

THEY SAND YOU SAIL

Classic Sailing Club offers ‘maintenance-free’ wooden yacht charter and East Coast river-sailing weekends; past ‘clients’ include Woody Allen. *Steffan Meyric Hughes* joined the fleet to learn more. Photos, *Ray Little*

“Nice boat! I’d love a woodie myself – but the idea of all that maintenance...” Then the body language – a car mechanic’s shudder (*all that varnish – could be serious*) or upturned hands (*what can you do?*). Act three of this little ‘tricolore’ is the apologetic confession – “I got plastic – but she’s a classic of sorts... isn’t she?”

I have heard owning a wooden yacht compared to insanity; TLC described as “time, labour and cash”; and best of all, owning a woodie as akin to “keeping a grand piano in your back garden”. But it’s good to know that owners of modern boats recognise that wood does look the part as, in honesty, a large reward for all that sweat is the aesthetic admiration of others.

Classic Sailing Club, set up three years ago by businessman Ian Welsh and architect Jonathan Stickland works on the premise of having your cake and eating it: essentially, they do ‘all that varnish’ and

you just get on with sailing their five classic yachts kept on Suffolk’s Orwell River close by the hamlet of Pin Mill. It’s where Arthur Ransome kept his 7-ton Hillyard *Nancy Blackett*, and it’s from here that the Swallows sailed accidentally to Holland in *We didn’t Mean To Go to Sea*.

Ransome’s yard, Kings of Pin Mill, (CB228) now looks after the club’s boats. The Butt and Oyster, a favourite pub of yachtsmen, sits on the water’s edge, and nearby is the fabled East Coast delta, a land of mud flats and bird cries, the spiritual home of British classic sailing. So it’s strange to think that this story began in the urban confines of London’s Old Street.

This is the where the Classic Car Club – in effect, the inspiration for the Classic Sailing Club – is based, and director James Evans shows me around the amazing fleet of Jaguar E-Types, “big, daft four-seaters” like the ostentatious old Bentleys, and, hiding behind some American metal, an



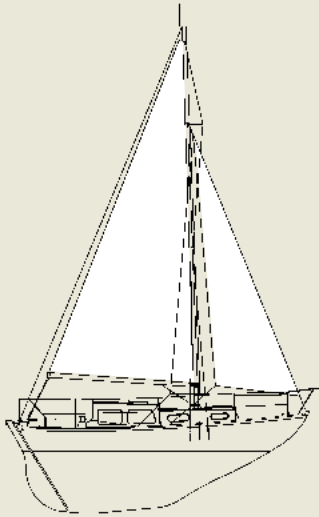


*Above left: Night Wind nears her mooring on the Orwell. Above right: dusk falls on the Deben.
Main photo: the Classic Sailing Club fleet: from left: Marcita, Hampshire Maid, Night Wind, Caressa*



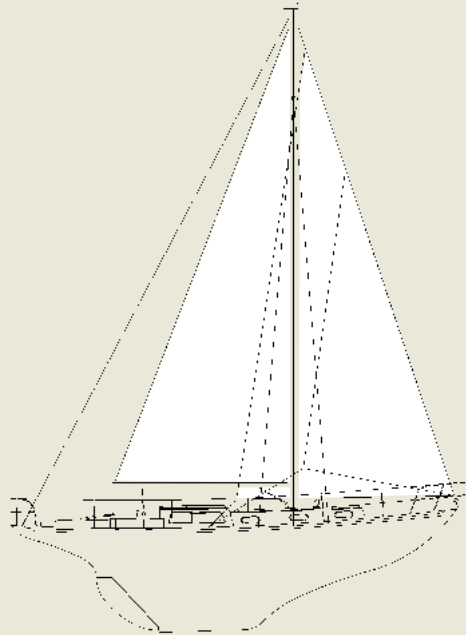
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The Classic sailing club fleet



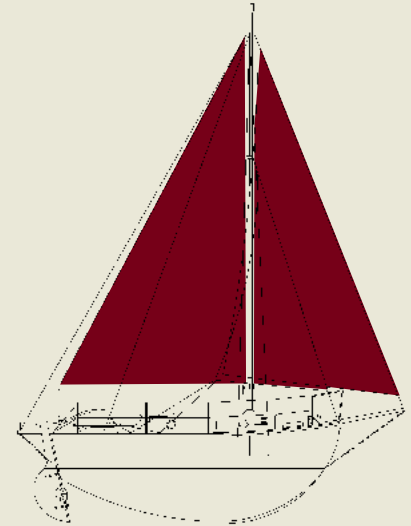
Hampshire Maid – Band 2

Charles Nicholson-designed South Coast One Design, built 1957, Woodnutts. Small (26ft) and seaworthy with a deep keel for her length. A favourite of Woody Allen's!



