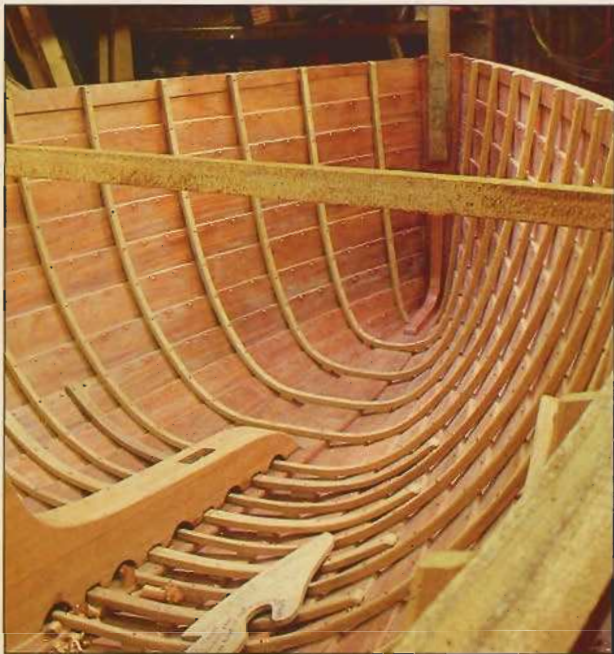


The
YAWL
Builders

Mark Fishwick talks
to three builders of
Salcombe Yawls

Y74 Albatross clears the bow of Y45 Lucinda during a race in July 1988. Photo: Mark Fishwick.



Above: The radical Nuffin, built by Dave Gibbens, has been the cause for the introduction of new rules of Yawl construction. Photos: Malcolm Darch

Although nearly 140 Salcombe Yawls have been launched since the inception of the class just before the last war, it is interesting to note that only a very small number of boatbuilders have been involved in creating them and among them, the name of Jim Stone must stand supreme.

By far the most prolific builder, he was also probably indirectly responsible for the con-

cept of the boat when he built Blackbird a 14ft (4.3m) three-quarter decked yawl just after the First World War. Based loosely on the small local fishing boats, he designed her for his own amusement to race in the harbour. She proved very fast and was undoubtedly observed by Francis Morgan Giles long before he eventually designed and built the first 'true' Salcombe Yawl in 1939.

In that year, Morgan Giles built three boats and Stone built his first, Y14, sentimentally named *Blackbird II* but it was not until the end of the war that his next emerged, Y15, built out of black market timber. That was just the beginning and since then his son Alec estimates that probably three-quarters of the class have been built by his family.

Sadly, Jim died two years ago at the healthy age of 84 but not before completing three more yawls during the final months of his life and Alec Stone now carries on the tradition. On first appearances this large, burly and very amiable character with a rolling south-Devon burr, would seem much more at home driving a herd of cows along a Devon lane, rather than building delicate racing dinghies and it comes as an even greater surprise when

you discover that he has, in his time, been one of the top world dinghy helmsmen: the first World Solo champion and nine times National Solo champion, to mention a few of his triumphs. He is also the demon of the Salcombe Yawl fleet where, I was reliably informed by those who race against him, at 61 he is just as competitive as ever.

Alec started work in his father's boatbuild-



Michael Atfield. Photo: Mark Fishwick.



Dave Gibbens. Photo: Mark Fishwick.

ing business just before the war. Then they had just moved to the old coal store at Goodshelter, where the yard remains today in a leafy, forgotten corner of Southpool Lake on the eastern side of the Salcombe Estuary where the tide only creeps for a couple of reluctant hours either side of high water. "It took years to get rid of the coal dust", he recalls with a laugh.

Soon he was packed off across the water to learn his trade at the famous Salcombe shipyard of Edgar Cove, where he remained throughout the last war, an experience that he admits he thoroughly enjoyed, although the discipline was hard: his father insisted that he got no special favours. Cashing in on the post war boom in dinghy sailing, the Stone business soon established a world-wide reputation through Alec's racing achievements in their boats. Of all the classes the yard has built over the years, the Solo was undoubtedly **their most successful**: during 1972, for example, they built no less than 72. The demand

definitely the 'new boy' on the yawl building scene.

