

Test of time



All photos: Christel Clear

A popular racing boat at series in Scotland and the north-east, the Impala will find even more favour this year, as her CHS rating has been reduced from 0.939 to 0.912

Impala 28

Geoff Hales revisits a 15-year-old design which can still race competitively under CHS, IOR and IMS, cruises well and even appreciates in value

Under scrutiny this month is a one-design conceived way back in the late 1970s, so the designer and builder of the Impala have had to undergo a tougher test of time than many others put under this spotlight. Has the yacht proved a success without serious modification? We won't ask you to read to the end to find out that we gave David Thomas and Peter Poland a clear thumbs up.

Very few changes have been considered by the strong owners' association throughout the history of the design, and still fewer have been tried. The result is that you can buy an early Impala and race alongside the newer boats with just as much chance of being up with the leaders – or down at the back.

We sailed the late-1982 boat, *Sunny Side Up*, courtesy of John Murray, the Impala association's treasurer, and his welcoming crew, who made this point clearly. The boat does everything asked of it and more: races one-design, CHS, IOR and IMS (with a standard triple certificate), cruises well, costs less than you expect and appreciates in value. Can you name another class that can claim all that?

Did John have any regrets? Certainly not about his choice, although he thought he had missed one opportunity and that was converting from an outboard to the Yanmar 1GM

(9hp) inboard engine. He bought *Sunny Side Up* second-hand in 1990 soon after the inboard option was introduced and the conversion then would have cost a deal less than today, due mainly to the increased power of the Yen. From the way he spoke it sounded as though the change would not be put off indefinitely.

In the words of the association chairman Ric Wilson: "The inboard version is stiffer, points better, is as fast if not faster and has completely transformed the boat into a true offshore yacht that is fast becoming a classic."

It is remarkable how a little extra weight in the right place can make an improvement. Ric is also adamant that David Thomas's generous help and skill over the years has been a great boon and was essential in achieving such a successful installation, which he believes has been the key to the resurgence of the class.

It seemed to us that perhaps he was forgetting the efforts made by the association officers (himself included) at about the same time: it is thanks to their considerable marketing efforts, particularly regarding recruiting members, pressuring the Rating Office (they got the CHS down from .939 to .912 – to the annoyance of owners of similar-sized boats) and gaining the support of suppliers, that the European Championships can now see 20 or 30 boats enjoying keen, close racing.

On the open circuit, the achievement of Derek Ide's *Supersparkes* (1978 vintage) in the 1992 Round the Island Race is just one of a number of prominent achievements by class members. And, of course, the close racing keeps the resale value high – and rising.

Overall, price has much more to do with how well the boat and its sails and engine have been looked after than age. Ric is on his fourth boat and has always sold at a profit – in return for general improvements and hard work – and John estimated that an average-condition boat would fetch £12,000 with an outboard engine or £16,000 with an inboard.

"Where else could you find a pocket racer and cross-Channel cruiser for that sort of money?" he said. Where indeed?

What do you get for your money? The cockpit is roomy for the size of boat, with lockers aft to each side and the lifting outboard in its trunk on the centreline. The foredeck and side ▶

HISTORY

IN 1977 the British Offshore One-Design Conference (BOODC) set out to choose some designs in various categories which would appeal to owners for one-design racing. David Thomas designed the Impala for the smallest of these categories (the 'Sportsboat') and won his section of the competition.

To digress, the other winners were the very pretty 101 and the Contessa OOD 34, but the Impala is the only one still racing as a one-design or which reached useful numbers: 155 were

built between 1979 and 1984 and there are still around 110 in active use.

An Impala took part in *Yachting World's* one-design One-of-a-Kind rally in 1979 and is fully detailed on page 103 of that year's August issue. The judges decided: 'She presented the best compromise between racing and cruising at the rally, and two of the judges commented that she was the boat they would most like to own.'

That was in competition with 11 other boats, including the other BOODC boats, the Sigma 33 and the Contessa 32: not at all a bad start.

The class rules are straightforward and have seen little revision over the years (Mylar sails are now allowed and the inboard engine, of course, and a second genoa sheet track has been introduced).

There was a brief flirtation with an alternative keel, but this was considered an expensive 'non-improvement' and abandoned.

Building ceased in 1984 and one can only speculate whether it would have continued if the owners' association had been as energetic then as they were a few years later.

