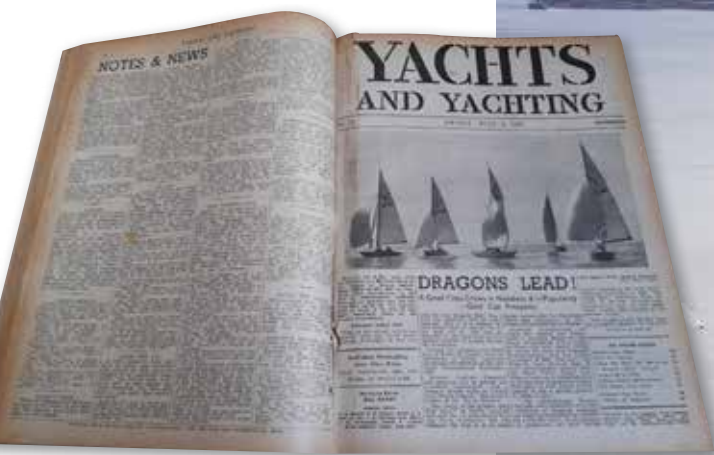




90 years on

To celebrate the Round the Island Race's 90th birthday this year, former *Yachts & Yachting* writers **Malcolm McKeag** and **Barry Pickthall** look back at the magazine's coverage of the race

PHOTO: IAN ROMAN



The Round the Island Race celebrates its 90th anniversary this year. The first race took place in 1931 with 25 entries. Nine decades later, it is renowned as one of the biggest mass participation events in the world, giving weekend family crews the chance to compete on the same course as the biggest names in the sport. Records have tumbled and eras come and gone, but the heart of the event – a spectacular, challenging day out for ordinary sailors – has not altered.

Back in 1930, it was Major Cyril Windeler, a member of the Island Sailing Club, who proposed a handicap race around the Isle of Wight for ‘smaller’ boats, which at the time meant between 5 and 25 tons. In this anniversary year, the Island SC, which has run the event since 1931, launches a new race for keelboats in Windeler’s name.

Peter Brett’s 22ft Cornish fishing boat Merry Conceit won that

inaugural event, the first of many victories over the years by the smallest boat in the fleet. The tradition was continued in 2019, by Jo Richards and crew in the victorious 18ft bilge-keeled Alacrity, Eeyore.

Numbers steadily increased over the decades and passed the 1,000 mark in the 1980s. The centenary of the Island Sailing Club, in 1989, saw the biggest fleet so far of 1,813. That was exceeded in 2008 with 1,875 entries. During the pandemic, the 2020 event was cancelled. Could a pent-up desire to get afloat and the additional attraction of the 90th anniversary see another record fleet in 2021?

ABOVE LEFT
The 1947 edition of the race gets only a few paragraphs in one of the first issues of *Yachts & Yachting*, but the race and the magazine grew rapidly

BELOW LEFT
The 15th race, in 1950, had a record fleet of 124 yachts; today, still organised by the Island Sailing Club, the race rivals the biggest sporting events in the world for sheer number of competitors

Yachts & Yachting was founded in 1947 and has reported on every Round the Island Race since then. Looking back through the *Yachts & Yachting* archives sheds light on the race itself and also on wider events. It debunks a few myths and it reminds us, today more than ever, of the sheer fun and excitement of sailing in a big fleet.

Growing up together

When *Yachts & Yachting* was founded, the Second World War had only just ended and Britain was still in the throes of wartime shortages and austerity, writes *Malcolm McKeag*. Our new-born paper was just that – a folded newsheet priced

at fourpence, rather than a magazine – and with paper rationed, so were space and words. The 1947 race got just three paragraphs plus the results. The ‘Big class’ was won by Owen Aisher’s Yeoman and ‘the small class’ by Chris Ratsey’s Evenlode, both of them, like every other entrant, pre-war yachts. 1948, the year of the Torbay Olympics, with Stewart Morris winning gold and a young Paul Elvstrom winning the single-handers sailed in *Fireflies*, saw ‘the most successful race ever’, with 81 starters and the ‘Big class’ sent round the Nab Tower as well as the island.

By 1950 both the race and *Yachts & Yachting* were growing. “Another record fleet [124 starters] and the

most successful Round the Island race ever,” reads our report. It was as “good as an ocean race and doesn’t take so long”. And there were photographs to prove it. Year on year, both the race and the coverage grew – double page spreads of photographs in 1953, with full results, and in 1957 an evocative photograph of a becalmed start, with spinnakers all a-droop, accompanied by the caption: “Could you be a race officer?”

The editor, whose “decision is final and no correspondence will be entered into” offered a prize of two guineas to the reader who could correctly identify the greatest number of yachts in the picture.

ABOVE RIGHT
Yachts & Yachting’s report from 1957 mentions Owen Aisher, racing the 12-Metre *Evaine*, and the JOG fleet, still very active today

BELOW RIGHT
Jack Knights’ report on the 25th anniversary event, as yachting entered ‘a new era, with a fibreglass boat and a catamaran the talk of Cowes that evening

Frequent flyers

Many are the yachts whose name has appeared often in the entry lists and many are the yachtsmen who would need to borrow the hands of a friend to count on their fingers the number of times they have been ‘round the island’. But the number of yachts and the number of yachtsmen who have had their names engraved on what is generally regarded as the principal trophy, the Gold Roman Bowl, is diminishingly small.

