BY THE LEE

Are there too many dinghy classes in the UK? If sailing club bar 'debates' ever had agendas, this would probably be the third item after lee bowing the tide and how to make the PY system fairer. One thing which can't be denied is that so long as there are genuine enthusiasts in our sport, we'll be guaranteed a wide and varied choice of craft in which to cruise or race. This month we were lucky enough to speak to three examples: you'll probably gather that such enthusiasm is contagious!

Single-handed **Solution**

News that the Solution single-hander is now to be marketed as well as moulded by Ovington made BTL think that we'd better go and see what all the fuss was about. We met up with co-conceiver, original builder, and class secretary Kevin Clark on a windy and choppy evening at Seafarers Sailing Club in the Solent.

Kevin explains; "I built a boat that three years ago I wanted to go to the Dinghy Show and buy. I love the Phantom and grew to sail it in a blow but it is really too powerful for many people of small to average build. We wanted something in a similar vein, but smaller, lighter, and more manageable, aimed at 65 to 85kg sailors.

"We wanted a proper mast that you could drop the sail on, decent sail controls, and a lifting centreboard and rudder to make singlehanded launching and recovery more manageable. We chose foam epoxy construction to keep weight down, and performance and longevity up."

Seafarers is a gem of a club situated between Lee on Solent and Hillhead. Though evening sailing had been cancelled, club members generously whisked our trolleys up the long beach (it was low tide!) and came down to meet us at the end of our sail.

The Solution's lifting centreboard and rudder certainly made launching into the surf kicked up by 25+ knots straightforward. Just sailing out through the surf reminded me of the responsiveness that comes from a light, stiff boat built in modern materials: I have spent too much time recently sailing mass production boats!

Sail controls are all double-ended and come easily to hand to hand: they are endless so if you have been lazy, you can just pull on the tail to cleat the leeward side. Once through the surf, we appreciated the side deck angle providing a comfortable sitting out position. But BTL has been allergic to sitting out for many years, so I eased the forestay, and increased kicker and cunningham to depower. The increased weather helm was easily countered by kicking the centreboard back a touch: the end result was a satisfying and well-balanced ride upwind, even in the biggest waves and gusts.

With more rocker than usual on modern designs, tacking in the breeze was just that: a breeze. The stable hull and great balance means that there were none of those nervous wobblies when tacking too slowly, even in the extreme conditions, and the boom was just high enough to make tacking BTL friendly. We're sure that the rocker will make roll tacking and gybing just as easy in lighter winds.

Pop the centreboard up, ease the vang, and the fun really begins. The Solution planed easily and comfortably downwind and the boom angle meant that you had to sail pretty badly to get the boom end in the water; even then a quick tweak on the rudder saw me back upright and on track.

Kevin had assured us that the boat is easier to gybe than to tack: maybe we were a little over enthusiastic to try this for the first time in 25 knots... but we have no doubt that we'd have been fine second time with a little more commitment and a little less mainsheet! Once capsized the Solution showed no inclination to turtle, (the sealed mast probably helps there), and popped up to 45° with just bodyweight on the centreboard. It's a long reach from the board to the gunwhale, but

Photos: Mark Bushall

righting lines would make the righting process straightforward for sailors of any agility. Reluctantly, it was time to head home: the onshore breeze and surf presented no problem - we simply dropped the main, raised centreboard and rudder, and sailed back to the waiting trolley!

With Ovington taking over marketing of the boat there will be a few minor specification changes which aren't expected to affect performance: new boats will incorporate a moulded non-slip finish, and a Selden rig, and the sail cloth specification will be subject to some scrutiny. Hull, rig, foils and sail will remain manufacturer one design, but there is latitude in fit out; for example, an owner could change fittings type and position, or change the current aft mainsheet bridle for a full centre mainsheet system.

The Solution's vital statistics are length 3.9m, beam 1.75m, weight 56kg, sail area 8.5m^2, its handicap is 1070, and price tag around £5000. Unless you are in the market for a new boat, we'd suggest avoiding Kevin Clark; some of his enthusiasm might rub off on you, too!

Photo: Emily Brown