

VICTORY CLASS

Celebrating 90 Years

by Laurence Mead

They are not, by some way, the biggest boats in Cowes Week. They aren't the smallest either. However, the Victory Class is indicative of what Cowes Week is all about. At home, the fleet race 3 days a week and pack in about 90 races in their season but certainly within the Cowes Week office they are known for balancing hard, competitive racing, with a great night time scene. Surely that's the essence of Cowes Week: Sail hard / party hard! The fact that they run most of their racing through the summer with members from within the fleet mirrors the fact that Cowes Week couldn't happen without 200 volunteers providing their time and expertise every day.

Cowes Week is always at the top of the agenda for the Class. Most of the boats are in attendance and they don't want to miss out on what they regard as their championship.

It's a competitive week and over the last six years there have been five different winners, in boats ranging in age from 6-70 years old!

That's why it is such good racing and they come back time and time again! Unlike a lot of day-boat racing, which has become dominated by windward/ leeward courses, the Victory Class sets most of its courses just outside Portsmouth Harbour, around their individually sponsored marks.

The Victory Class is based in Old Portsmouth, where their boatyard and Class launch are located. Notably, 2024 marks the Class's 90th anniversary. One of the key celebrations is a passage weekend to Seaview and Bembridge in late June, featuring five races and ample socialising. The year will culminate with the annual prize-giving ceremony at the Mary Rose Museum.

The Victory is an Alfred Westmacott design – a man whose boats are ubiquitous across the racecourse at Cowes Week (other designs also include the Solent Sunbeam, XOD and Seaview Mermaid).





In the early 1930s, small day-boat racing was popular within the Portsmouth Harbour area, but, as in other sailing locations, there was a hunger for a true local one-design. The Bembridge One Design was the obvious choice because there were already a number racing in Portsmouth but this created its own problems, not least that all the frames and plans for the hull had been destroyed in a boatyard fire.



A local naval architect, Sidney Graham, was commissioned to lift a set of lines of an existing boat, then make a number of changes. The “new” boat was lengthened a little and the draught reduced. Most significantly the centerboard was replaced with a fixed keel. At the same time, Charles Nicholson developed a new rig for the boat – Bermudan rather than Gaff, with a small jib and large main set on a boom that overhung the transom.

By the standards of the time she didn't lack sail area. The design was conceived as an affordable boat, “to accommodate the moderate means of most prospective owners, especially those in the 3 services”.

Owing to the Portsmouth location, the Royal Navy was closely involved in the development, so there was little surprise when the design was labelled the Victory Class after Nelson's flagship. With the sail letter V already having been assigned to the Sunbeams (another Westmacott design profiled in last year's Cowes Week program) the new boat was given Z as its sail insignia.

To this day the class maintains a record of all of the boats built, and, even more amazingly, a list of all of the different owners that those boats have had over the years. It's the boats which have had the owners, not the owners who have had the boats! This documented class history is a testament to its longevity and sustainability. Many of the boats are still sailing and the passion of the sailors in the class keeps it thriving. Boat number one is still actively racing in the Gibraltar fleet, and both fleets periodically compete against each other.



The class is not afraid to make very controlled changes. The rig has evolved to modern standards over the years, and although traditionally a wooden clinker-built boat, the class was farsighted enough to make the move to GRP in 2006. David Heritage in Cowes has been offering a GRP version since then, and one has just come out of the mould ready for a new owner to join the class! If you find a group of sailors living it large at Cowes Week there is a distinct possibility it's Victory sailors from Portsmouth enjoying their annual sojourn to one of the world's best regatta weeks.

