

CLASS STRUGGLE

A SHORT HISTORY OF THE DART 15 CLASS

BY NICK DEWHIRST

What did Marx say about the theory of social class that might be relevant to the sailing classes? So might the question be put in the Oxbridge Entrance Papers. A short answer might be "Nothing", which is wrong, or "Nought marks to Marx. Full marks to March", which is right. However this answer is also glib, cheeky, doesn't take 45 minutes, and leaves the examiner feeling cheated. Since my purpose here is to generate column inches, which will keep the reader avidly consuming in front of the fireplace while the ambient temperature on the water is below that which his club committee regards as acceptable for sailing, I have no intention of letting our readers feel cheated and so here is the full answer.

Let's start with Rodney March, the man who designed the Dart 15. The scene is Minster on the Isle of Sheppey, where he lives. Just down the road is a Yacht Club, not just any Yacht Club but in particular the Catamaran Yacht Club, a patch of land bought off the Ministry of Defence by the original members some years after the end of the war, when rising prosperity created

the first generation of middle class Londoners able to afford a weekend home.

Many yacht clubs had their heyday in this period. Previously country houses and yachts were the exclusive preserve of the landed gentry or seriously wealthy, but now the middle class could afford to get in on the act as well, even if it was on a rather more modest scale. The entry level country house became the country cottage and the surrogate yacht was the wooden dinghy. These clubs were often in towns with a railway connection to the great metropolis, from which those with their newly acquired weekend retreats could escape by train if a suitable motor was not at hand. They stretch along both banks to the Thames estuary as far as Harwich and Ramsgate right at the end of the line. Such bastions of tradition are distinguished with the title Y.C. as opposed to the more humble S.C., that is more commonly to be found on your converted gravel pit or other inland pond on which your average working class sailor may boat about.

Now the Catamaran Yacht Club is a rather special Yacht Club. Many would say it is not a yacht club at all as they would argue that catamarans are not yachts and indeed have been formally disqualified or at least seriously frowned at in many real Yacht Clubs. So what happened? These crazy eccentrics, who were obviously not socially acceptable, went off and started their own club and cheekily called it a Yacht Club too.

Cats in those days were experimental fly-by-wire machines. Not that the idea was entirely new. As long ago as 1877 a crazy designer by the name of Herreshof created a racing cat and entered it in the prestigious New York Yacht Club regatta. The design looked remarkably modern and reports of the time tell of abysmal performance in drifters but excellent results in a blow and even mention its ability to pitchpole. How very up to date! Despite its technological superiority, somehow the establishment froze it out.

In those early postwar decades it seemed like every second enthusiast took evening classes in woodworking, designed his own boat, and with a dozen sq. ft of marine ply, a few hardware fittings together with a hundred yards of wire and rope could turn his dream into reality. C.Y.C., Sheppey, collected more than its fair share of these eccentrics, and it did not take long before boasts as to who had the fastest machine were settled on the water.

Some people had unfair advantages, like bigger boats, so these hull flying machines were divided up into classes that were unimaginatively defined as "A", "B", "C", and "D". Confusingly for sociologists there was no correlation with C2DE, so they could not tell who was working class. Indeed even more disconcertingly class barriers, as these social scientists knew them, somehow seemed to dissolve in the salty waters off the Isle of Sheppey.

Young Rodney duly produced his own design in class "B", which turned out to be a particularly elegant formula combining speed, grace and manoeuvrability, requiring only two sailors on board. This rapidly became popular. Indeed it even got selected as an Olympic class much to the disgust of real yachtsmen, and a young man from Essex, by the name of Reginald White even managed to collect the first Olympic Gold before the foreigners had cottoned on to our new game. That also is another story.

Having designed a thoroughbred, Rodney little expected anyone to try improving it, but little by little they did. Not so much, mind you, that it would no longer qualify for the Olympics, but enough so it stood a better chance of winning. Little could our Rodney have realised that his doodling with drawings of boats might actually produce something prestigious which earned the Olympic seal of approval, but indeed it had, with all the awful consequences that this

involved - namely money. As a true amateur sport, winning was not all about how much money you got out of it, but how much you could put into it. Olympic Tornado sailing had become chequebook racing, where a competitive boat will now cost well into five figures.

Enter Ian Fraser and Kim Stevens, a race winning Tornado pair who appreciated the chequebook effect. So much so that they asked Rodney to design another boat, where no one was allowed to change anything, and that meant anything at all! This machine was meant to minimise the cost to each sailor, so maximising the number of possible sailors and hopefully also the return to the entrepreneurs. Intended to bring catamaran sailing to the people, this craft was duly designed to meet the "A" class specifications, so completely confusing the sociologists. They named it after their local river, the Dart, no doubt to distinguish it from a rival U.S. design from a bloke called Hobie Alter that was proving a great commercial success across the pond.

Funnily enough both boats were made out of fibreglass, had no centreboards for the inexpert to smash, but did have two hulls, two rudders, two sails, and needed two sailors. Coincidentally they were almost equally fast. However, cleverly, the Dart did have a sharp point at the bottom of each hull two thirds of the way back that made it a lot easier to turn. The Dart was entered for the IYRU trials in Los Angeles to select an international

racing catamaran class and won. Thereafter it proved to be a runaway success and is, by a long way, the most successful European design with thousands of happy owners to its credit.

Having set the scene, let us now introduce "Son of Dart", on the well known commercial principle that, if you can do it once, you can do it again. No need to have another bright idea. Just take the old drawings, make a few minor changes, scale them up or down, produce some new packaging and run the product off the same production line, spreading the overheads over more customers.

Whoopee, instant success, hundreds of Sparks sold in the first couple of years, most for export. Within the first five years over a thousand boats were sold. 169 here in England, but even more in France (228) and most of all in Germany (329). Exotic places featured as well with Barbados and Hong Kong and even unlikely places such as Iraq, Japan, Kenya, Malaysia and Saudi Arabia.

However here the game plan went adrift. Having hoped for monstrous sales, what actually happened was a monster recession in the first half of the Eighties, and dreams of a populace afloat were sunk along with the entire subscribed share capital of many a yacht builder. Annual sales figures were not made public but, adjusted for hype, I understand Sparks did well to make it into double figures, just.

While Darts were intended for the people, it would be a great mistake to think that there was anything democratic about the class. The rules were carefully designed to make it virtually impossible for the owners of the boats to change anything, which was fine if the boat was well designed in the first place. The Dart had become an international class, so complicating the process of change further. Only the International Rules Committee could make any change. National Class Associations could only make suggestions, and woe betide any motions that were not properly formulated because they were sent back for another try the next year. Most disconcertingly, the Sparkies started to become stropky, using the boat for purposes other than the manufacturer intended, and horror or horrors, even proposing changes.