The delightfully named *Evenlode* is the first to appear a second time, in 1947, repeating her 1938 win, while in 1966 and 1967 Sir Max Aitken’s epoch-changing fin-and-skeg *One Tonner Roundabout* was the first to have back-to-back wins.

Prime Minister Ted Heath’s *Morning Cloud* topped that with three-in-a-row in 1971, 1972 and 1973 and the name appears again in 1980. That was, of course, three different guises of *Morning Cloud*. →





PHOTO: LEFT JO RICHARDS; RIGHT PAUL WYETH



PAUL WYETH

Nonetheless, Heath and 'Morning Cloud' are usually credited with having won the race four times – "a record no one has bettered" to quote more than one history.

However, the owner was not on board for the first win, as Yachts & Yachting's report race makes plain, complete with a photograph of the two smiling paid hands who raced the boat for him in his no doubt unavoidable absence. Nor was he aboard for the second win either: Yachts & Yachting's caption to the photograph of a mop-haired and moustachioed Owen Parker tells us that 'the Prime Minister was celebrating his birthday at Chequers' that day.

If there is a King of the Island, the title must surely go to boatbuilder Jeremy Rogers, who has sat at the tiller of the winning yacht no fewer than three times – in 2002, 2003 and 2006. And it was the same yacht in each instance – Rosina of Beaulieu, his own Contessa 26.

A new era

The 25th anniversary race of 1961 was not merely another record year with 274 starters. In the words of the respected writer and sailor Jack Knights: "Possibly British yacht racing in general entered a new era. For the first time a true planing keelboat planed away with a prize – the fibreglass Bristol I took the coveted Gold Roman Challenge Cup. And for the first time a catamaran went round the Isle of Wight in less time than the fastest conventional yacht [the 12-Metre Flica II]."

The catamaran, a Prout Snowgoose, not only beat that year's quickest big monohulls, but by going round in 6hr 46m, she beat the all-time race record set by the 8-Metre Iskareen in 1948.

Jack Knights himself sailed aboard the "true planning keelboat", which was built entirely in the still-very-new medium of glassfibre by Bristol Aircraft Plastics, hull number 7 of a Jack Holt design originally called the

ABOVE LEFT
Jo Richards and crew cut in through the Needles on their way to winning overall in 2019

ABOVE CENTRE
Tacking up the Solent in the early morning

BELOW LEFT
Morning Cloud wins the 35th edition in 1971, without the owner on board

BELOW RIGHT
The overall winner is often one of the smaller boats and has on many occasions been a Folkboat and its sister design the Contessa 26

Zest class but which would, thanks to the diamond-shape logo on its sail, soon become the Yachting World Diamond.

The race was sailed in a south westerly Force 4, gusting 5, which took a toll on the fleet as it punched its way down the west Solent on the ebb – demanding wind-against-tide conditions no more pleasant today than they must have been in 1961, as Knights describes: "Our first mark was the Bridge Buoy, four hundred yards to seaward of the Needles. Here the waves got suddenly large and curly. We had time to notice two dismasted Atalantas... there was another larger boat with just a stump and one or two boats with split jibs. What with the sea, the damage and the odd launch taking photos, the scene was becoming very like an oil of Trafalgar.

"It was a relief to be around the buoy and to be easing our sheets, for this was what we were here for – a wind from aft of the beam. We

immediately began to surf!"

Knights and crew debate whether or not to set the spinnaker and decide to go for it: "The boat picked up on the instant. Where we had surfed, occasionally we lifted and planed. Now we began to run through the fleet, past boats of all sizes..."

And so on to St Catherine's, Bembridge Ledge and No Man's Land Fort, overtaking larger boats all the while. Then a long-and-short beat to Old Castle Point and the finish. "We were ninth out of the 274 to finish and had won the Gold Roman Cup from Angelique, a sixteen tonner, by two and a half minutes."

And history had been made.

There is a curious footnote to this. Over the years a tale grew that Knights secured his victory by 'threading the Needles' – that is, by nipping in between the great chalk pillars instead of going around the lighthouse. Whence comes the myth, research cannot find, but myth it must be. Knights won the Gold

Roman Bowl but once – and this was it. A Yachting World Diamond has won it but once – and this was it. The Bridge Buoy was a mark of the course, so the ploy would have been illegal and the boat disqualified. And it was blowing Force 4, gusting 5. Not even the great Jack Knights would have attempted such a risky manoeuvre in those conditions.

Female victories

In the 90 years of the race, only two female names have appeared on the Gold Roman Bowl, in 1954 and 1982.

