



Tim Jeffreys Photography

A life on the ocean wave: David and Christine Hopkins' 2012 *Concours d'Elegance* winner, Chough, slices through the water

Setting sail for Cowes

Superlative boats, homemade cakes and a good dose of fun combine to make Cowes Classics Week a regatta with a difference, says Chris Partridge

NOTHING looks lovelier than a fleet of classic sailing boats haring across the water, but the sight is becoming an increasingly rare one these days, as the sailing world seems to value raw performance above all else. However, the Charles Stanley Cowes Classics Week is the one regatta where beauty and style are as important as speed, and having a great time is as important as winning.

Now in its seventh year, Cowes Classics Week has established itself as the premier

regatta for boats ranging from the Metre classes to XODs and old gaffers of all shapes and sizes. For some sailors, it is the only big competition they can participate in and they go for it with gusto, which provides truly exciting racing.

The regatta is open to members of specific classes, including the established day boats in the Solent area such as the Victory and Dragon. Other boats can get in under the innovative '50-year rule' unique to Cowes Classics Week: if your class of boat was designed more than 50 years ago

and, in the opinion of the committee, looks like a classic, then you are in. The novelty is that this cut-off point is rolling so, one day, 'modern classics' may qualify under this rule. This clever system means that the regatta will remain current in future years, allowing boats that eventually achieve classic status to qualify and inject new blood into the competition.

The long pedigree of the crafts taking part in Cowes Classics Week adds a unique feel to the event. Many boats have become heirlooms—Gayle Palmer, for example,

the third generation of her family to own and skipper the Solent Sunbeam Little Lady.

Some of the oldest, most fascinating designs are on show at the *Concours d'Elegance*, now sponsored by *Classic Boat* magazine. Particularly popular with spectators, the race attracts boats with the wow factor. The glistening varnish, glowing woods and gleaming bronze are in stark contrast to the 'plastic fantasies' of the high-tech, but often soulless, speed machines that populate most yacht gatherings these days.

It's not just the boats that make the Cowes Classics different, though—take the hugely popular tea and cake stand, sponsored by Winkworth, for example. Many classic boat regattas these days seem to be marketing tools for the luxury goods industry, so all you get is champagne served by waiters in starched uniforms.

But, at the Cowes Classics tea tent, members of the organising yacht clubs serve real tea with homemade cakes—and everyone loves it. It is a very English institution, a haven for crews coming off the water after a hard day's racing and a base for friends and relations. One year, when the racing was delayed by dodgy weather, the main complaint from crews was that they would



A lifelong love of the sea: this Solent Sunbeam V6, Little Lady, is owned and skippered by Gayle Palmer, who is the third generation of her family to sail this boat

miss the tea and cakes. Indeed, the tea and cake stand has become one of the unifying events of the regatta, the place where all the participants gather, chat and network. No other regatta has anything like it.

Later, there is a dinner or other social event at one of the participating clubs, although crews often do their own thing in the many restaurants, pubs and bars that Cowes has to offer. Again, this gives Cowes Classics Week another dimension—all the

clubs get the chance to show off their party skills and everyone enjoys a varied and entertaining experience. And that's really the essence of the Charles Stanley Cowes Classics Week: it is a meeting of like-minded people to enjoy sailing, compete hard but with good humour, and have a thoroughly fantastic time. 🐦

Cowes Classics Week is organised by the Royal London Yacht Club and runs from July 21-25 (www.cowesclassicsweek.org)