Caressa – Band 5

Alan Buchanan-designed 'Prior 37', a 37ft sloop built by RJ Prior and Sons in 1966. Go-anywhere deep-keeler originally designed for racing, but today a comfortable 'proper yacht'



Night Wind – Band 2

Built 1939 by Uphams to a Harrison Butler design. She's the earliest in the fleet with an original Taylors stove and Baby Blake loo. A bit tricky in close quarters but a good cruiser



Hampshire Maid beats up the Orwell



View of the Deben from the Ramsholt Arms

early 1970s Ferrari 246. For a one-off fee of £500 then a minimum of £3,750 per year, you are allotted a number of points to spend on car hire. It's from here that Ian and Jonathan got the idea for their – considerably cheaper – points-based system: the cost of a day's hire depends on the yacht, the day of the week and the season: a simple look-up table shows the price (p44).

As James talks I have to remind myself that it's on the subject of cars, because it sounds spookily like he's talking about yachts. "People often buy a car for restoration and run out of will, skill, money or time and then leave it to rot. Soon it's fit only for junking," he says. I think of my own yard, filled with rotting hulks owned by men whose tragic optimism is charged at £700 per annum hard standing.

In 2004, Ian bought *Marcita*, the same 31ft (9.3m) Buchanan sloop I did my Day Skipper on last year (CB227-233). "At the end of that first season," says Ian, "I realised

I'd spent £10,000 on six day's sailing, and I began to think seriously about charter." He conferred with Jonathan who owned the SCOD *Hampshire Maid*; the two went for a week-long charter sail in the Greek Islands, and that's when it all fell into place.

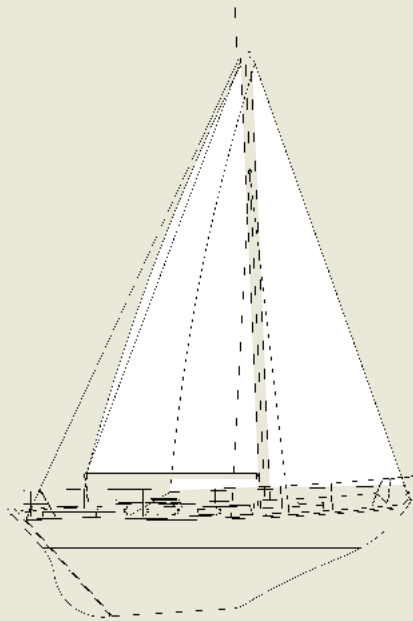
The next summer saw the two on a boat-buying spree of grand proportions. They already had *Hampshire Maid* and *Marcita*, and trawled the brokers, yards and marinas of England to find more. The first addition was *Night Wind*, a 1939 Harrison Butler cutter of 28ft (8.5m) that the two of them fell for on sight. "We didn't want restoration projects," says Ian. "We had enough work to do with the MCA coding," (a legal requirement for charter vessels). *Night Wind* is undoubtedly the most classic in a fleet of classics – "a real taste of pre-war yachting," enthuses Jonathan.

After a few doomed expeditions to see floating wrecks, they found *Caressa*, a stunning 37ft (11.3m) Buchanan racing yacht

from 1966 with teak decks. "We wanted an E-Type!" says Ian, referring to the most popular of the Classic Car Club's cars. An early Jaguar E-Type in pristine condition will fetch £50,000 which is what Ian and Jonathan paid for *Caressa*. It's Ian's favourite yacht, though Jonathan has a softer spot for *Night Wind*.

