

95 Years Young!

The enduring splendour of the Solent Sunbeam in Chichester Harbour

Bosham resident Peter Nicholson first set sail in a Sunbeam keelboat in 1966, seeking an antidote to the boredom of accountancy studies, when he was invited to race on his now classic yacht 'Dainty'.

The owner of Dainty at that time was Paul Brauner who had the year before been alerted to the fact that the yacht had been lying in Combes Boatyard in Bosham since 1957. She was in a sorry state, but long-time Sunbeam enthusiast Sir Henry Chisholm, from Itchenor Sailing Club, persuaded Paul that this historic Sunbeam, the first one ever built, with sail number V1, was worth renovating to race once again.

Paul, a successful entrepreneur involved in the metal markets, was a keen and competitive sailor and fortunately rose to the challenge with a purchase in used notes. Later, when Paul moved to live abroad, he asked Bosham resident Peter Nicholson to maintain and race Dainty. Peter has looked after her ever since; quite a feat considering the yacht itself is celebrating 95 years since its launch this year! Incredibly nearly 70 Sunbeams



are still regularly racing and sailing today, including hull numbers 1,2 & 3 - all built in 1922/3. Some of the yachts are treated as heirlooms with ownership passing down the generations. In fact V6 'Little Lady' has been owned by the same family for over 80 years!

Yachting in the 1920s

The 1920s was the era of beautiful yachts with stunning designs from the likes of William Fife, G L Watson and Charles Nicholson. Yachting was an elite pastime; the vessels were large, requiring many hands. Hamble River Sailing Club was looking for a new one-design yacht for its members to race and

asked Club Commodore and Tall Ship historian Basil Lubbock to commission a design. Basil went to Naval Architect, Alfred Westmacott, based on the Isle of Wight, who was already well known for designing a string of successful one-design keelboats - the Mermaid, X Boat and Yarmouth one-design, all still well-known and active in the Solent today. The specification was to produce an 8-metre boat, an 'improved Mermaid', the first one-design class with a Bermudian rig. In many ways Westmacott managed to capture the 'poetry' of the 1920s large yacht design with his new 8m keelboat, and many regard the Sunbeam as his masterpiece. Certainly the yacht performed even beyond the expectations of their new owners with 7 boats completed within 4 months of the launch of V1 and a further 11 delivered in the following year.

In the Class's first season in 1923, 7 Sunbeams sailed at Cowes - including





An Acclaimed Design

Back in 1923 when she was launched, *Yachting Monthly* noted: 'The new Solent Sunbeam One Design Class, from the board of Messrs Woodnutt of St Helens Isle of Wight, promises to be one of the best which has ever been produced. The design shows a powerful yet sweet lined little vessel with ample beam and draught. The lines and sail plan of the Sunbeams cannot fail to

sail number 1, *Dainty*. Peter Nicholson has sailed her continuously at Cowes for the past 53 years and competed again in 2018 to celebrate the yacht's 95th anniversary.

The Sunbeam Class

The founders of the new Sunbeam Class had understood the new design would be called the 'Y' class and so declared that all the yachts should have names ending in 'y'. When it came to receiving the sail insignia it turned out to be 'V' instead of 'Y' but the name rule had already been made so most of the fleet still have names ending in 'y'. The founders of the class drew lots for the first three hulls; Basil Lubbock drew hull #1 and named her *Dainty* – the name of a succession of naval frigates and originally held by one of Queen Elizabeth I's pirate ships! Peter Nicholson believes that the name 'Sunbeam' comes from a Schooner called *Sunbeam* which Basil Lubbock would have been familiar with from his Tall Ship sailing days.

appeal to yachtsmen who are on the lookout for a really able little boat.'

More recently, in review of *La Belle Classe* in 2017 *Yachts and Yachting* referred to 'a masterpiece as sublime as *Dainty*.'

The popularity of the design is still as strong today as it was 95 years ago. Some believe it's the long counter which extends the waterline, making her appear to have a faster 'waterline' speed, that means that sailing in all winds is really exhilarating. Undoubtedly the beautiful aesthetics and excellent sailing performance across the wind spectrum contribute hugely as well. Others remark on the high standard of competition on the water followed by extremely sociable gatherings back in the club-house!