Like Alec Stone, he served his time with Edgar Cove and then worked for a number of years at Stone's before setting up his own business in 1972. However, it was not until the beginning of the revival of interest in the class in 1979 that he built his first yawl, Y122. Since then, demand has been steady and in addition to his other very traditional wooden boatbuilding - he specialises in small launches and dinghies - he has built no less than eight more. Ironically only three now remain in the Salcombe fleet, the rest having scattered as far afield as North Wales, Lincolnshire and Northumberland. The dispersal of his boats is however, something that Michael is surprisingly unsentimental about: "I'm always happy when I see them leave my shed, it's so nice to have all that space back again!"

He is not particularly interested in sailing them, either. Like so many other builders, his

pleasure is derived purely from the concept and creation of his boats and within the simple restrictions of the class: 16' (4.9m) overall, 5'4" (1.6m) to 6'8" (2.0m) beam and the 2'4" (0.7m) depth amidships ruling, he produces his own designs, which have proved an undoubted success.

Dave Gibbens, in contrast to the other two, is the enigma, for as he admits he very much drifted into boatbuilding, is largely self-taught and did not serve his time at Edgar Cove's yard! After finishing his National Service he worked at Salcombe Marine during the 1950's when it was still a boatyard. He was drawn into dinghy building through his interest in model making and eventually his hobby developed into a business.

His shed is even harder to find than Atfield's, for there is only a visiting card pinned on a hidden door but, as I discovered, you only have to ask. Dave and his boats have quite a reputation in Salcombe and the finish and attention to detail clearly reflect the

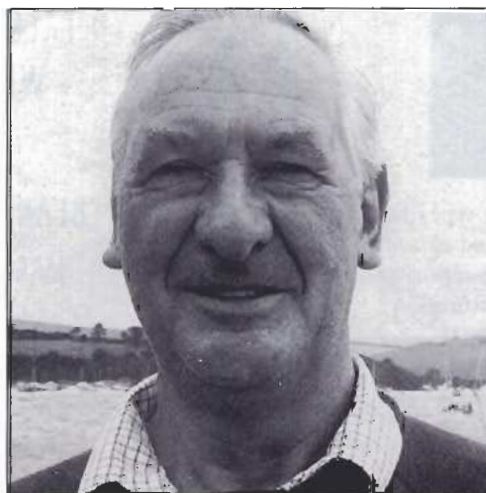


for the yawls is, however, still very much there and since Jim's death, Alec has built two more and also completely rebuilt one of their very early boats, Y17, which has proved to be very competitive again with this new lease of life. New boats now cost in excess of £6,000 but the orders still come in to Alec's self-professed amazement "... they were £250 when my father first started them; I just can't believe people will pay this sort of money, but today you can't build them any cheaper..."

The other two yawl builders are both Salcombe based, tucked away in my favourite part of the town: 'round the back' in Island Street, where all manner of nautical activity lurks in a shambling row of sheds backing onto muddy Batson Creek. The area is pleasantly far removed from the 'yuppie chic' and bustle of the popular waterfront. Here, down a narrow alleyway, a very modest sign barely indicates the presence of Michael Atfield, Boatbuilder and he, in contrast to Stone, is

Salcombe Regatta in 1968 with Avocet Y65 sailed by Terry Stone and Choice Y7 sailed by Tim Street and his wife. Photo courtesy Tim Street.

Below: Alec Stone. Photo: Mark Fishwick.



modelmaker's touch. A keen racing man himself, he has built Hornets, Solos and National 12's over the years and was asked to build his first yawl, Y67, in 1968. Since then, he too has built eight more including Y141, the very latest, a radical Phil Morrison design that has been cleaning up in the local racing this season and inevitably creating more than just a buzz among the fleet and around the yacht club bar.

USEFUL ADDRESSES:

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Dave Gibbens Boatbuilder, Island Street, Salcombe, S Devon.