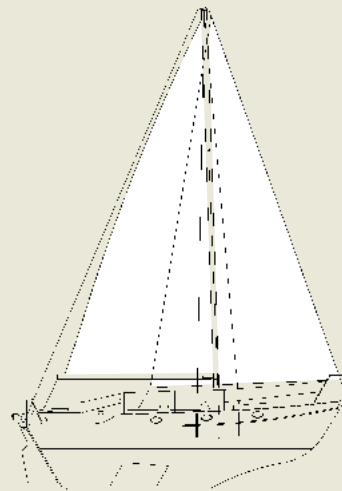
Last to join the collection was the Rossiter Pintail *Myfanwy*. "We knew we needed a bilge-keeler to complete any East Coast classic collection," says Ian. "We thought of Maurice Griffiths initially, but Jonathan was nagging me to see this for ages – I thought it was pretty hideous!" When they finally went to look at it however, and felt the quality of its build and appreciated its clever design, it was another no-brainer – £25,000 changed hands and the collection was complete.

"I quite fancied a centre-cockpit Hillyard at one point," says Ian. "It's what Peter Gregson of Wooden Boats told us to get



Marcita – Band 3

Tender, fast, exhilarating and not a whole load of room below. *Marcita*, designed by Buchanan to race and built by Kings of Pin Mill in 1957, is a real sailor’s boat.



Myfanwy – Band 3

The creek-crawler with bilge keels for taking the ground upright. She’s a 27ft Pintail designed and built by Rossiters in 1965, stable, easy and a popular family choice.



Jonathan Stickland:
architect,
sailor...
master chef



Ian Welsh and the author on *Night Wind*



‘First mate’ Lara on the foredeck of *Night Wind*



A bumpy ride as we leave the shelter of the Deben. Photo shows *Marcita*

– ‘That’s what you need,’ he told us. ‘Nin-ton Hilly. Moor up, put the kids in the forecabin and mum and dad can have a bit of rumpy-pumpy in the stern cabin.’”

“There’s one – a Gregson Hillyard!” shouts Ian excitedly a few weeks later as we sail up the Deben. We’ve got a new game on the go in the cockpit – the mnemonic poetry competition. The idea is to come up with the most pompous-sounding ‘Colreg poem’ possible. “If abaft the beam she doth appear – stand on, ’tis she who must keep clear!” Soon this gives way to an exchange of ‘heads humour’, interspersed with trying to identify the different yachts we see at anchor.

I’ve come away with girlfriend Lara for a Deben River weekend with Ian and Jonathan, one of the trips they run every weekend from March to November for members to sail in company. We’d driven up from London on the Friday night, met our fellow club members and weekend

companions over a glass of wine in the Butt and Oyster, then driven to Woolverstone and waited under a starlit sky at the pontoon hammerhead for the club’s launch to arrive and taxi us to our various boats, floating quietly at their moorings on a still, black Orwell. Our trip, in late September, carried some end-of-season nostalgia for a summer that never happened – although we had enough sun to inspire skipper Will Spencer, CSC’s ‘third man’, and me to swim in the chilly Deben the next day.

These trips, cruising in company up an East Coast river with an overnight stay, a walk and a good dinner at somewhere like the Ramsholt Arms (Deben) or the Butley Oysterage (Ore and Alde), are something Ian and Jonathan started to cater for those, like me, who might not be ready to skipper a strange boat in unfamiliar waters. You can try skippering, safe in the knowledge that Ian or Jonathan or Will is ready to jump aboard and help if you need it. Or you can

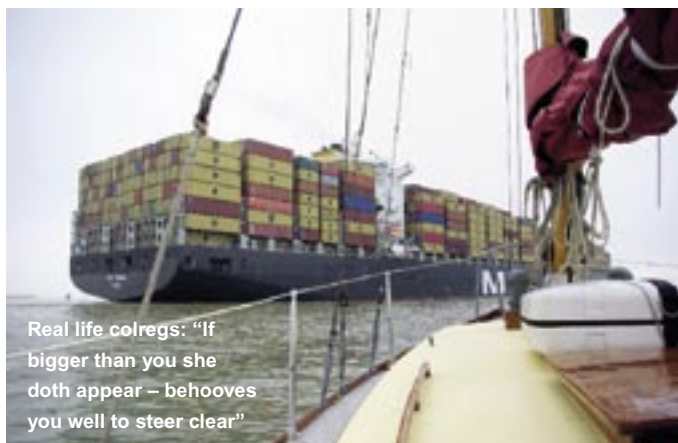
come alone or with a friend to join another boat. It’s all very laid-back and gives the club a social feel, so a member with no experience and no sailing companions can join for £50 and be sure to sail every weekend of the year. The club also arranges RYA training on its yachts, and brokers charter on other classics in Cowes and the Med.