It is often thought that Sparkies are a little insensitive to convention in the sailing world, and indeed so they proved here, with their blissful lack of appreciation of the manufacturers strategy. The idea was that the Spark was a holiday fun boat, slightly more refined than the wonderful inflatable catamaran made by the Metzler tire company, but in theory aimed at the same market. Alternatively it was a Dart trainer, for the adolescent till he was man enough to sail a real Dart. "Just for Fun", the original marketing brochure shows pictures of Spark on a Passat, a family of three on a Spark and a lightweight lad flying a Spark hull. Lots of people Having Fun. However the message said "Just for Fun" I.E "Not for Racing".



Fortunately the British were not much of a problem. There was an annual Spark Rally at Pentewen Sands that was a family holiday and yes, a few cans were raced around, but not many people were involved, maybe up to twenty if the Sparkies got lucky. Nick Black, a veteran of those years, self-deprecatingly penned some lines in our Newsletter, showing the incompetence to which we pretend. However one champion of those years, Andy Worby, who first took me out for a ride, went off to sail round the world, and another, Pat Oxley went on to win regattas in real Darts, so even then Understatement was our second name.

However the Germans were seriously out of order. Under the leadership of Wulf Oelrich they had organised themselves in typically Teutonic style into the Deutsche Spark Klassenverein and travelled all over the country racing. Leafing through "Sparkling News", their class mag, one can see they had much fun, cruising around the Danish Isles or prattling about like Udo Prothmann who managed to sail round the Iron Curtain by mistake, but they also did some serious racing. In their misguided enthusiasm they even put forward the Spark as the official German trainer catamaran. Naively Wulf expressed surprise to me that this suggestion was apparently not supported by the manufacturer.

Back in 1982 Krause Tuning had even suggested in the mag that a Dart jib be cut down in the ratio of

1.2 : 1 and hoisted to produce a Turbo-Spark, much like the Hobie 14 Turbo. What an idea! Fortunately the Deutsche Spark Klassenverein is a shadow of its former self. Wulf now sails a Dragonfly trimaran and the best selling catamaran currently in Germany is a Topcat which looks suspiciously like a Spark with a jib and trapeze. We met some Topcat types racing round Texel and can confirm that they go at the same speed as we Sprint. Dozens appear at their race venues on the Bavarian lakes or at sea in the North. How it might have been different!

How very nearly we went the same way. The original Spark enthusiasts had wandered off to do their thing elsewhere. As mentioned some did great yachting deeds. Others simply disappeared. Nick Black tells of one wonderful fellow who had a wooden leg, simply stuck it in the sand when he went off racing and picked it up afterwards. Tim Shepherd, the original pipesmoking senior Spark citizen took up windsurfing. We had only one racing club and the Events Schedule was down to a separate start at International Cat Week, Sheppey, which itself was a sorry reminder of its former glory.

The Treasurer lost the accounts and membership list, so there was only Jim Jeffery left. The Newsletter, down to one sheet of double sided photocopying contained such gems as "Well, next to Drum's appearance in the Fastnet, our Travellers Trophy was

the Non-Event of the Year". Jim was our One Man Travelling Band. He was Chairman, Secretary, Treasurer, and Events Secretary in addition to reporting on his own sailing exploits as Editor of the Newsletter. So poor was our outlook that the 1984 AGM failed to attract a quorum and the Spark Association effectively died.

Ignorant of this disaster situation, this is where I entered the story and can tell it first hand rather than handing down by word of mouth the yachting lore as it affects our class. In 1984 I had become one of the last few misguided fools to acquire a specimen of this dying breed, little knowing, despite my background in high finance, that the purchase of an extinct species of sailing craft was a sure-fire money losing formula. My wife and I were a couple of lesser mortals that had been permitted to join the prestigious Whitstable Yacht Club with an ancient Minisail we had acquired. As a maturing Yuppie I had decided to have a go at this boating lark now that we had scraped together a few quid to spare and got a used Spark as we reckoned it would be cheaper to prang.

In view of our evident lack of sailing prowess and unyachtspersonlike behaviour no one spoke to us at the Yacht Club. They all had what I am now convinced are aquatic dinosaurs. However I was then very impressed with all the spaghetti with unpronounceable names that adorned these Rockets, and how difficult it must be to go sailing

because they seldom seemed to venture out of the dinghy park. One kind soul did speak to me, Mike Shaw, and generously offered me a ride on his cat, a Hobie 14. That was great apart from the difficulty of making three point turns at every corner. When I expressed enthusiasm on coming ashore he generously offered me his boat in exchange for a small consideration, so I checked the market, dealt away and here I am today. I am sure my introduction to the class is little different from many. All that differs is that I was dumb enough to buy one then. Mike also bought a Spark a little later.

Keen to learn, I rang up the only contact I had, the boat-builder, and got the senior secretary, Margaret Ashburn, who was helpful then and has been equally helpful ever since. I was told that there was an active Class Association, led by this chap, Jim Jeffery, who was ever so enthusiastic. "Hello, yes, I want to learn" say I. "Great, come along to one of our races" says he. "Oh, no I don't want to race" say I. "Don't worry you don't have to win" says he. And so off I went in trepidation to meet the famous Jim Jeffery and the race aces.

That was October 1984. The venue was Grafham. The Nationals had been cancelled for lack of support. This was the rescheduled event. Well, I did follow him around as long as I could see him, which wasn't very long. A Yorkshire lad called Steve Tellwright won, Jim was second, someone else came third and I was fourth! Four entered.

I have never done so well since. The next year we held the Nationals at C.Y.C., Sheppey, the only place where Sparks still sailed. I only managed fifth. The entry had doubled to eight hardy souls.

That was the nadir. The next year we nearly disappeared off the face of the earth altogether in a merger bid by UKIDA, who were encouraged by the manufacturer's rep to mount a takeover for both Sparks and Stampedes to create a Dart family, again following the Hobie example. The last Newsletter of the old class was headed One Big Happy Family? Thus showing that even the indefatigable J.J. was getting a trifle exasperated. Notice of the AGM was given for 19th October, at the Grafham Cat Open. Jim turned up. I turned up. Someone else came but he did not have a boat, so didn't count. My memory blanked out in the club bar and there is no recorded history that anyone else turned up or that anything happened. The Darts thought we were not good enough for them except as Associate Members, so we simply faded away.

Here Alan Franklin appeared on the scene, sailing to the rescue of the demoralised Sparkies. One month later, this bloke who didn't count at the AGM suddenly counted very much. Despite the appalling advertisement we made at Grafham, he decided to get a Spark. Suddenly there he was, the missing link in a chain of Sparks along the Kent coast. Sandwich Bay - Minnis Bay - Herne Bay -

Tankerton - Whitstable - Seasalter - Sheppey. Full of naive enthusiasm in typically Sparking style he promptly rallied us to his club, Seasalter, one cold autumn day. Half a dozen of us sat round the table while the duties were dished out. It was clear that J.J. from Sandwich deserved to be Chairman. Jack Lawrence, an obviously respectable businessman from Tankerton, made a suitable Secretary. Alan Franklin, who was so keen to get us all sailing together at Seasalter was the equally obvious choice for Events Secretary. As I was Something in the City I was duly volunteered as Treasurer.

