and trying to sort results into place order on several pads of paper with a rubber always at the ready. Now it is good old Excell or Sailwave and press button race results calculated and then sorted however you want in record time, so no more long nights spent propping up the bar waiting to see where you came, or was that just a ploy to boost beer sales by the treasurer all along.

The races themselves have also changed, originally they were sailed round the normal club dinghy course with the start and finish lines off the main beach and all controlled from the race box on the harbour wall. The downwind and even occasional almost hooked starts and finishes became legend, mind you they nearly always worked, as general recalls are exceedingly rare on a downwind line, while show a fleet a windward start with even a slightly biased line and then the trouble begins.

Nowadays with a busier harbour and bay full of mooring buoys and pontoons, racing has moved further out but we still try to bring things in as close as we can for the tactical experts ashore to get an unobstructed view and to throw in the odd downwind start just for the fun of it. Surely perfect start lines and windward triangles get boring after a while and there is still a lot to be said for quirky courses set more inshore where the impact of the tide and cliffs add to the challenge, whilst at the same time providing a great spectacle for those watching from the beach and harbour wall. Maybe we should look again at the format, it would be interesting to hear people's views, is progress always good, have we lost something in the passage of time or am I guilty of looking through rose-tinted glasses whilst reminiscing on the glories of sailing days gone by.

Coppet Week used to be just one of several holiday series run by the club, back in the sixties and seventies racing took place every week over the school summer holidays, amazing for those of us lucky enough to grow up here during those years, as we never had to travel as a new group of competitors arrived on our doorstep every week of the summer holidays. Sadly, over the years, probably with the advent of cheap foreign holidays, turnouts declined, and the summer holiday series were dropped from the programme in the eighties, along sadly with the August regatta in more recent times. How lucky we are that Coppet Week has survived with such a loyal following, and long may it continue.

An almost full list of winners follows, there are a few gaps so please let us know if you can fill them in, as it is hoped to put them on a proper honours board in the Clubhouse in the future to mark what has now become the club's most prestigious event. The list of winners tells an interesting story of the development of the week and the quality of the fleet including as it does several national and indeed world champions and is a real blast from the past in many ways.

The winners of course are only a very small part of the story and many others who didn't quite get on that list are equally and probably even more important to the development and character of the week. Pride of place must go to Keith and Val Jones who started it all off and still come every year with their family despite no longer sailing, that is the true spirit of the week, Keith originally helmed their Enterprise often with Val crewing then his dream boat, Osprey 420 the "Fast Lady" often with son in law Richard Cooper on the wire. But there are so many more; Dennis Cook in his Grad, "Luffer" Jack Parkinson in his Solo, Brian Ballinger in a 470, Ken Evans in his Mirror, Des Wood in his Merlin, and the clubs own Trevor and Norma Smith in their Graduate to name just a few. Then others such as Paul Young in his Enterprise, Keith Macdonald and Andy Britain in their Fireball, and John Shoemsmith in his Laser who are still competing after many years.

The first official running of Coppet Week was won by Chris Avery in a Lark crewed by his dad Ray, they were competitors and summer visitors for many years in a variety of craft. Years two and three saw local winners with Graduates winning for the only times, firstly David George crewed by son Mark then Mark taking the helm crewed by brother Paul the following year and beating dad in the process then crewed by the youngest brother Adam.

Cannot resist a nice tale here involving Ray Avery crewing for David George in his Achilles for the round Caldey race in the club regatta around this time. In an effort to make the most of a lifting gust they went a touch too close to the White Back sand bank off Tenby South Beach on a falling tide and ran aground. The cruisers started first so a while later as the dinghy fleet arrived there was still just enough water for dinghies to sail round them, which many did just to pass the time of day of course! By then words may have been exchanged as one of them was perched on the pulpit the other on the pushpit, they got a loud cheer though as they returned to the bar much later that evening during the prizegiving.

The next three years saw a hat trick of wins for Chris Cotterill in his International Moth, more of them and their development later. Then the first of two victories for the venerable GP14, this time helmed by the stalwart of the class Barry Richards, sadly we have no record of his crew. Many will remember that Barry sailed GP14 Number 10, Siskin, a boat he tenderly cared for, sadly she was burnt to cinders in the Don Marine factory just as she was due a full refit.

This brings us to the eighties and the first appearance of a trapeze boat on the top step of the podium, and the first of three appearances for Team Cooper with Alan and Geoff winning in their Fireball, the boat with the never to be forgotten name of Omeegoolies. This was followed by a return for Chris Cotterill in his International Moth, or Cross Citteral as he was announced at the prizegiving by a slightly tipsy Sailing Captain that year. The following year saw more local success with John Griffiths winning for the first time and becoming still the only Laser ever to win the event, strange really when you think of how many there have been over all the years.

Then it was more International Moths with Roger Angell dominant for two years despite the best efforts to adjust their handicaps! This was the first time that we had dabbled with adjusting handicaps, but unusually this came at the request of the sailors themselves as during this spell we had some of the top Moth sailors in the world regularly taking part with Chris and Roger being joined by Toby Collyer and of course a young Robin Wood. Around this time the RYA had the International Moth on the same handicap as the Enterprise, we sailed it off the Laser number, when the RYA caught up and had it on the Laser, we had moved it to the Merlin Rocket and when they caught up again and agreed with that we had moved to the same as the Fireball.

