

Champagne classics



Some of the finest classic yachts in the UK raced in a near gale off the Royal Yacht Squadron in the Hermès Mumm Trophy. Elaine Thompson reports from the distinctly wet deck of Rona

A scene from a watercolour: 15 large classic yachts jilling elegantly off the Royal Yacht Squadron at Cowes. For one weekend this June, the picture was real and the Solent looked as if this were once again the heyday of the resplendent gentleman's yacht.

Converted working boats and pedigree racing yachts jockey for position at the start of a second day of racing. All are here for the Hermès Mumm Trophy, an invitation event run by the RYS every other year. In 1996 there were just a handful; double that this year and a gathering of some of the best and most gleaming examples.

Across the Solent, other CHS fleets (lightweight whipper-snappers!) are regularly wiping out. But these boats, too, are determined not to act their age.

"Dump the main. DUMP THE MAIN!" One big gust right after the start and we on *Rona*, a solid 103-year-old Stow-designed ketch, are over on our ear. The knee-high varnished bulwarks scoop out half a ton or more of white water.

With 25-30 knots of wind, most of the fleet are down to working scraps of canvas. *Kelpie's* crew are recovering from the experience of having run up on Gurnard Ledge the previous day, an ignominy caught on camera and sent straight off to the diary pages of *Country Life*.

Our crew have foresaken *Rona's* mizzen and at times even the reefed main, yankee and staysail are too much. Alex Drummond, her skipper, assures us that despite the alarming amount of sea water on deck, we're not in trouble. She dips the top of her bulwarks at 30°, he explains, and the aft hatch, the lowest of the openings, won't be touched by water until the boat reaches 68° of heel.

The fleet is split into two classes for the weekend: the gentlemen's yachts in one and the gaff-rigged yachts and converted working boats in the other. *Rona* is in the former division, along with a clutch of William Fife designs, right down the scale from *Moonbeam III* at 104ft (built in 1903), *Corrie* at 47ft (1908) to the 38ft *Rosemary* (1925).

The Scottish theme is a strong one: the Fifes, also on their way to the Clyde for a reunion of the great designer's boats later in June, plus *Tigris*, a 52ft Clyde gaff cutter ▽

Roger Sandiford's 52ft Fife cutter, Solway Maid, thumps through the rough off the Squadron





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designed by Alfred Mylne just before the turn of the century, and *Cetewayo*, a Laurent Giles design built in Argyll in 1957.

Some of the fleet have stuck with almost curmudgeonly faithfulness to the technology of their time. Others have kept up. *Rosemary*, a 1920s Fife, is a Bermudan sloop and now boasts a metal mast. *Cetewayo*, over 40 years old, has been extensively restored for racing by owner David Murrin.

Cetewayo was always fast, and the new look is startlingly pretty. Upwind, she is easily under control with mainsail and blade jib. Downwind, her crew quickly snap out a red spinnaker – and it's the last the crew of *Rona* see of her.

Bloodhound, the 63ft Charles Nicholson yawl once owned by the Duke of Edinburgh and now by Robert Cook, came to her third Hermès Mumm Trophy. She has an impressive pedigree: 1st in the Fastnet Race of 1939, three years after she was built, and a member of the first ever Admiral's Cup team. Skipped for this series by Harold Cudmore, she walked away from the fleet each time and easily claimed the trophy for the third time running.

As for *Rona* herself, she has had an interesting past. Until 1993, she belonged to the London Sailing Project, taking young people sailing round the UK and in numerous Tall Ships races.

She was sold five years ago and given a huge refit by Tony Blair (no, not that one! – this is NOT New Labour's new hobby!) Parts of the hull remain, but virtually the entire interior and deck are new, as are her rig and sails.

After the refit, she was bought by Matthew Sowerby. He had previously owned *Samphire*, a 67ft centenarian, and in a curious twist, he bought *Rona* from Tony Blair and Blair bought *Samphire*.

There are 14 in her crew today and *Rona* still needs an awful lot of grunt. Hauling in the mainsheet, for example, takes six people in this weight of wind: two people on each side to bounce a part of the mainsheet and two more on each side to tail and belay.

Any assembly of classic boats tends to be some form of parade of sail. The Hermès Mumm Trophy is far from that; it is a true race series taken very, very seriously. Even on *Rona*, not rated and therefore not in contention, the mood is earnest.

But it's fun, and part of that fun comes from seeing the other boats doing their damndest in windy and choppy conditions. Two memories are etched on my mind: *Corrie* (that 47ft Fife sloop from 1908) and *Hiltgund*, 41ft and built in Germany in 1938: two wildly different red boats in neck-and-neck battle on the downwind leg.

And the bowman of *Kelpie*, poor bugger, plunging through a windward leg at the end of the bowsprit, repeatedly immersed feet deep in the Solent chop.

As for *Rona*, I have never been on a boat that shipped so much sea when hard pushed without the smallest sense of threat. As one of her crew remarked: "You could get used to seeing all this water." □

Crew of *Kelpie*, recovered from a grounding on Gurnard Ledge



Photos: Franco Pace

Ocean Images