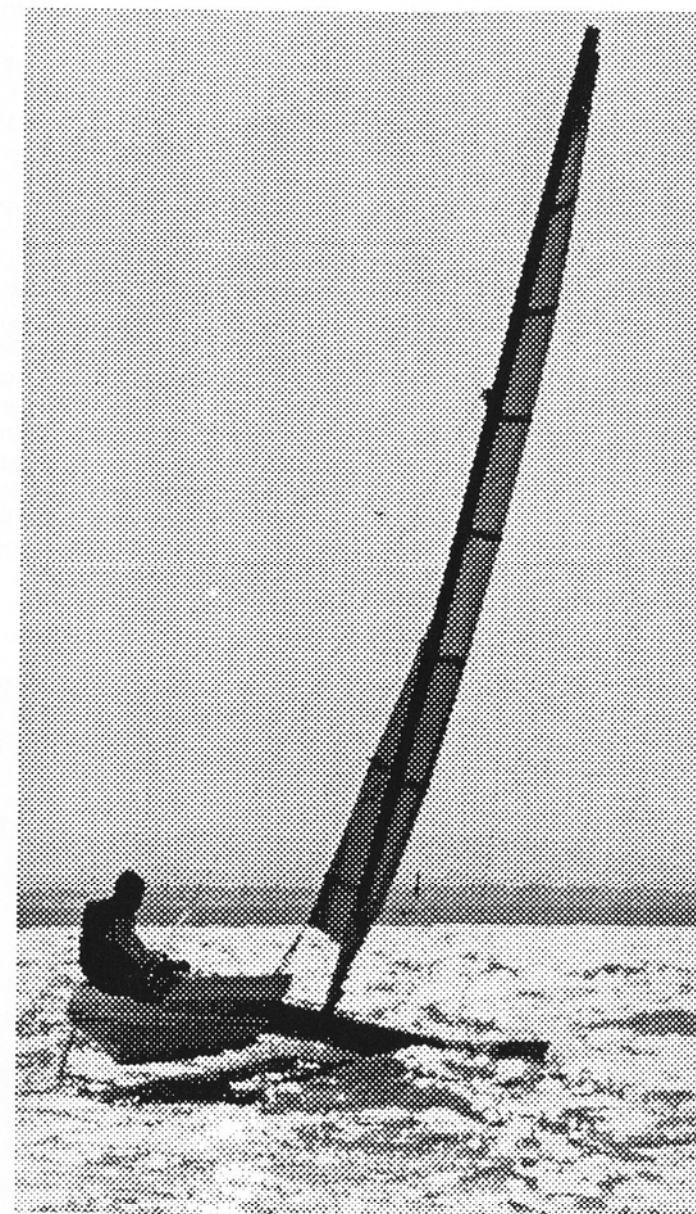
What a crowd we were. I don't think that there was anyone present who reflected the "Likely Lad" image of the Dart trainer we had all bought. J.J. did have some sailing background in his youth, but that was as Quartermaster on HMS Bulwark. Jack has recently got his name in the yachting press but that is as a leading contender for the Dart O.A.P. competition. Mike Shaw, having failed to sell me his Hobie, managed to offload it elsewhere and acquire a Spark instead. All six foot of him weigh in over 13 stone. Tony Smith however was used to carrying up to 16 stone of ballast on his Spark at Herne Bay. I suppose that I was the youngest and I was in my mid-thirties. Clearly we were all over-age and over-weight, and as unlikely a bunch of Olympic athletes as you might find. Certainly we failed to inspire instant respect from the manufacturer.

However, what the hell, we were going to have a good time and sod the Olympics. Nevertheless we were a highly experienced and business-like sales force - unpaid, of course but we didn't mind that. We were in it for the Fun, if perhaps not "Just for Fun". Nevertheless the reaction of one of the proprietors when I mentioned this on the phone on taking up contact, was on the lines of 'So you are think you are God's gift to sailing' and 'If a handful of you want to sail around in the Thames Estuary and call it a race, I suppose we can't stop you'. What made those pearls particularly outstanding was that they were actually uttered rather later when we were no longer such an exclusive class but becoming a little more popular. - indeed in the year we gathered over 40 boats at Grafham, for the third largest catamaran championships that year.

We were very amateur in those days. Alan and Jack did most of the initial work but by the time I took over the Newsletter in September 1986 in my first editorial I was, however, able to write, "Homo Sparkensis, once thought to be near extinction, is a versatile species. From studenthood to senior citizenship he usually, but not only, hunts the wind alone. The species is most populous in the South East where indeed whole fleets of Sparks have been spotted together on occasion and the birth rate is particularly high". The image hasn't changed much but the numbers have. We managed to locate 20 owners initially and charged them £5.50 each giving us

an annual revenue of just over £100. Apart from the new members obtained from the occasional sale by Panthercraft, securing an annual appearance at the Crystal Palace Dinghy Show was our principal means for advertising our existence, and that consumed a large part of our revenues. In those days the few examples of the Newsletter were run off the office copier, but as our production run grew so it became harder and harder to do this surreptitiously. The last time I remember this approach was when Tim Dieu de Bellefontaine and I had a rendezvous to meet at his old offices after hours. Our print run by then required over 700 hundred copies. It was high time we had it printed professionally.

The Newsletter had already established the combination of announcements, racing reports, tips and write-ups of catamaran holidays that we have today. The emphasis was even then on what entertaining pranks and pratfalls occurred rather than how brilliant our Olympic hopefuls were. I remember for example the Panthercraft Barge Start by Peter Ewing, "which required great nerve or alternatively defective hearing, as one screamed down a reach totally oblivious to the fearful sight of a pack of pointing Sparks. The appropriate mental attitude was a supreme confidence in the incompetence of lesser men, which, if misplaced, may leave one embracing the mark with both hulls, as demonstrated by the builders rep".

