

Main image and inset: Racing fleets
jostle for position at Cowes Week 2009



ON THE CREST OF A WAVE

Cream's Andy Evans explores the British
institution that is Cowes Week.



For over 180 years, Cowes Week has been an integral part of the British sporting and social calendar. The annual sailing gala takes place in the testing Solent waters off the Isle of Wight, and is routinely held between the end of Glorious Goodwood and the start of the grouse shooting season – in other words, the week that crisscrosses July and August. This has been the case since 1826, with only the two World Wars managing to blow this iconic event off-course, enabling Cowes Week to claim the title of the largest and longest-running regatta in the world.

Cowes is therefore seen as a traditional and quintessential British event, although according to Michelle Warner,



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Sales & Marketing Director of Cowes Week, the event is constantly moving with the times.

“While the early August dates still remain, Cowes Week has evolved enormously since that first regatta, when just seven boats lined up on the start line,” she says.

“The event organisers work hard to protect the rich heritage of the event, whilst ensuring its relevance to today’s audience; it is this delicate balancing act that helps ensure the success of Cowes Week.”

Nowhere are these changes more apparent than on the water. When Cowes Week first began, it was at the behest of King George IV, who had an interest in yachting. The event therefore attracted royalty and the nobility, who watched races involving naval warships, square riggers and other historic vessels; and the festival soon became a three day regatta. Following World War II, the world of sailing – and particularly yachting – became much broader in its appeal. No longer was Cowes Week the domain of the privileged few; now,

anybody could be a part of the event. Warner believes that this attitude is at the heart of the regatta.

“Fundamental to Cowes Week’s strategy is ensuring an all-inclusive approach – anyone can come and take part,” Warner says.

This inclusivity has led to the gala now evolving into an eight day racing event, during which more than 1000 boats take place in some 320 races. The competitors are in their thousands, and range from weekend sailors to Olympic champions. The event also includes disabled as well as able-bodied competitors – and as sailing is one of the few sports where men and women compete against each other, a third of Cowes’ participants are female.

The boats used are just as varied as the crews who race them. From super yachts to classic Bembridge Redwings, the Solent water is a unique and beautiful sight during the regatta. As Warner remarks, “there is a diverse mix of boat types. From the perspective of the participants, Cowes Week offers exciting and challenging racing.”

And of course, excitement for those on the water means thrills for those on the shoreline. 100,000 spectators attend Cowes Week every year, and Warner believes that this is partly due to the fact that the crowds can get so close to the action. “From a spectator’s point of view, one of the great things about Cowes Week is that much of the racing can be enjoyed from the shore – and there are also now a number of fantastic opportunities to go afloat to watch the racing,” she says.

The races all start from the Royal Yacht Squadron, and the surrounding area provides excellent viewing opportunities for spectators, with the blasting of the cannons which start the races adding to the drama. The regatta provides an awe-inspiring experience, with races starting every five minutes. “The sheer scale creates a huge buzz,” says Warner, “and the festival atmosphere ashore tops it all off!”

Ah, yes! The festival atmosphere ... the Cowes spectators certainly know how to enjoy themselves, but that’s hardly surprising. Cowes Week is famous for putting on a range of daily open-air entertainment for its visitors, which lasts into the early hours of the morning. From busy restaurants and pubs that overflow onto the main high street, to live music and specially-constructed cocktail marquees – the onshore atmosphere is electric.



The small town of Cowes certainly becomes a hive of social activity for those eight days.

But when an event like Cowes incorporates such contemporary elements, there is always the risk of alienating some of its more traditional supporters. However, Warner insists that this modernisation is justified. “With any developments and growth, there will always be people who fondly reminisce on how things used to be,” she says. “But all the measures we take each year are an effort to improve things, based on the feedback that we receive. The growth of the event over time is testament to this approach.”

Cowes certainly hasn’t been afraid to innovate in the past. For the last 150 years, the regatta has finished on the Friday with a huge firework display, launched from barges on the Solent.

This extravaganza is seen as a wonderful highlight of the week, and one of Cowes’ great traditions – but one can imagine the opposition when the displays first started to take place. The gala also took on a sponsor, Skandia, in the 1990s, which helped Cowes Week to become more outward-reaching. Modernisation has therefore always been part of Cowes’ history.

