



Cowes Week 2003

by Chris Bentley

Hot on the heels of the Sonata Nationals came Cowes Week. For Chrysalis, the temptation was too great and we crossed over the Solent to do battle again, joined by Fortune from MYC (Charles Pegram) and eight of the Sonatas from the Nationals.

Hot was exactly the word. Nationals week had been reasonably comfortable if sometimes overcast. Now the temperature climbed into the 90s, which inevitably brought with it the typical Cowes weather of land breeze fighting sea breeze mid Solent – result – calm with occasional fog. The race officers did their best, despatching the larger boats to committee boat starts anywhere where there was wind. Unfortunately, Sonatas are caught up in the dayboat classes and started with them from either the Squadron or Wrightlink lines which meant long postponements and shortened courses. A blow-by-blow account of how we crept around the Solent doesn't make for interesting reading, so here are just a couple of personal stories from our week.

Spectator Fun

Frustrated, no doubt, by the lack of spectator sport on the famous Cowes Green, a Race Officer with a wicked sense of fun sent half-a-dozen classes off Westwards from the Squadron line on a very light foul-tide beat. Starboard tack in, Port out amongst the rocks up to Egypt Point quickly became something akin to stock-car racing. Arriving at the Point, the leading boats discovered that tacking out into the tide to clear the rocks took them on a circular route back to where they started, creating a 200-boat pile-up with those behind. It was about then that we discovered the uniquely Cowes tactic of rock-parking. You go in until you hit one, tack the boat over and then wait until there's a decent gap to get out and back to the next rock on. Who says light weather racing isn't exciting!

A similar, but less nerve-wracking beat occurred the following afternoon on the mainland shore. Dodging in and out of the groynes in company with Pizzicato and Sir Sandy Woodward in ex Medway Sonata Tiger Rag, we were 'buzzed' by a gentleman on a jet-ski. It was difficult to hear exactly what he said over the roar of his engine, but the message was that he was in charge of the piece of water we were sailing in and we should depart it immediately otherwise, in his capacity as Jet Ski Patrol man, he would 'take action'. The fact that there were no jet-skis, apart from his, anywhere in sight, but plenty of swimmers, didn't phase him at all. He then roared off to repeat the message to Sir Sandy. Oh to have heard the exchange that took place! Eventually, he departed seawards at 30knts leaving the three of us to wonder what possible danger a Sonata moving at 1/2 a knot could be to a craft such as his!

Tactical Discards

Thursday was not a good day for Sonatas. A frustrating drift around culminated in the course being shortened in time for the Sonars, who we start with, but not for the lead Sonata, so we were all out of time. But, for us in Chrysalis, there was a silver lining. With no discard left, our results put us in touch with the top of the fleet. Half way through Friday's race we found ourselves in front of Pizzicato and catching the leading boat, Missred. Heading west towards a mark off Lepe beach the dilemma was whether to dodge the tide by crossing the main channel to the shore or go out to the Bramble Bank. I guessed the shore: we couldn't beat Missred overall but maybe we could stay ahead of the rest in this race.

In the end, it turned out better than we dared hope. Missred won the race, and Cowes overall. We made the finish line inside the

time limit and the rest of the fleet didn't, giving us an overall second. Full of good cheer, we stopped to give an Etchells a tow home and that was nearly our undoing. Sod's law caused all the trot boats to vanish as soon as we got to the mooring. At last we hi-jacked a corporate RIB, and I am sure I now hold the hurdles record from the end of the Island SC pontoon to the Race Office on the prom. Alas, it was 19.05 and the declaration sheets vanish at exactly 19.00. With a sickening realisation that I was up against the might of the Combined Cowes Yacht Clubs tenacity to the rules, and the memory that Dick Owens had missed winning Cowes before for another paperwork omission, I gasped my explanations to the man in charge. Eventually, I was given a piece of paper to explain the 'mitigating circumstances' to the Race Officer. Apparently, I was still threatening to hang the lot of them from Stuart Quarrie downwards after the third pint if they couldn't accept the near impossibility of crossing 2 miles of tide and getting to the Office inside an hour. After an agonising wait, we eventually got the news later that evening that they had capitulated and our result stood. Phew!

Winding down

The fireworks that night were brighter than I had ever seen them – but there may have been another explanation! We watched them from East Cowes, where we had been camping, and it was an excellent vantage point, far better than being crushed on the Cowes prom. Camping is an economic way to do Cowes, as Charles Pegram has pointed out in an [article](#) for this web site. We were blessed with brilliant weather, but caravans are also available on the same site and the facilities are fine. The apparent disadvantage is the distance from Cowes proper – in reality it's 20 minutes walk via the chain ferry. And we discovered a jetty on the east shore with enough depth near high water to offload and reload gear.

Chrysalis is now back on her home mooring. The trip back was done in two hops, Cowes – Eastbourne, Eastbourne – Medway. This trip we spent an extra week in Eastbourne because Max and I decided that a 12-hour beat to Ramsgate, which was the prospect on the first weekend, was not an option. Instead, we sailed out from Sovereign to watch an excellent air show off Beachy Head.