Fortunately, much is known about the history and heritage of the Sunbeam Class due to an extensive collection of photographs that survive from the 1920s

as well as some important watercolour paintings by Henry Tuke RA who owned Sunbeam V17, now called 'Melody' and based in Falmouth. A fascinating and meticulous sailing log exists from Sunbeam V5 'Whimsey', written by its original owner Colonel Bowdler. A truly incredible collection of all the official Class Association minutes and papers dating back to 1922 still exist in fabulous condition in leather bound books.



The Sunbeam Fleets

In the 1920s and 1930s the fleet sailed at open events all around the Solent, including at Yarmouth, Lymington, Beaulieu, Cowes and Bembridge. In 1933 Itchenor Sailing Club was looking for a one-design fleet to introduce alongside its fleet of X boats and decided to adopt the Sunbeam class. A sister fleet had been established in Falmouth in 1924 and has raced there ever since, with both fleets coming together for special regattas.

Sir Henry Chisholm has undoubtedly had the most influence on the class in its 95-year history. He bought Sunbeam V24, Fay, in the 1950s and immediately recognised that in the post-war era of petrol rationing, transport restrictions and reduced leisure income there was potential in one-design racing as a more cost-effective and highly social pastime. In 1948, a press release by Sir Geoffrey Lowles had described the Sunbeam as 'big boat feel at small boat cost'.

Mediterranean Adventures

Bosham resident Peter Nicholson has sailed Dainty extensively from Itchenor and the Solent, Round the Island, as well as to Falmouth and, more unusually, for the past 13 years at the famous Classic Yacht regattas in Monaco, St Tropez and Cannes. Despite being by far the smallest yacht at the Mediterranean regattas, the pleasing lines of this classic yacht are admired and attract just as much attention as the large classics. Peter notes that the Mediterranean regattas extend the normal British summer by an extra 3 weeks and provide skilled and competitive racing as well as an extremely sociable and enjoyable end to the season! Dainty and her owners have even been presented with a special award of Tape de Bouche by the Yacht Club de France for the Sunbeam's contribution to classic yacht racing in the Mediterranean.

An Enduring Appeal

As with many sports and yacht classes, the Sunbeam fleet has seen dips and rises

in enthusiasm over its 95-year history. After WW2 it was a struggle to maintain numbers on the start line but a resurgence in the 60s and 70s saw fleet numbers increase. Today a training programme for newcomers, syndicate ownerships, the addition of ten GRP boats, the enduring performance of the yacht on the water as well as competitive sailing and an extensive social program mean that good numbers turn out for the regular weekend and Thursday evening racing at Itchenor SC.

Peter Nicholson puts the longevity of the yacht down to its sublime design and original high-quality construction and

specification, as well as the quality of the pitch-pine and caulking that was used in the yacht's build by Woodnutts on the Isle of Wight nearly a hundred years ago.

The demographic of the sailors has changed over the century, with most of the owners in the 1920s and 1930s aged between 30 and 40 coming from London but owning second homes on the South Coast. Today around 80% of the Itchenor fleet owners live within 5 miles of Chichester Harbour and due to fitter lifestyles, the average age of the sailors has increased to between 50 and 70 years old.

The Dainty Dish

One notable award is named after Peter's yacht Dainty and was brought into existence in 1971 by the yacht's former owner, Paul Brauner, who recognised the importance of combining good racing with fine wine and dining. When Paul noticed a lower turnout for the annual cruise from Chichester for Cowes Week and no arrangements for dinner together that evening, he decided to offer a new prize. He bought an Armada Dish from the silver vaults in London (reputedly made from silver from the Spanish Armada) called it the 'Dainty Dish' and made a deed of gift with the condition that it would be presented to the winner of a Solent passage race at a dinner, normally at Cowes, on the evening of the race. The Dainty Dish trophy now has a special place in the Sunbeam Class and it encourages a good turn-out together with a most enjoyable dinner!

The full story of this stunning and enduring class has been detailed in a magnificent book called 'The Brilliance of Sunbeams' which is full of exceptional images gathered by Peter spanning the 95 years of the yacht as well as a huge array of adventures, stories, calamities and triumphs detailing the history of the fleet. Copies are available through www.solentsunbeam.co.uk.