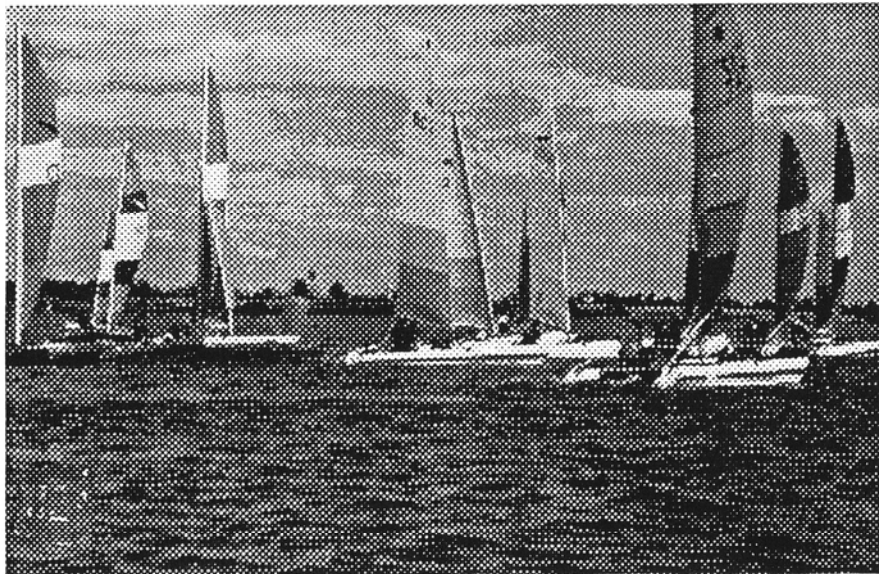


Early days of Spark sailing

Some of our first headlines in the press were such gems as "Sailor beats vandals to win" and "Penguins to Port, Sir". This last one was a four page review in Yachts and Yachting all about Commander Mike Johnson R.N. taking a Spark to South Georgia on board his frigate. It was full of wonderful snaps of Spark and Snow, Spark and Iceberg, Sailor and Penguin, which set us apart from other sailing classes and did our image a power of good. We were beginning to get coverage and as they say in the sales school, "don't know - can't ask, don't ask - can't have".

Once he could see that we were going to be successful J.J. felt it was the right time to give up. Misguidedly, Jim wanted to try his hand at yottin. We thought he

would get over it when the maintenance bills came thudding in, and indeed he did. Mrs. J. much preferred losing him Sparking for only a couple of hours every Saturday and Sunday to losing him all weekend yottin every weekend, and losing the family savings into the bargain. Well, he was only following bosses orders when he got another Spark, sorry Dart 15. Just to show the old master (nigh on half a century old now) hasn't forgotten his tricks he went and won the regular T.T. Circuit this year. That must make it at least the third time, but this time there must have been as many competitors as all the other times added together. There is however the feeling that Jim is a little old fashioned and doesn't hold much with all this new-fangled Sprinting lark.



Round the cans at Grafham

It was obvious who should be our new leader. There was only one among us who had the sailing pedigree to take on the Tornado team at Panthercraft, who thought it was their job to lay down the law to us. That was Gerry Lewin. Now Gerry is a modest chap, a little shy about his past achievements, but he did leave a suspicious clue or two around his house, like beautiful little model prize Tornados. When did he acquire those? Back in 1972, he confessed. On further cross-examination it emerged that lean, tall and young Gerry was rather useful at the sharp ends, where there is quite a lot to do. No, he did claim to be quite as good as Messrs.. Fraser, Stevens or White, but he did admit to a second in the British Championships once. What about international events? Sixth in the Europeans was the answer extracted.

So Gerry went in to bat for us about the Rules. This was a source of great misunderstanding, to put it politely. We asked Panthercraft to draw up a draft set for us. Whereupon they send us a copy of the Dart 18 rules. We changed a few things, like putting the word Spark in place of Dart 18 and then put the draft to the membership at the AGM. Basically people thought the One-Design concept was right, but the minutes reveal disagreement that the rules should specify how the permitted parts must be assembled or that ultimate control of the Association should be governed by an International Rules Committee which might be controlled by the manufacturer. The committee was given freedom to

negotiate with Panthercraft. Two years later the minutes report that Gerry regretted Panthercraft had not replied to the corrections of the draft sent back to them to bring the Rules into line with Spark practice. Over time experience gained racing the boat had shown that a variety of minor changes were advisable to bring the spec up to racing standard, like 2:1 jib leads, shroud covers, wind indicator and so on. All small budget items, that could easily be retrofitted to old boats, were often standard Dart 18 fittings, etc., but were never offered on a boat that was not intended for racing. In the end they did reply, agreeing that we could sail the boat according to our Rules in the U.K. (not that they could stop us) but that their rules applied for international events (of which there were none), which killed the subject, except that the manufacturers continue to send out their Rules to U.K. owners and we have to keep on informing new members that these are not our Rules! Silly really for the second largest cat class in the country.

So why were our entrepreneurs so keen on controlling a One-Design Class that they did not seem to want raced? Why indeed did they not positively encourage us racing? The answer emerged when we went as far as to suggest a trapeze kit in 1987. Panthercraft wrote back that structurally it was no problem. However, "from a marketing point of view, they wanted to ensure that the basis is a single handed boat, to which can be added...". In other words, they were afraid that we might compete with the Dart 18.

overtake the Spark in terms of sales.

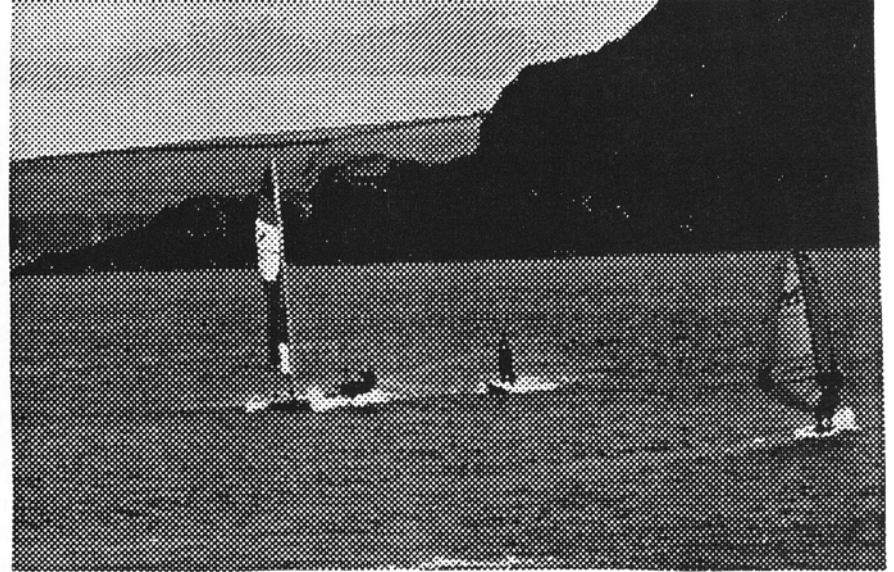
This design by Jon Montgomery was obviously technically brilliant, but turning it into a business proved another matter. Mercia, the venture capitalists who funded it reported repeatedly of production difficulties. Problems grew in geometric proportion to the large number of revolutionary new ideas incorporated. Despite substantial financial inducements under the government's Business Expansion Scheme, investors lost all. Along came the Laser Centre, put significant resources behind the Spark and regained market leadership, selling as many as 100 boats a year in this country. Now as part of the Topper stable Catapult sales have picked up again, but never exceeded those of the Spark. Recently a new polypropylene threat appeared from France. This New Cat undercut Spark prices by a huge amount, but this too failed to attract substantial buyers.