Nobody at that time could ever have imagined the flying machines that we have seen over recent years in the hands of Robin and David DJ Edwards, although it is nice to see that Lyndon Beasley can still produce some impressive results in his lowriding traditional one on regular occasions. The international Moth dominance was broken the following breezy year by the second GP14 to appear on the list sailed by Dave Marshall and his wife, again sorry but her name escapes us.

Then the next two years saw Team Cooper to the fore again, firstly in their Fireball and then their Osprey as the class was being revitalised by the influx of the new Porter boats. Sadly, neither Alan nor Geoff are with us any longer, but I am sure that many of the old hands will have fond memories of both of them, with Big Al perched on his stool in the corner of the bar often in the company of Des Wood, another who is sadly no longer with us, between them they were guilty of leading us youngsters astray on many occasions over the years.

Saundersfoot now boasted a club fleet of Ospreys again for the first time in many years, and the following year local brothers John and Paul Griffiths took the honours in theirs. The club has a long history with the Osprey, the first national championships were held here and won by our very own Tony Phillips after a tight tussle up the last beat with the boat's designer Ian Proctor. Tony sadly slipped his lines for the last time last year but he and fellow renowned local Osprey and Redwing sailor Valentine Howells of inaugural OSTAR, the single-handed transatlantic race, fame did much to develop competitive dinghy racing here.

Just to show that trapeze boats were not always dominant and that it was not just the International Moths development that gave him the edge, Chris Cotteril returned for his fifth and final win in a Streaker of all things. Normal service was resumed for the trapeze boats the following year as we moved into the nineties with Gareth Caldwell helming his Osprey to the first of his three titles to date crewed by Nik Dailey-Hunt. A light airs week the following year upset the fast end of the fleet but led to a dominant performance by Steve Hunt and crew Royston Taggart to take the only Enterprise to win to date to the top of the fleet, still time for you yet Paul Young.

The trapeze fleet came to the fore again over the next few years with Stephanie Pilkington and Alisdair James winning in their Fireball, followed by Ian Fryett and Jon Pym winning in an Osprey, Andy Homer and Mandy Mathews in a Fireball followed by another Fireball this time sailed by brothers Alex and Jon Bale, then the only appearance of a 505 on the list helmed by Dave Griffiss but again we are minus his crew's name.

The next few years saw hiking boats to the front of the fleet with Peter Rose sailing his Scorpion to victory with various family members crewing, then Steve Hunt and Andy Wilcox in an RS400 followed by the first but certainly not the last win for Robin Wood, this time crewed by son Ben in their National 12.

The millennium saw a third victory for John Griffiths, this time again sailing with brother Paul in their Fireball, the boys had watched the first Coppet Week from the beach or possibly from their West Eleven dinghy, then took part in 1974 in their GP14. John curtesy of a back injury no longer competes, but Paul has sailed in every week since; crewing in a GP, helming his Topper, then Laser, crewing again in an Osprey then Fireball before taking the stick again in a Laser, Solo, National 12 and now RS200 with Julia crewing, forty-nine weeks under his belt and still counting.

The Fireball theme continued the year after with Ian Fryett and Jon Bale winning the week. Robin and Ben Wood were back at the top next, this time in an RS800 exhibiting great skill in twin trapezing around the bay. They were followed the next year by another regular visitor with Richie Adams in his International Moth.

This brings us to a new period of dominance of the week by just two classes with the International Canoe and the Merlin Rocket fleets to the fore. A brace of wins for Robin Wood in his Canoe was followed by Chris Martin and Chris Gould in a Rocket, then another win for Robin Wood's Canoe. The Rockets fought back and recorded two more wins with Richard Dee crewed by Phil Scott followed by Richie Adams and crew Martin Weatherstone. Then as we get to 2010 another Canoe this time with Gareth Caldwell at the helm followed by two more wins for the Rockets, firstly Richard Dee this time crewed by Chris Gould, then another win for Chris Martin this time crewed by Matt Smith. The tables were turned with Gareth Caldwell getting his third win in his Canoe followed by only the second hat trick of wins in the events history so far for Robin Wood again in the Canoe over the next few years.

This dominance was broken briefly by Ian and Ben Fryett sailing their RS Vision to victory, Ian joining the growing list of those with three titles to their name. But Robin Wood was back the next year in his Canoe with the Rockets then returning the year after with Rob Kennaugh and Andy Prosser winning in a week which will sadly be remembered for a freak life-changing accident to long standing competitor and former champion Richard Dee, we all wish him the best.

Covid stepped in to prevent racing in 2020 and on its return the following year another of our long-standing competitors Alisdair James was victorious in his Solo after previously crewing the winning boat thirty years before, a welcome return to the top for the slower end of the fleet. Normal service was resumed last year however, with Robin Wood yet again sailing his International Canoe to record his tenth win.

So where will the trophy go next? It is not all about the winner of course and over the years we have tried to spread the glory around the fleet with separate prizes for the fast and slow fleet along with class prizes and various other categories. When we first introduced an over sixties prize quite a few years back now it was a bit of a gesture for the oldies, now we have a large part of the fleet in this category and an over seventies or who knows and over eighties category beckons. We are sure that the fun and friendly competition will continue this coming year when we hope you will all be able to join us to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of Coppet Hall Dinghy Week in style.

We hope that you enjoyed this article, if you can fill in any of the gaps or have memories to share of weeks gone by, we would love to hear from you. Also, we would love to see your Coppet Week photos and will try and build up a gallery of the week over the years showing how trends in boats and all other things has developed.