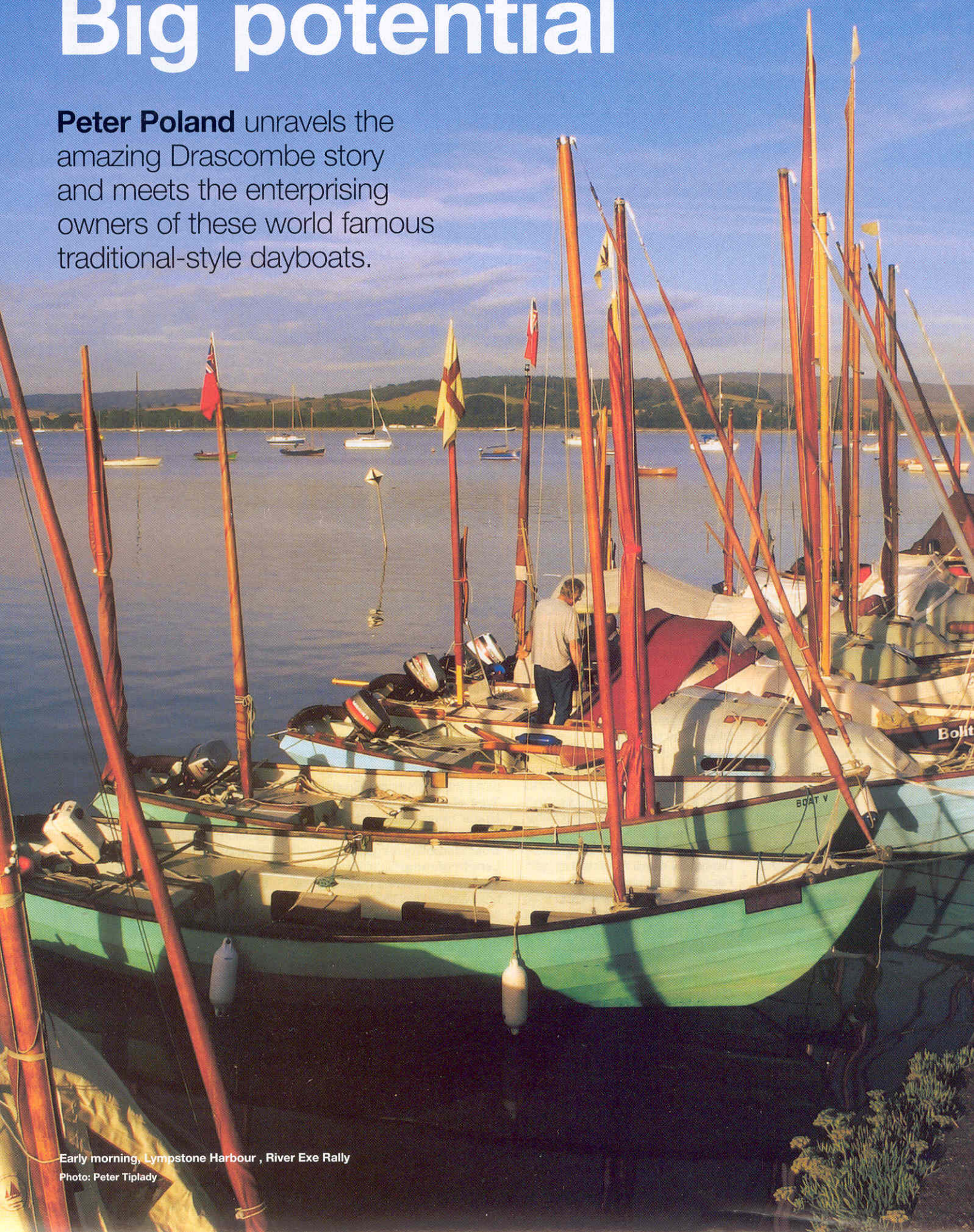


Small boat...