Now the British market has stabilised in favour of the Spark, or rather Dart 15 as the Laser Centre promptly renamed it and as we shall now also refer to it. There are over 1600 boats sold, with all but a handful still afloat. Even number one still sails thanks to tender loving care from its owner, the former production manager of Panthercraft, Bob Hughes. I guess possibly as many as two thirds are in this country. That makes the Dart 15 not only the largest single handed cat class, but also the second most successful of all

catamarans in England - second only to our larger sister. In terms of boats raced the Dart 18 is clearly the most popular with over 200 appearing at championships. While the Hurricane also receives wide publicity for racing, it is however our class where the second largest competition is to be found. This year we entered the Fifty Plus Club of classes listed by Yachts & Yachting for national championship entries, while the Hurricane has yet to feature.

The story is different abroad. There other contenders have cornered different national markets. Hobie is clearly market leader in the U.S.A. There the Hobie has proved a runaway success with tens of thousands of boats sold. While the market has apparently slowed, the Hobie 17 successor to the 14, nevertheless continues to dominate single handed racing. Some Hobie talent defected to set up Prindle with a similar product but one which had heavily accentuated asymmetrical hulls. This clever design failed to usurp Hobie's position in the United States.

However that was not the case in the European country best designed for catamaran sailing - Holland. With its extensive safe sailing waters and lack of hills to obstruct the free flow of the prevailing winds whistling over from the Atlantic, Holland should have been an obvious European first target for Hobie. The Prindle managed to outsell the Hobies thanks to the energy and resources of the local agent, Jan de Boer. His



Dart 15 ski boat in action

huge establishment resembles British Car Auctions, in the rows and rows of used boats he has lined up for sale. Jan Mulder had tried imaginatively to sell the Spark, and I saw his version of the Spark in the Dutch boat show at the R.A.I. in Amsterdam, fully equipped with Sprint kit years before Panthercraft incorporated it. No wonder we had such a handicap at Texel, I learnt after entering the event the first time.

In France Lucien Gomez worked with somewhat more success, but faces fierce competition from the home-grown cheapie, plastic New Cat. Germany is however the saddest case for the Spark. It was the biggest market. It did have an enthusiastic class association. All that has gone. Now the Topcat dominates the market. As

mentioned it looks suspiciously like the Dart 15, which is not surprising since I was told Topcat is run by the former Dart agent. I even heard mention of law suits at one stage.

It is most unusual for a dead product to be revived successfully. However that did happen to the Spark, reincarnate as the Dart 15 thanks to co-operation with the Laser Centre. What they bought was the Dart brand, a single successful product, and two failures. However Richard Simmonds quickly realised the potential of the 15, writing to us offering full support as soon as they had taken over. His words of encouragement appeared in the March 1987 Newsletter. "We feel that the Spark has probably the most untapped potential of the Panthercraft Catamarans. Interest

in the Boat at recent shows and in recent advertising response has proven very encouraging." Such sentiments from the supplier had never graced our pages before. This was indeed a revolution. From a business point of view the Spark was an odd situation - a dead product coming to life again thanks to the customers not the supplier! Our enthusiasm and our groundwork made it easy to see the potential and just think of all those keen unpaid salesmen. Would such resources have been pushed behind a relaunch of a ten year old product without these assets in place? How could any boat builder be so short sighted as to seek no return from such assets previously?

Like all the best deals, this was good for all sides. Richard pointed us in the right direction by introducing me to Jeremy Atkins, Chairman of the Laser Two Association. That was a model to follow. Despite dozens of other two-man dinghy classes, the Laser Two had grown from nothing in only a few years and at that stage already boasted over 50 boats at their championships. Jeremy was my counterpart. The key ingredient, he said, was demo boats. As I met him in a pub, he was actually handing over the running gear for their demo craft to the next potential customer. In other words, Laser Centre invest their capital and we invest our enthusiasm.

They get rewarded with bigger sales. We get rewarded with bigger competition. Certainly we could never even think of a project such as this on our own and surely they would find our unpaid enthusiasm far more persuasive than any talent they could provide, however highly paid the great Ewing might be. It did not take long before we had a spanking new trailer with two Sparkling new Fifteens on board to do with as we pleased for a whole season. Our thoughts were to use the boats to trail around the open meeting circuit, or rather what little of it we attended in the South East as well as offering demo days.

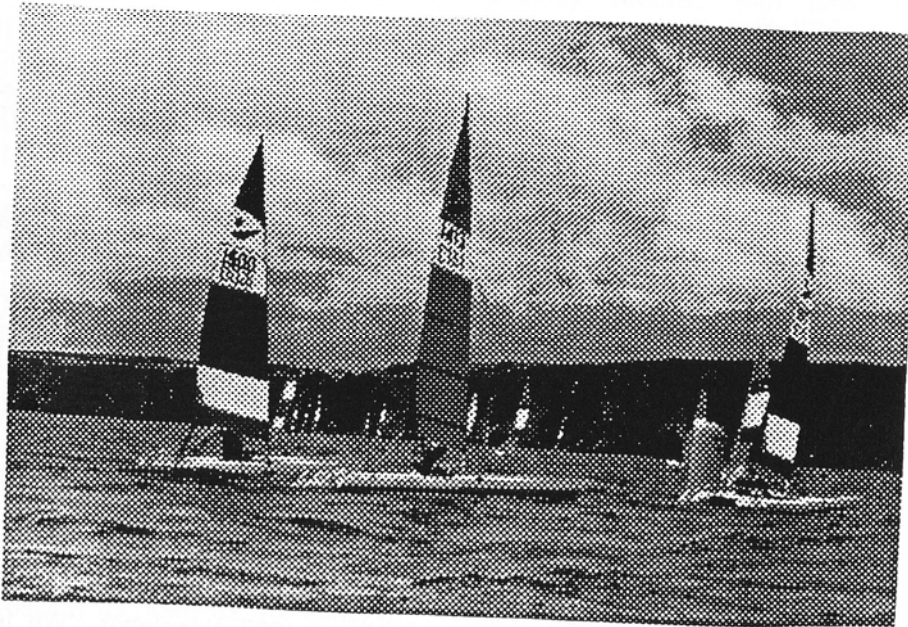
more likely looking punters on demo boats might make it some real competition. Even if they did not end up buying, they might plant the idea among other drinking members of their clubs that racing Fifteens is the solution for the single hander. Furthermore others might see us.

Happily, not everybody thought we were a joke. In 1987 we found good interest in our demo boats at a chain of clubs in our corner of the country. They went from Whitstable to Seasalter by sea and then back again, before going overland to Sandwich, Sheppey and Southampton and finally ending up at Grafham. JJ got some interest at Sandwich, I got a bit more at Seasalter and Tim Dieu de Bellefontaine together with Gerry Lewin fairly packed on the punters at Sheppey. The next year unearthed an outstanding "volunteer" - Peter Richardson, a diminutive Yorkshire man whose stamina was in inverse proportion to his size.