The original idea was for bareboat charter, but the East Coast weekends now see Ian and Jonathan out every weekend. River sailing is something both of them believe strongly in, and they run the occasional trip up the Thames into central London.

In 2006, the club played host to the film crew of *Cassandra’s Dream*, teaching Ian MacEwan and Colin Farrell to sail (“They thought crash-jybing was hysterical,” relates Ian drily) and even sitting down for a chat with director Woody Allen on *Hampshire Maid*. Allen, famously neurotic, stopped short of going for a sail, though just meeting the legend was thrill enough



Formation sailing on the Orwell.
From L to R: *Caressa*, *Hampshire Maid*, *Night Wind*, *Marcita*



Real life colregs: "If bigger than you she doth appear – behoves you well to steer clear"

Wind	Band 1 Night Wind			Band 2 Hampshire Maid			Band 3 Caressa			Band 4 Mammoth		
	Low 100	Mid 150	High 200	Low 100	Mid 150	High 200	Low 100	Mid 150	High 200	Low 100	Mid 150	High 200
1	7	8	12	8	9	16	1	4	7	7	4	8
2	6	12	24	8	12	24	1	12	24	4	8	16
3	9	18	36	12	24	48	7	18	36	6	12	24
4	2	24	48	16	32	64	12	24	48	8	16	32
5	3	30	60	20	40	80	15	30	60	10	20	40
6	4	36	72	24	48	96	18	36	72	12	24	48

The points scheme: points cost between £3.75 and £5 depending on membership, which starts at £50. A band 2 yacht (*Night Wind* or *Hampshire Maid*) can be hired in winter for less than £20 per day.

for Ian. Last year, the club organised the ketch *Tai-Mo-Shan* for the filming of *Mamma Mia!*, and rubbed shoulders with the cast in the Greek Islands.

After sailing up the Deben the next day, we have a companionable supper of Deben crabs at the Ramsholt Arms, and I broach the subject of membership with Ian and Jonathan. They love sailing, the social aspect of the club, and the East Coast so much, it's easy to forget that the club is supposed to make money as well. It doesn't have to be seriously profitable, but it's an expensive outfit to run and though membership is lively, they need more. "For £2,000 or less you can have more sailing than most people need, on a range of boats, in company or without, and never have to lift a paintbrush. I would say join CSC for a year, even if you do want to buy. Get an idea of what's involved and what sort of boat would suit you." Similar to the Classic Car Club, some members also own boats

and buy points to increase the variety of their sailing, in terms of craft and location. According to James Evans of Classic Car Club, "Britain is obsessed with ownership, much more than America and Denmark, where we also operate. Perhaps it's a throwback to the Thatcher years, I don't know." The proportion of second home owners, by far the highest in the world, is witness to this. I wonder though, if ownership is the right word for a yacht that will probably outlive its owner. Typically, you'd be in your 40s by the time you could afford one like *Caressa*, and too old to sail it by your 70s. You probably won't hand it down either, so is that really ownership? Or a 30-year lease paid up front?

On Sunday we return to Pin Mill, through a steep chop. The wind's only a 5, but the tide against it means that Ian and club member Dick Houghton on *Marcita* occasionally disappear below the waves just 30ft (9m) to our starboard. Luckily, Brian

Gascoigne, an experienced sailor, film score composer and stalwart CSC member is on board *Night Wind* with Lara and me, and sorts out a halyard tangle as I work the surging tiller two-handed.

We had considered going it alone, following Ian's wake on *Marcita*, and we were glad we hadn't – maybe next time. On reflection, that last sentiment explains much of the club's appeal. Driving home, I thought about our awful non summer. Soon the clocks would go back, the club's yachts would be hauled out at King's yard and England would be covered in a freak October snow storm but now it's all about 2009. I would like to try the Pintail at some point, and if I just can't wait till then, I've been invited (as are all members) to help work on the boats. *All that varnish?* You must be joking!



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