Sometimes, such changes have literally saved the event. Immediately after World War II, the three day regatta was increased to accommodate events organised by sailing clubs in Cowes and its surrounding areas. By 1953, the regatta had turned into a nine day chaotic marathon. Each club ran its own event to its own sailing instructions and racing marks, and there were different start and finish lines for each club. “Many classes were given the same courses – all of

which were taken from a book of around 500 options,” says Warner. “This often led to congestion at marks, boring long legs and many classes simply running out of time.”

This format rapidly became a mess, and something needed to change. So, in 1964 – at the request of the Admiral of the Royal Yacht Squadron, Prince Philip – the Cowes Combined Clubs was founded to run Cowes Week. The club was made up of the seven sailing clubs that had previously put on events – resulting in one set of sailing instructions and racing marks for the whole week. It was also because of this arrangement that the Royal Yacht Squadron became the universal starting point.

But this doesn’t mean that obstacles are a thing of the past. The growth of Cowes Week has led to some additional problems for Warner and

Clockwise from above: Spectators enjoy a break from the racing at one of the many hospitality areas; Sam Davies, Zara Phillips, Dame Ellen MacArthur and Dee Caffari before the Artemis Challenge; a crew enjoying Copa del Ray racing

the organisational team. “Probably the biggest logistical feat is in dealing with the needs and desires of 1,000 boats. Course setting for the 40 different classes is particularly hard, especially in the Solent with its complex sea-breeze patterns.”

These difficulties can catch out even the most experienced competitors. Last year, the double Olympic gold medallist Shirley Robertson was involved in an accident when her catamaran collided with a spectator boat that had drifted onto the course – hospitalising one of the spectators on board. But, as Warner explains, Cowes Week is planning around these eventualities. “In recent years, we have had the benefit of some sophisticated course setting software to help the race officers in their tasks. This has gradually evolved, along with its supporting infrastructure. Now, our courses are normally challenging, exciting and fun for all the competitors.”

Main image and below right: Friday's firework extravaganza; below left and middle: Around 30 different live music acts helped to entertain the crowds at Cowes Week 2009



There are some things that you can't plan for though. The 2009 event was hampered by a lack of wind on the Solent, and ten per cent of the competing boats had to retire over the course of the week. The unusually calm conditions also adversely affected the Artemis Challenge; a race that pairs solo round-the-world skippers with celebrity crew members on board Open 60 high-performance boats (the 'Formula 1' vessels of the sailing world). Wind speeds struggled to get out of single figures, and luminaries such as Zara Phillips, Mike Tindall and Sir Robin Knox Johnston were stranded in the lifeless waters for nearly seven hours before the race was abandoned.

However, the Artemis Challenge is still one of the most eagerly-awaited races in the Cowes Week calendar. The event started in 2008, and has attracted such names as Davina McCall, Alastair Campbell and Dame Ellen

MacArthur – adding to the glamour of Cowes Week and drawing in huge crowds. But Warner believes that people are as interested in the round-the-world skippers as they are in the celebrities on board. "Round-the-world sailing is easy to follow and understand. In addition, you have a strong human interest element and the personality of the sailor can be built with the public, so that they feel engaged in the experiences of the sailor." Warner feels it is this element of the race that truly intrigues spectators. "A round-the-world race is something that few of us will ever even consider doing, and therefore we are curious

to understand what motivates and drives someone to do this – further feeding our curiosity."

But for all of these innovations, Cowes Week remains an established and essential part of British life. The mixture of competitive sailing, entertainment and glamour has always been a part of the event's allure – and no doubt always will be. And Warner is confident that the world's most iconic regatta will continue to broaden its appeal, while maintaining its heritage. "Cowes Week will continue to develop and evolve through listening to, and working with, the event's

participating sailors, and many thousands of spectators – both onsite and online."

"In addition, Cowes Week will continue to provide a platform for the promotion of sailing to a non-sailing audience through the media attention the event receives, and by engaging with non-sailing visitors to Cowes Week. There are some exciting times ahead."