Peter was a member of the Camping and Caravanning Club of Great Britain and had at least fifty novices out in the two weeks he had the trailer at their annual camp at Marconi S.C. on the River Blackwater. Most of our cheer leaders burnt out after two seasons, but Mike Cemm is still going strong. Readers may remember Mark Greenwood's entry for the Nobel Literature Prize early this year "Pitchpoled and Sold", which describes the scene perfectly.

During the 1987 season we were whistling in the wind. In those days we tagged on to the end of other catamaran open meetings, but we soon realised that we could send in race reports of our own to Yachts and Yachting. Sue Pelling, Clubs and Classes editor set out the rules. We act like journalistic hacks and she plays the editor. Typed, double spaced lines, 200-300 words and only positive vibes please - those were the guidelines from her. Ours were - lots of names, everyone had a good time and don't mention how few we were.

As we got more experienced so she changed less and following her example of "A Sterling win for Moss", we have even learnt how to make the titles corny enough, like "Roger the Dodger", "The Price is Right" and "Conquerer Cemm". If we could ruffle up half a dozen genuine Fifteen sailors a couple



National Racing at Pentewen

By the time of our 1987 Championships at Sandwich Bay we felt we were able to quote attendance without blushing and mentioned a new class record of 25 boats. Since new members had been a rarity, I had made a policy to briefly mention each one in the Editorial. However by September of our first demo boat season this policy was breaking under the strain. I was obliged to write that regrettably with 20 new members this quarter, it was no longer practicable to welcome them all in the editorial, so we needed half a separate page to do the job. In June the next year this section required a whole page.

Till then I had been able to either meet all of them or chat them up on the phone. Since then the task has become impossibly large, but now thankfully there is Mike to do it as well. One of the problems of success is becoming impersonal. We try to avoid this, and I think it is still fair to say that almost every member personally knows either Mike or myself, if not both. In order to overcome the North/South divide we have also created a special position on the Committee for a Northern Area Rep - that was when the ideal candidate showed up: One John Adamson, publican of the Swan Inn, Macclesfield Road, Kettlethume.

The end of the season racing summary showed as many as 50 competitors having taken part either in club series, TT events or the Nationals - the word had been spread. By September the cheapest

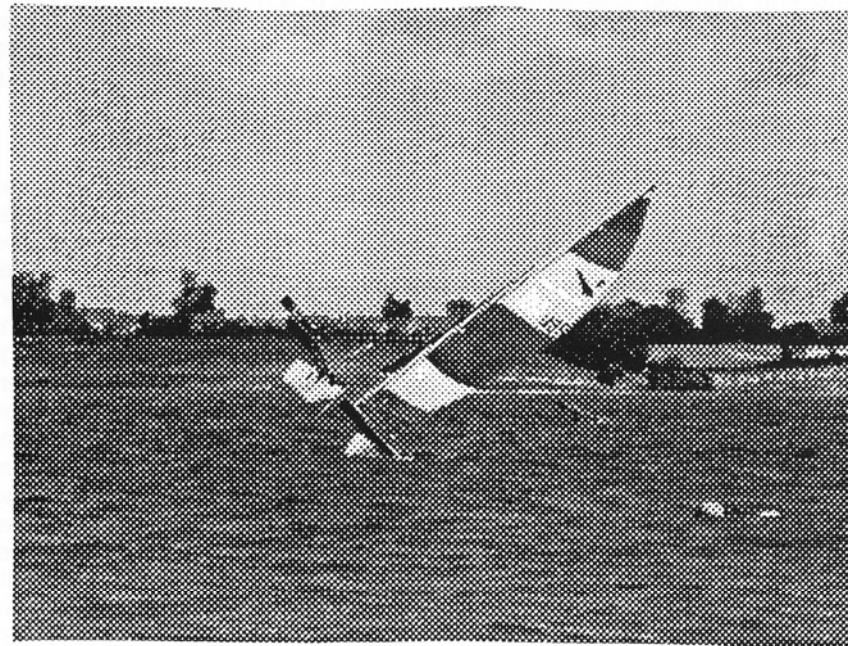
price for a used Fifteen had risen to £850, up from £500 only two years earlier. This was what really counted. The more we boosted the price for old boats the easier it was for the Laser Centre to sell new ones. So good had demand become that it became virtually impossible to get a second hand one unless you had a pre-production copy of Y & Y or a good tip from our Mike, the Secretary. Even now in the depression this year, no old boat has changed hands to our knowledge below £1000 and Peter Ewing reports that he continues to have more demand than supply for used Fifteens. The cheapest used Fifteen has become as expensive as the cheapest old Eighteen on the market. Personally, I am on my third, and made a profit on the first two. What better barometer for the health of a class is there than the numbers of dissatisfied customers wanting out!

However in our eagerness to boost attendance by offering the demo boats to all and sundry, we made some terrible gaffes. More specifically, in my ignorance, I made some terrible gaffes. First I lent one to a local windsurfing lad at Whitstable, only to have to write up the Seasalter Open with the headline "Lightweight Ball Wins". However this was nothing compared to my next Faux Pas. As no one else had managed to lend out the demos for the Nationals, and turn out was threatening to be far lower than eventually turned out, I spotted another acquaintance at the W.Y.C. bar and offered him the boat. Since he was the only person

to actually speak to me in my first year at that club, I thought I might reward him. Little did I know how much.

He immediately invited another of his monohull mates to sail with him two-up. With Tim and Wendy Dieu de Bellefontaine also sailing in this mode, 1988 was the first Nationals where two-up entries took part. Previously we all thought two up sailing was the exclusive preserve of Eighteens, and Fifteens were only for those who can't get crews. As the record shows, Richard King and Chris Lewns walked it, becoming our first two-up champions. They certainly showed us up. We must look like a joke if board sailors and monohull types could beat us first time out.

A lot of lessons were learnt in the post-mortem. Firstly thanks to Gerry's experience with the Rulebook, we spotted that only those with valid membership cards were eligible for the Championships and the only way to get membership was to own a boat. Since then we have allowed the odd guest if we thought he was not a serious threat and pointed out this little restriction to avoid pot hunters in our class. Ian Holt provided the most elegant solution. We had lent him a boat in 1989 to get a good write-up and indeed he secured us a couple of pages in Multihull International. When he actually did well, he voluntarily stood down from the prizes. Now we are in less need of publicity the rules are likely to be enforced more appropriately.



