

# CLASS REVIVAL

Amid declining numbers, exemplary action taken by the Cowes Etchells fleet has seen a dramatic recent turnaround.

**Rupert Holmes** investigates

“Our sailors want it to be difficult – no one likes it if the racing is a procession and the same boat wins all the time”



**ABOVE** Matching owners with capable crew has helped boost numbers

A few years ago regular participation in weekend racing at Cowes had dropped to a handful of boats and just eight teams turned out for the 2010 and 2011 Etchells national championships. However, since then the class has bounced back, with a regular fleet approaching 20 closely-matched boats for weekend racing and a healthy nationals attendance. So what's changed in that time?

To a large extent the fleet's revival was kicked off by class captain, David Franks, who identified a number of factors that had been off-putting to owners. One of the most important of these was the difficulty of attracting, organising and retaining capable crew members. He also identified keeping fully up-to-date with maintenance during the season as a problem for many owners.

It's no coincidence that the class is perceived as much friendlier now than it was a few years ago. "We have many more social opportunities," says David.

Last but by no means least, was acknowledgement of the need for the racing to remain competitive, with closely-matched boats and good courses. "What our sailors want is for it to be difficult," says David. "No one likes it if the racing is a procession and the same boat wins all the time."

Given that the class comprises some of the UK's top sailors, including Andy Beadsworth, David Bedford, Stuart Childerly, Simon (Stir) Fry, Andrew Palfrey and Graham Sunderland, this might appear to be a tall order.

However, all are great supporters of the fleet. In addition, they are reportedly very generous with their time and love to share their knowledge, which benefits both the young sailors and other owners. "We set good windward-leeward courses and wherever you are in the fleet there is always close action with other boats," says David.

### Securing owner buy-in

The class is also now much more proactive in getting owners out on the water than in the past. "That's not really about your profile on Facebook; it's about talking to owners, asking each one about the specific barriers that stop them getting on the water. It might be finding the right crew, preparing the boat, or organising repairs that need to be done before the next event," says David. "Once you know what each owner's problems are, you can help them to find solutions."

"For example, if someone needs a lightweight crew member for a weekend (the class has a weight limit) we can find them someone who's a talented sailor. It's no good just simply finding someone that's the right weight – if they are not a good sailor, then the whole crew will be disappointed with the way that they sailed and they won't have enthusiasm to race in the next event."

The class is dry-sailed, predominately from Shepards Wharf in Cowes, which has been steadily improving its facilities as a regatta centre. "Their reaction to requests and suggestions is never, 'we can't do that'," says David. "It's always 'let's figure out what we can do to make that happen for you'." Recent

improvements include the installation of a new £100,000 crane in 2014 that significantly speeds up launch and recovery of boats, plus a briefing room and media centre for the 2015 season.

The class also has a well-equipped shipping container on site, with spares and workshop facilities. This also has wifi, a printer and drinks on offer both before and after racing. The result is that the location has become a focal point for the class and there's plenty of interaction between sailors off the water, including sharing of knowledge.

### Attracting top talent

Many of the class stalwarts saw encouraging talented young sailors into the class as key to helping provide a supply of capable and enthusiastic crewmembers for owners. "We started with one loaner boat for young sailors," says David, "but in effect we now often have four boats racing with young sailors. That's because a further two of the owners have populated their boats with young crew."

These owners get several advantages from this, including a crew captain ▶

### An enduring appeal

A strict 30ft one design keelboat, designed in 1967, the Etchells has some of the most competitive racing in the world and winning the class's world championship is regarded as one of the toughest achievements in sailing. Former world champions include America's Cup winners Dennis Conner and John Bertrand. British Olympian Stuart Childerley has won the title twice and quadruple Olympic gold medallist Sir Ben Ainslie has competed as a crew member.

who is responsible for looking after the boat, for ensuring the crew are available on the appropriate weekends and who, if necessary, can race the boat when the owner is not available.

“Among some members of the fleet there was initially some concern that the young sailors would be accustomed to only sailing dinghies, rather than a big keelboat, which would increase the risk of collisions,” says Franks. However, this was not borne out by experience – the young sailors had already been in high-level coaching squads and often brought a much higher level of competition to the class.

### Young recruits

As a result of the Etchells’ initiatives, in the 2012, 2013 and 2014 seasons, some 90 young people aged between 18-25 sailed with the class in some format. These sailors have gone on to a number of notable successes in their own right, including victories in the Women’s Student Match Racing World Championship, RYA Youth Match Racing Nationals, and Youth Match Racing Europeans.

Trials for the Cowes Etchells youth programme are held each spring, consisting of one day of boat



In addition, the Etchells Invitational Regatta for the Gertrude Cup, which ran for the first time in 2014, has attracted a lot of interest in the class, both locally and nationally.

### A numbers game

As ever, turning the class around has been a team effort, with lots of people contributing. This includes Edward S Fort OBE, an Etchells sailor for more than 30 years, and now Admiral of the class, who has made a huge contribution through funding two boats for the youth sailing programme.

The overall result has been a critical

as possible in the fleet are active, the entire fleet is in good shape and the competition on the water is even closer.

A number of owners are also attracted by the international element of the class, including the annual world championship that takes place at one of the planet’s top sailing destinations.

An additional dimension is the winter series in Miami, where a number of the Cowes fleet sailors race in a 50-strong fleet one weekend a month and the class has a further boat available for charter.

With interest also increasing with the 2016 Worlds to be held in Cowes, the future of the class looks much stronger than it has for many years.

### Inspirational model

David believes the turnaround within the Cowes Etchells fleet is down to a number of elements, “especially that it’s a friendly but competitive fleet and we have now sorted out previous crew and maintenance issues.

“In addition the boats last well and there is a sail replacement rule, which helps to contain costs.”

Whilst the Etchells class has been lucky to draw on some fantastic resources, much of its recent success is underpinned by a can-do attitude from those involved. By starting small, the class has pulled together to achieve some real results – and that’s a model David hopes will inspire other classes in future. ■

**ABOVE** An annual invitational event encourages potential new owners

“Getting more boats on the water has a benefit beyond simply providing more competition”

acclimatisation and training, followed by a day of observed racing.

Following that, two fully-funded Etchells are made available for two successful youth crews to compete in racing from Cowes for the remainder of the season, including at Aberdeen Asset Management Cowes Week.

The trials also serve as a recruiting ground for young sailors who, even if they are not offered a boat for the season, are invited to crew for Etchells owners on a regular basis.

The class also runs an annual event in which it invites prospective owners to try out Etchells sailing for a specified weekend – which added one new owner to the fleet this year who was particularly impressed by the friendliness of the class.

mass of boats on the water that has, in turn, spurred others to get afloat.

The class has since attracted a number of new owners, who race their boats regularly through the season, which includes roughly one weekend of racing per month, plus Aberdeen Asset Management Cowes Week, and the European and world championships (set to take place in Cowes in 2016).

And getting more boats on the water has had an added benefit beyond simply providing more competition. As David points out, a boat that isn’t used still needs maintenance, but it tends to be ignored, with the result that the longer it stays inactive, progressively more work is required to get it into a full racing condition.

Therefore by ensuring as many boats

### Calling all young sailors!

If you are between 18 and 25 years of age, you can apply for the 2015 Etchells youth programme. Check out more details at [www.yachtsandyachting.co.uk/Etchells](http://www.yachtsandyachting.co.uk/Etchells)