



Only here for the Beer ... luggers

Tradition comes alive every Monday evening in this Devon fishing village. *Nigel Sharp* went to join in the racing



PHOTOS BY NIGEL SHARP



Top: Launching Scrimpy off Beer beach

Left: Sailing Scrimpy Main Picture, opposite: Class commodore Tim Tolman owns the 1962 Katherine

“The spirit of the rule does not allow for boats to be too far removed from the original Beer beach boat”

From the early days of Beer’s annual regatta, which was first held in 1913 (or 1914 – there is some controversy about that), local working boats – trawlers, drifters, pot haulers, netters and self-drive hire boats – would be rigged for racing for just one day each year.

For the regatta, traditionally on the Thursday after the second Monday in August, the boats would use any sails that they could get hold of – at one stage they may well have been the old sails that had originally been used before the boats had been fitted with engines, or possibly any conventional dinghy sails that might vaguely fit. Alternatively it might be the case that someone had a rig, or access to a rig, and would then look for a suitable boat to put it on. More often than not, the rig would be that of a dipping lugsail.



All that began to change sometime in the 1970s when four of the smaller boats had sails specially made. This had the inevitable effect of raising the level of competition, and other boats felt they had to follow the lead.

To some in this Lyme Bay fishing village it didn't seem to make sense to go to the expense and effort just for one race a year, so in 1985 a group of some half-dozen sailors formed the Beer Luggers Club. Initially, racing was held four times a year, culminating in the annual regatta. Over the years, the racing programme has expanded and racing now takes place every Monday evening from April to September.

The original set of rules has evolved and expanded slightly over the years to prevent too much development, but perhaps the most important rule is Rule 17, which

states: "Boats are to be of general working shape with long rocker type (not yacht shaped) keel. The spirit of the rules does not allow for boats that are too far removed from the original 'Beer Beach Boat' design. Prospective owners are advised to take advice from the committee."

Dipping lug foresail

All boats have to have a dipping lug foresail and a standing lug mizzen. Many readers may think of a dipping lugsail as one which requires the sail to be lowered slightly and the forward end of the yard to be brought around the back of the mast in order to tack. In the case of the Beer Luggers, the foresail has a lazy sheet which is taken forward of its luff. To tack, this sheet is pulled to pass the sail around the bow and bring the yard almost vertical to pass forward of

the mast onto its new leeward side. 'Dipping ropes' attached to the lower end of the yard will occasionally need pulling if the yard gets stuck on top of the mast.

This system works much better when gybing (as the wind helps rather than hinders the process), which is what the luggers would have done much more often than tacking in their working days. Either way, an important advantage is that the sail is never crossing the working part of the boat. Characteristically, the tack of the jib is attached to a short bowsprit which has a 'catcher' on it to limit the likelihood of the lazy sheet going under the bow, and all boats have a long bumkin so that the mizzen can be sheeted well aft.

Other rules include a maximum draught measurement (one-ninth of waterline length) and a requirement for wooden

masts to be supported by rope shrouds tied with rolling hitches. All boats have to have working inboard engines (as they would have had anyway prior to 1985) with a three-bladed propeller.

There are currently around a dozen boats in the fleet and inevitably, considering the history and the rules, there is quite some variation in terms of origins and ages. The oldest boat is *Cuckoo*, a pre-1900 Gorran Haven crabber owned by George Dart since 2004, and the newest is Justin Adkin's *Enterprise*, which he designed (in conjunction with Phil Morrison) and built himself in 2004 – similar to a Salcombe yawl but longer and wider.

Whereas the other luggers tend to have rocker in the keel to ease the process of getting them up and down the beach, *Enterprise* has actually got rocker in the rabbet line as well to allow her to tack more easily, which is not a bad idea considering the rig is making that manoeuvre so difficult. Justin normally sails *Enterprise* with his brother (and fellow Transatlantic rower) Robert and their father Christopher.

Christopher's brother-in-law Ali Green was Commodore of the Beer Luggers Club from 1985 until 2003 (when he became Commodore of Beer Sailing Club) and in the early years raced one of his self-drive motor boats – the *Duchess*, the *Lion* or the *Walrus*. He now owns the *Percy Mitchell* – originally called *May Blossom* and brought to Beer and renamed after her famous Portmellon builder by George Dart in 2000. She was built in 1932 (yard number 213) for a publican in Portloe as a Mevagissey tosher but, unusually for that type, as a beach boat. George found her somewhere up the River Fal when she was “full of water, had a greenhouse on her and had no engine.”