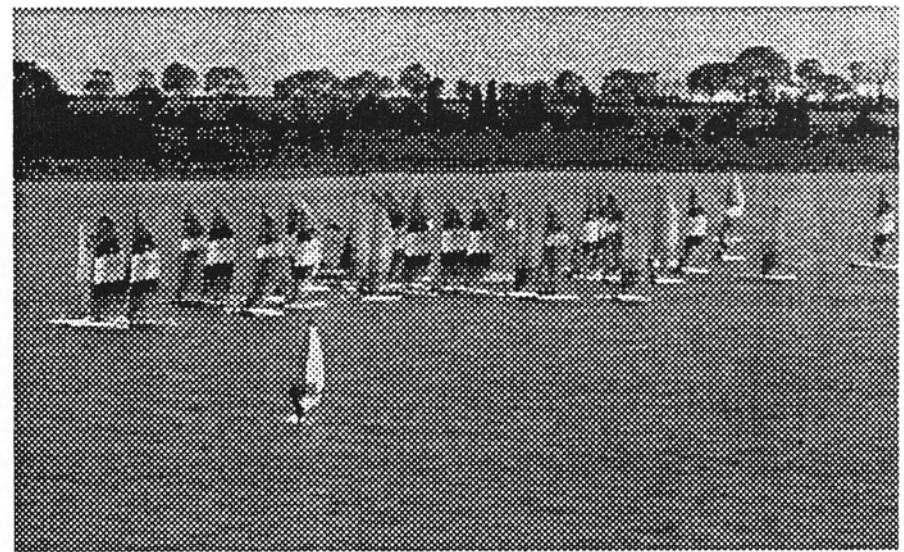
Sprinting on the edge

Secondly we began to appreciate the importance of weight. Eighteen year old Eduard Ball weighed only ten stone then. Now he is over twelve stone. Chris Lewns and Richard King weighed in under twenty stone the pair. I do not think we were then aware of how weight might matter, but certainly it was becoming clear that it might matter. By the autumn of 1990 this had brewed up into a major issue both in our Newsletter and the pages of Yachts and Yachting with myself on one side and the rest of the committee publicly disassociating themselves while George Wood carefully sat on the fence with a piece that applied the Texel Yardstick to resolve the matter. Don't worry. We kissed and made up. Nobody resigned. We are in it for the Fun after all. A reasonable compromise has been reached. The Nationals are run on the traditional basis and a generous benefactor, our very own Wendy House Insurance brokers, has stepped in to provide a trophy for results adjusted by weight this year. As it happened I don't think it made much difference in such a tactical event this time, but now everybody has something to compete for in future.

Thirdly we took a closer look at the boats and found out two interesting changes we had not noticed. At Seasalter the local Commodore, Fred Williams had come over to our fleet. He was pissed off too at being beaten by newcomers, but unlike some of us he knew a thing about weights and measures being a master builder. The boats were bisected. Each hull was balanced

on a pair of bathroom scales brought down for the occasion. In proper scientific fashion a control group was set up - my hulls in fact. Well I never! Lo and Behold! The demos were meaningfully lighter. Bob Hughes, the production manager, eventually confirmed that the difference was as much as 3 kilos. This was because they did not have our beloved drinks cabinets. However his solution was to phase out all the old Sparks. Make us obsolete, indeed! Kill the class, more likely! This looked like Panthercraft subversion again and stung me into my longest missive ever to the manufacturer. Fortunately they eventually saw sense. The cheaper, but faster all white hulls were discontinued. Adjustment weights were provided for old boats. So if you ever see one with all white hulls and colour sails and without grey blocks in the front beam, you know who is cheating.

We also noticed that there was something "wrong" with the sails. Whoever had the demo boat yellow sails seemed to do well, however inexperienced or incompetent they might be. At Sandwich Bay during July 1988 this was formally put to the test. Tony Drake, Jim Jeffery and Peter Johnson, the three local stalwarts were always neck and neck in their club races with any one of the three capable of winning. Once the demo boats were left there for a couple of weeks, so they tried swopping around both hulls and rigging. With new hulls and new rigging the demo boats beat the old Sparks. With new sails on old Spark hulls the old Spark beat



Growing fleet racing

both old Spark hulls flying old sails and demo boats with old Spark sails. However it was not until the demo boats were taken on to Seasalter that the reason began to emerge.

Laying the sails on the ground on top of each other it was clear that the demo boat sails were a couple of inches longer and wider, increasing the overall sail area several percentage points! No wonder the old battens did not fit every time we had to change one after a punter capsized. Now that we were putting the matter under the microscope and looking at the sail really closely one could also see that the old sails were flatter. When hung up the new sail always seemed to sport a big curve. Reading the textbooks showed that more curvature meant more lift i.e. more power, especially useful in the intermediate winds in which most

races are sailed. We weren't prats after all. What a relief!

One may speculate as to how the light-weight hulls and more powerful sails came about. Was it just coincidence that they both happened at the same time? Clearly the lightweight hulls were introduced as part of a strategy to introduce a cheaper non-racing Spark, known as the Spark Fun to distinguish it from the Spark Sport. This was a last throw of the dice to boost sales by cutting prices at the end of the recession. Not only did this cheaper boat have cheaper hulls without the luxury of the drinks cabinets, but it also lacked a traveller and various minor fittings and it was described separately in the Rules. However it did not take long before some bright sparks caught on to the wheeze of buying the cheaper boat and fitting the extras to race it competitively.

In the climate of distrust for the manufacturer at the time, it was all too easy to conceive devious conspiracy theories. Was the builder quietly trying to raise the performance to improve the Spark's chances of winning races? Had 97 been suggested initially simply because it sounded good if it was as fast as a 505 and has a PY under 100? Was this a recognition that the PY number was too low because no-one seemed to win in handicap races? Was it true that the Dart 18 also seldom won on handicap so was this perhaps part of a conscious policy by the builders? Alternatively should the Spark Fun be seen as an attempt to sabotage the resale value of Spark Sports and force any serious racer into buying a new boat, as regularly happens with top Eighteen racers? Whatever way one looked at it, the new formula boats were a retrograde step from the racing point of view, and, since racing is the lifeblood of any class, therefore also a retrograde step from the point of view of the entire class. How now strict One-Design Class Rules? Was this not hypocrisy of the highest order when we had the builder rejecting changes put forward by the only people with racing experience, namely us, while at the same time this pontification about the Rules went on and on? Had any representative of the builders more senior than lowly salesman, Peter Ewing, ever even tried joining us for a race? If this was not deliberate policy, what could it be other than incompetence? No proper reason has ever been received by the class association, so the question

of motive must be left open to the readers judgement.