Big potential

Peter Poland unravels the amazing Drascombe story and meets the enterprising owners of these world famous traditional-style dayboats.



Early morning, Lymestone Harbour , River Exe Rally

Photo: Peter Tiplady

There's an old saying in the sailing world that goes: "The bigger the boat – the less it gets used." The reverse might be: "The smaller the boat – the more fun it provides." And, if the enthusiastic owners of Drascombes are anything to go by, it's true. But then, they give the lie to that other old adage: 'One foot of waterline length for every year of your life'. As marina berths get ever more expensive and running costs escalate, countless sailors (especially those approaching retirement age) forsake their keelboats and reduce their waterlines by buying dayboats and small trailer-sailers. And Drascombes fit the bill to a tee.

The story started way back in the late 50s. Having retired after an illustrious career in the Royal Navy (including war time service protecting Russian convoys, special operations as navigating officer on a submarine, subsequent tours in the battleship *HMS Vanguard* and finally captain of the destroyer *HMS Armada*), John Watkinson went west and bought Kelly and Hall, a small boatyard on the Yealm. His first design was a 16ft mackerel boat. Then, having sold the yard again in 1964, John and his family embarked on a 13 ton ketch and set sail on a seafaring life, cruising the Med. But the dream soon deteriorated with shocking weather and month long Mistral. In John's own words: "The ketch was left out there with a 'For Sale' notice on her and the family returned by train, set on the idea that any future boating would be of the day-sailer variety."

ENTER THE LUGGER

And that day-sailer wasn't long in coming. Based on the experience of the mackerel boats he'd previously designed and built, John got building again, further developing his system of glued ply clinker to form a simple but rugged hull. His new dayboat's rig featured a loose-footed mainsail with the sheet leading from a single block on its clew. In John's words: "Gone was the threat of the sickening sound of boom striking female head." And so the first ever Lugger, *Katherine May*, was launched in 1966.

It didn't take long for the boat to get noticed and admired. Clearly,

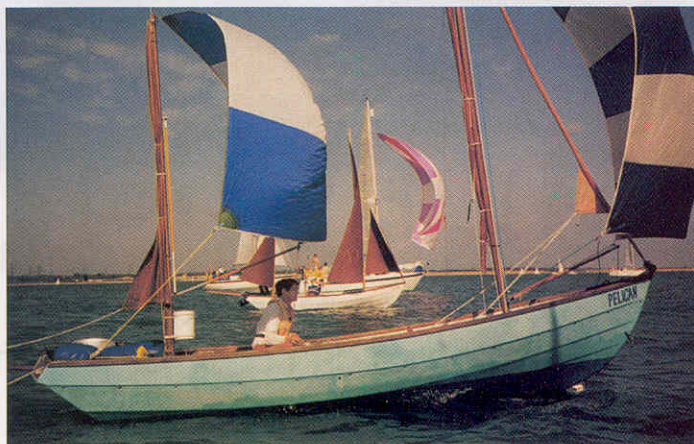
"Gone the sickening sound of boom striking female head."

she filled a gaping gap in the market, and a glowing magazine test in 1967 fuelled the fires. Now named the Drascombe (after John's house) Lugger, here was a sizeable and stable 18-and-a-bit-foot dayboat

that could sail safely, then be recovered from the water and trailed home. Her debut at Earls Court in 1968 produced 11 orders and the rest is history. It soon became obvious that John's team would be unable to cope with demand if they continued building in wood, so Honnor Marine (the old one) came along and the Drascombe went 'plastic'. They subsequently built around 5000 boats of varying shapes and sizes as John developed new models, such as the 'stretched' Longboat and the smaller Dabber. Whilst Honnor Marine produced them in GRP, other licensed builders continued in wood.