Helen Tobin was a prominent member of Royal Lymington YC and her yacht, Babar, was a Lymington Slipway 5-tonner. These little double-enders were comfortable cruisers with a full-width raised deck amidships to give headroom down below. The 1954 race was one of the lightest on record and Babar, in Division C for the smallest boats, negotiated her way round in 10h 46m 04s, to beat her closest competitor, also in Division C, by

ABOVE
Massed spinnakers, the quintessential Round the Island Race sight

BELOW
Yachts & Yachting's coverage of the dramatic 1982 race, won by Julia Dane on Glass Onion

just two seconds on corrected time. It must have been a very sweet win, as Babar had been second overall the year before, by a not much greater amount. That year, the first boat to finish, Foxhound, in 9h 21m 5s, was also owned and skippered by a female sailor, Rachel Pitt-Rivers.

The 1982 race could hardly have been more different. By now the event attracted more than 1,000 yachts and Yachts & Yachting was giving the event many pages of text and photographs. This year was one of the wildest on record and Yachts & Yachting's report begins: "More than records were broken in this year's Round the Island race when over 1,100 yachts were faced with a boisterous south-westerly. In huge seas and gusts of reportedly up to Force 7, masts crashed to decks, sails were blown to shreds, halyards parted and spinnakers became their own masters – one minute driving boats at breath-taking speeds, the next throwing them round in wild broaches."



Round the Island Race



PHOTO: FAR LEFT AND RIGHT BY PPL MEDIA, MIDDLE SHOT PAUL WETH

A heavy air race such as this might have produced a big-boat winner in years past, but by now yacht design was enjoying radical innovation and the conditions suited a different type. The lightweight fractionally-rigged boats like Smokey Too, Pacifist and Glass Onion “put up their spinnakers, shot up onto the plane and were away...”

Glass Onion, named after the Beatles song, was a Julian Everitt design, developed from a boat he built as a wedding present for his wife Julia Dane. And it was Julia who was at the helm on this wild day. The breeze lightened towards the end and it started to rain, so the fleet was faced with “a rather miserable beat up The Solent” against a foul tide. Nimbleness and shallow draft were now assets worth their weight in gold and at 1700 Glass Onion took the win – by seven seconds.

Race records

For the contenders, there are always two goals in the Round the Island Race: to win the Gold Roman Bowl for best corrected time; and to be first to finish, preferably in record time, writes Barry Pickthall.

The current race record-holder is Ned Collier Wakefield and his Concise 10 MOD70 trimaran, which skated round the 50-mile course in 2 hours 22 mins 23 secs back in 2017.

Having started in the second van at 0640, the crew were back ashore before 1000 in time to catch last orders for breakfast! The boat also broke the Rolex Fastnet Race record the same year.

If no other multihull of her ilk swells the entry list this year, there is always the monohull record to crack. Mike Slade has done so on five occasions, first with Ocean Leopard in 1991, the maxi racer Longobarda in 1996, then in 2001, 2008 and 2013, with his swing-keeled 100 footer, Leopard, which reduced the time to 3 hours, 43 mins 50 secs. After eight years, it’s high time the record was broken again.

It is a far cry from the first time set in 1931 when Thomas White Ratsey laboured round in almost 10 hours.

Technology has changed a little bit, too. Today’s results are live online within minutes of each boat finishing and shown on screens around the Cowes Parade race village [details TBC this year], while declarations can be made by text message.

We’ve mentioned the 1961 race, which saw the introduction of the multihull class and a lowering of the race record by Snowgoose of White. Two years later owner Don Robertson managed to trim 10 minutes off this.

The multihulls would never be beaten again for pure speed and so it

ABOVE L-R

Apricot broke the record in 1985; the race has been run by the Island Sailing Club since 1931; the winner’s trophy bears famous names from yachting’s past

BELOW LEFT

The race’s official charity is the Ellen MacArthur Cancer Trust; many other charities also benefit through individual fundraising

BELOW RIGHT

Cheers and here’s to the next 90!

was in 1985, when Tony Bullimore and Nigel Irens took the record to new levels with their 60ft wing-masted tri, Apricot, slicing 1 hour 46 minutes of that time prior to going on to win the double-handed Round Britain Race that year.

Not to be outdone, Mike Whipp and Rodney Pattison reduced the time to 3 hours 55 mins 28 secs a year later with their 60ft trimaran Paragon, a record that remained for the next 15 years, before Pattison returned, this time with his French friend Francis Joyon, sailing the 60ft trimaran Dexia Eure et Loire to a record of 3 hours 8 mins 29 secs – an average of 19.1 knots.

Sir Ben Ainslie took over Pattison’s mantle in more ways than one, by streaking round in 2013 in 2 hours 52 mins 15 secs, in the solid-wing AC45 catamaran, JP Morgan BAR, controversially chaperoned by RIBs in case the cat capsized. Some questioned whether sailing a boat that could not be reefed was a safe and seamanlike example, but at the time, she did share the same sponsor as the race.

There were no questions about Lloyd Thornburg’s 2 hours 23 min 23 sec time, set in 2016 with his MOD70 Phaedo³. Few people believed the record could be lowered, until Ned Collier Wakefield and Concise 10 did exactly that a year later.



PHOTOS: LEFT SPORTSGRAPHY, RIGHT PAUL WETH