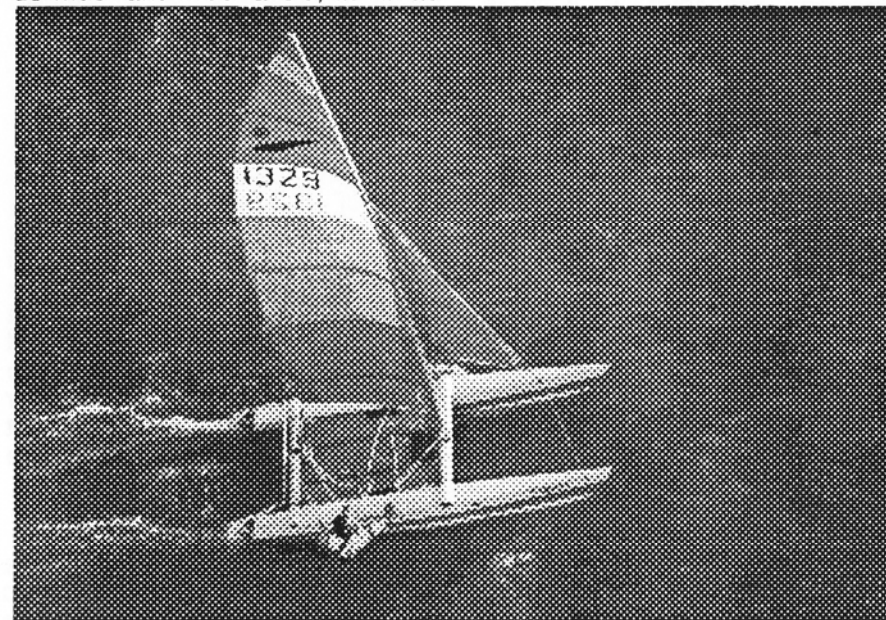
In facing the problems of success our situation was little different to that of many a sole trader who has built a business that requires skills more varied than the bright idea and enthusiasm he needed to launch the concept in the first place. This showed up, as in businesss, in our organisation. It was not only the production of the Newsletter that was on a shoe string basis. Jack Lawrence left the class and I temporarily took over his duties as Editor and Secretary until we could get a new Treasurer at the 1987 AGM. Heavyweight Tony Smith from Herne Bay had allowed himself to be volunteered in that capacity and what with Chairman Gerry Lewin from Sheppey it was easy to get together for the odd committee meeting somewhere in Kent when business could not be settled by use of our favoured instrument - the dog and bone. Tony was actually a qualified accountant so now we had someone who did know what he was doing, rather than a stockbroker whose main skills, as everybody knows, consist primarily in bullshit artistry. Instead I was given the chance to put my training in Securities Selling Skills to work Selling Sparks. I had been taught early in my professional career that ignorance was no excuse for failing to hold a firmly held belief in any subject. Here was my opportunity to put this to work in racing sailboats, something of which I had no previous experience, since the Secretary's role in those days was

both to field customer enquiries and to produce the Newsletter.

Now neither Tony or I were literate - in the computer sense that is. This was all right when we only had a few members. Not only could the Newsletter be run off the office copier, but we could all lick a couple of dozen stamps and pencil and paper could complete the double entry book-keeping obligations of our paltry figures which frankly no one on the committee ever complicated by putting forward their out of pocket expenses in those days. However the workload was becoming overburdening, even with such enthusiastic helpers like Tim and Wendy around. Fortunately the expansion of our class was taking us wider and wider afield, as far as

Pagham on the South Coast and Grafham in the Midlands, and as it did so new talent was revealed. Here is where the computer literate heard about us.

Mike Cemm and George Wood were the new talent in question. They were the first Eighteen couple to sell out for a Fifteen - each! While they looked considerably closer to the Yuppie Eighteen image than any of us did, apparently the Eighteen image was not quite to their liking. For some reason we were. Now they need not argue about who was in charge, and while they were often both happy to travel to our meetings each also had the ability to duck out without upsetting the other, should domestic circumstances require.



Sprinting In the Solent

In 1989 Gerry retired to the back-benches, pleading overwork, leaving his space free for me try and fill, which in turn created the requirement for a new Secretary. Mike had clearly shown his enthusiasm attending all but one of the TT events since he first surfaced at Pagharn, and coming second in the Series. Then he had not quite worked it out yet so that was the one and only year I beat him. Mike had also hinted at his talent in the computer department with a Tour de Force of computer graphics in designing a highly impressive cover for our Newsletter - one which showed all versions of our three in one boat flying hulls in unison. Such dedication could not be allowed to go unrewarded. The next year Tony retired, so the inseparable George, an old computing colleague as well as sailing colleague took over the Treasury, creating scope for the dataprocessing duo to chuck out the paper and whizz discs around instead.

Kicking and screaming, Mike and George dragged your Class Association closer towards the Twenty First Century. Committee meetings represented a study in contrasting cultures with your chairman shuffling endlessly through an over-stuffed briefcase looking for lost papers while the secretary merely opened up his laptop and had the answer in seconds. Knowing what could be done, Mike could not turn down the temptation of moving into print production as well. Previously the Newsletter was a scissors and paste job, with press clippings and

contributions merely glued together in a colourful pastiche of differing styles. Now it became WordPerfect.

Slowly but insidiously Mike hooked the Editor on the wonders of desk top publishing so now it actually looks like a slick professional document. Yes, the stone age admits defeat. We have learnt to love Lotus and value Ventura. What with Mike's and George's skills with BITS we now not only have DTP but also MIP and can keep track of the hundreds of Darts Fifteen that have superseded the dozens of old Sparks that represented full capacity for the creaking manual system in the old days.

Fortunately, as we matured, so we became bolder, not more conventional. When we had initially just tagged on to the open meeting handicap classes we sometimes finished out of time, not surprisingly if handicaps ranged from 75 to nearly 100. After a couple of years where such incidents occurred we decided that the lead Spark would simply inform the race officer that he was finishing when he crossed the line and would ROD kindly blow the hooter. The first time we dared do this was at Rock in Cornwall and we succeeded in bullying the authorities into breaking out our results separately. Now we won't even enter an event unless we are promised separate results.

Our image in the press has become quite distinctive. Our journalistic staff that supply Y & Y with race reports often emphasise the entertaining pratfalls rather than the



Dart 15 sprinting fun

professionalism of budding Olympians among us. There have been a succession of major articles about us. All set the class apart. The explorers masterpiece about Commander Johnson in the Southern Ocean, was followed by an excellent review by Ian Holt of our Grafham nationals in 1990, which established our racing reputation in the press. An provocative article of mine about adjusting handicaps to sailing conditions was considered worthy enough for reprinting to add to the learned debate in Multihull News, January 1989. Recently we have not been shy to publicise our Golden Oldies in the Letters Column.

This boldness extends to our sailing events as well. One year we set up the rash experiment of catamaran team racing at Whitstable, which was considered a great success. Perhaps it only succeeded because we were such gentlemanly sailors. What other boat is competitive both single handed and two up? How many other boats attract racers from 17 to 70? In recent years we have also taken on the family holiday. Previously all we dared was to ask for a pink ticket for an extended weekend.

Now we offer an action packed week - not only of racing but also other fun events and attracted new record turnout. Not for us one race per day, which seems to be all other classes often achieve in a week. Increasingly Sprint racing has also emerged to complement the basic boat and complicate the

results. In the process we have accumulated a variety of prizes so everyone has a chance to be a winner in some category. So far we have managed to maintain a quaint and possibly unique tradition that gentlemen settle their differences on the water, not in front of a protest jury. How much longer we can keep our very special identity is the question. Will we like so many revolutionaries become part of the Establishment? Which brings us back to the matter of Marx and March, where we started.