As often happens in this industry, recessions came and went

the Pacific Ocean in his Lugger. He later wrote all about this epic trip in his books *Open Boat – Across the Pacific* and *The Ocean Waits*, both of which are still available. The renowned Ken Duxbury and his wife sailed *Lugworm* – another Lugger – back to the UK from Greece, as well as making subsequent trips from Padstow (on the North Cornish coast) to the Scillies and back, recording these feats in his books *Lugworm Homeward Bound* and *Lugworm Island Hopping*. But, even more astonishingly, David Pyle sailed a wooden Lugger from England to Australia. If you don't believe it, read *Australia the Hard Way*. And then Geoff Stewart did a single-handed trans-Atlantic



Above: Tom Richardson in *Pelican* during the Solent Cruise in 1994. **Bottom Left:** 2004 Brest Festival of the Sea **Bottom Right:** Double daydreamers in a Drascombe Dabber, Dominic Jarman and son. All photos by Peter Tiplady.



accompanied by receiverships. Honnor Marine was no exception, although by then John had a new career as Harbour Master on the Yealm. More recently, Churchouse Boats took on the Drascombe range, while a 'new' Honnor Marine (no relation to the old) began producing the 'Devon' range based on the original moulds bought from the receivers. Being sensible people with the sole aim of getting as many like-minded enthusiasts together as possible to have as much fun as possible, the Drascombe Association is happy to include 'Devon' owners in some of their rallies.

Over the 40 years that Drascombes have been sailing, various owners have made extraordinary voyages proving that a Drascombe can be as happy on the open seas as she is on a road trailer. Webb Chiles crossed

passage, as recorded in *Sail South till the Butter Melts*. The mind boggles at these adventures. On a more local note, current Association Chairman, Jim Hopgood, has almost finished a circumnavigation of the British Isles in a series of coastal hops.

Now, before anyone plucks a Drascombe from the classifieds at the back of ST and points her towards distant horizons, it should be stressed that all these extraordinary voyages have been accomplished by highly experienced sailors in superbly equipped boats. So don't think that anyone could (or should) undertake similar trips in a Drascombe, but these adventures do show that – suitably equipped and sensibly sailed at the right times of year – these rugged little boats can (with a bit of luck thrown in) achieve great things.

SUCH WIDE APPEAL

Since its formation in 1987, the Drascombe Association has continued to hold the threads together and keep the Drascombe ethos alive. When I asked Association Publicity Officer Peter Tiplady what the Association offered its 1567 members (of which around 300 are 'overseas'), he replied: "An unlimited enthusiasm for small boat sailing providing – through a series of weekend sailing rallies and longer 'cruises in company' that cater for the whole range of sailing abilities – the basis for getting together with the friendliest and most sociable group of sailors you'll probably ever meet." In addition, he said the Association offers a fund of knowledge on most subjects – with experts on all of the Drascombe range of boats – as well as an award

"These are sensible boats sailed in a sensible way."

winning quarterly Newsletter and a well-formulated and extremely popular web site (www.drascombe-association.org.uk).

And what about those rallies and events? Because the Association is so well represented by so many enthusiastic area committees, there are plenty to choose from. Would you believe 47 scheduled for 2006, spread over the UK, Ireland, the Netherlands and Denmark? And because Drascombes fit inside ferries and travel on motorways, there's nothing to stop members from extending their horizons and hopping from one country to another. Of these 47 events, 15 are reassuringly coded SSD (which stands for Suitable for Smaller Drascombes) and are generally held in sheltered waters without strong tides. That makes them confidence boosting starting points for beginners and families. And then there are more adventurous cruises (best suited to those used to living on board Drascombe Coasters perhaps) in the Bristol Channel and the shallower parts of the Waddenzee and the Baltic. Further reassurance for those attending rallies is to be found in the section marked 'safety considerations': "Each skipper must make his or her own decision to go or not to go. Only the skipper knows the condition of the boat and the experience of the crew. The Golden Rule is to get the best information you can, then trust your own judgement. Don't be pressurised to go further than you want to..."

Clearly, then, these are sensible boats sailed in a sensible way by adventurous people. Small wonder that so many owners have so much fun in them.