The current class commodore, Tim Tolman, owns the 1962 *Katherine*, which was originally a tender to a motor yacht.

Moon Dance, built in Yeovil in 2001 by Adrian Noyles, is now owned by Geoff Pook. Nigel Daniel's *Gannet* is a former ship's lifeboat. Originally canoe-sterned, to comply with class rules she now has a transom which was built, rather unusually, aft of the original stern. *Scrumpy* was built as a cabin cruiser in 1968 – Greg Lockyer bought her 10 years ago, took the cabin off her and added 4in (10cm) to the keel.

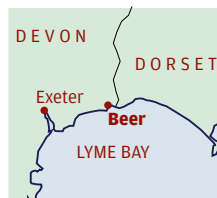
Mary, a 1960s River Exe harbour launch, is owned by David Boalch, former landlord of the Anchor Inn where many of the early meetings of the Beer Luggers Club took place. David says that “*Mary* likes a bit of a blow” and so on the evening that I was in Beer he and his crew Geoffrey (another member of the Adkin family) decided they would be better off forming the advance party to the Sailing Club bar rather than going racing in such a light wind!

In the annual regatta the coveted prize for the first boat to finish in the working boats class is the Percy Westlake Cup, named after the landlord of the Dolphin Inn in the 1960s and nearly always won by one of the luggers.

Personal handicap

With such a wide range of boats, it clearly makes sense that there should be a handicap system, which is run in conjunction with the Monday evening line honours series. This is effectively a personal handicap system as it is performance-related and not based on any boat measurement, and it is reviewed every four races by Colin Westlake, a distant relative of Percy.

Ali Green has dominated the line honours series almost completely this season, and there are some who say that the *Percy Mitchell* can never be beaten. However, as Ali is quick to point out, there have been several eras in the past when the same has been said about other boats, most recently *Gannet*, and things are sure to change again as they always do.



Left: Launching *Moon Dance*

“Happily there was just enough wind to allow a race to take place”

The race

For a while it didn't seem as if there would be any racing that particular Monday evening, as a gentle afternoon breeze had gradually been dying away. As the lugger sailors gathered on Beer beach there was an air of pessimism but, despite that, they started to prepare their boats. Covers were removed, masts stepped and sails hoisted while the boats were still on the relatively flat top part of the beach.

Teamwork then came into play when the boats were pulled across greased timbers down the steep bank of pebbles to the water's edge. There was a delay while the sailors debated whether it was worth going any



**Above: A standing start on the beach
Far left: Twilight goosewings
Left: Puffin
Right: Percy Mitchell named after her famous builder; some consider her unbeatable**



further as there was practically no wind at all. After a while, enough of a hint of breeze appeared to persuade a couple of boats to launch and the others soon followed.

As is the normal practice, engines were started while the boats were still on the beach, used to prevent any swell bringing the boats straight back to the shore again. Because of the delay and uncertainty I had missed the opportunity to go on the committee boat, so I hitched a lift out on the last lugger to leave the beach - class commodore Tim Tolman's Katherine - and I soon joined Peter and Brian Adkins as they were laying the start line.

The tide played a much bigger part than the wind in the events at the start. Percy Mitchell was swept on to the committee boat, whose

anchor rope got tangled in Percy's rudder. Ali Green quickly raised the rudder and sailed free, and then did a penalty turn as soon as he was clear. Meanwhile Enterprise was late for the start as the tide had taken them away from the line further than they had intended.

Happily, there was then just enough wind to allow a race to take place and for everyone to finish. The course consisted of two windward/leeward rounds - they would normally sail triangles as well and I hope that the lack of them on this occasion wasn't only because Peter and Brian were kindly taking me to the right places to take photographs, when perhaps they should have been laying the wing mark! Despite her penalty turn, Percy Mitchell established an early lead and then pulled away

from the fleet, comfortably winning line honours, although relegated to fifth place after the times were corrected. The handicap winner was Moon Dance, with octogenarian Robbie Driver's Puffin second. A photo-finish was almost needed between two of the boats, but Scrumpy enjoyed a gentle surge on a bit of swell to beat Katherine by two seconds (seventh and third on corrected time).

All the boats made their way back to the shore, no doubt thankful for their inboard engines. Further teamwork was then needed to get them back up the beach - the club owns two electric winches which do the real hard work, but many hands are needed to ensure greased boards are positioned for the keels to ride over the large pebbles.