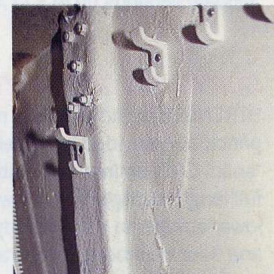


Top, under spinnaker, *Sunny Side Up* was like a big dinghy. **Above and below right**, the galley and chart table are mounted on the main bulkhead forward, allowing space for

two settee berths and pilot berths aft. **Below left**, a clean transom and transom-hung rudder conceal *Sunny Side Up's* well for the outboard motor



Locker lids are foam-cored for stiffening, but have been known to delaminate



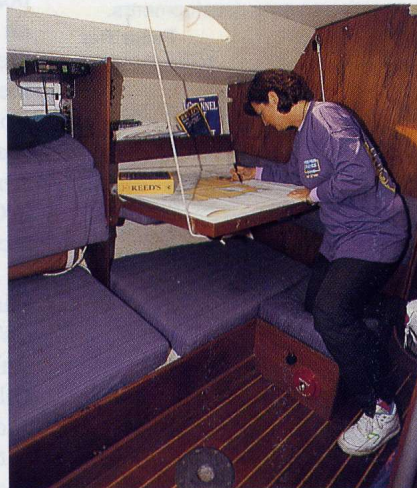
Timber is used to reinforce the bulkhead to chainplate attachment



This makeshift lower forestay attachment can cause misalignment and excessive wear



Chainplates for the lowers and cap shroud are small. The clevis pin can draw out or shear its locking pin



Check for corrosion of the steel keel fastenings. Hairline cracks in the reinforcement indicate stress



Offset shroud load on the chainplate can cause moisture to get into boltholes, swelling the bulkhead

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Dimensions:

LOA	28ft 0in	8.53m
LWL	23ft 0in	7.01m
Beam	9ft 3in	2.79m
Draught	5ft 4in	1.62m
Disp	4,041lb	1,833kg
Sail area	367ft ²	34.09m ²

Designed by: David Thomas

Built by: Hunter Boats Ltd, Sutton Wharf, Sutton Road, Rochford, Essex SS4 1LZ. Tel: (0702) 546541. Fax: (0702) 541015.

Second-hand price guide:

Old versions in poor condition are likely to fetch £10-11,000. More recent outboard versions with a better spec – £12-13,500 according to their condition. Inboard versions up to £17,500

SURVEYOR'S REPORT

STRENGTH in the Impala's main hull is principally provided by its relatively thick, 'solid' GRP laminate, sensibly reinforced with a full length stringer in the lower topsides, a lower stringer in the full body and bulkheads and floor members in central midships.

Ideally, the saloon sole panel should be lifted at regular intervals to allow a thorough check of the structure beneath. Evidence of grounding can be found by checking the floors at the after end of the keel.

The combined lower and cap shroud chainplates are approximately 0.10in thick. This is a lot less than the width of the rigging screw fork end and, as a result, the clevis pins can tend to draw out and possibly shear their locking pins or rings and can suffer local wear.

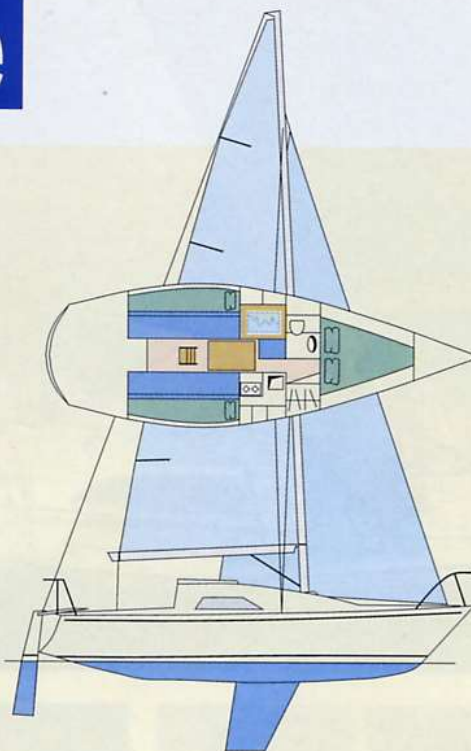
A collar plate round the cap and lower shroud chainplates provides a watertight seal through the deck. But under load the seal can be broken as the collar moves up with the chainplate. The sealant works better if the chainplates pass easily through the collars.

Bolts securing the chainplates on the after side of the bulkhead panel also pass through a vertical timber reinforcing piece. The slight offset of shroud load on the chainplate to the bulkhead support causes the bolts to angle upwards slightly. This can allow water ingress which softens the bulkhead panel, making it less capable of preventing further slight movement. Bulkhead panels can often be seen to be locally swollen or distorted.

If Class Rule No 7.1.1. would allow, it would be a good idea to fit a simple reinforcing strap of stainless steel, positioned on the aft face of the chainplate, extending down about 9in.

The main fuel tank and any spare tanks should be located in a sealed deep shelf fitted with an overboard drain. Spare fuel cans should not be stowed where they could be vulnerable to damage from other gear.

The rudder blade and upper mainpiece are of timber, not always in one piece. Sometimes



joints may open or cross-grain fractures in the waterline region, the area of maximum stress.

The copper gas supply pipe running to the cooker from the cylinder stowed in the chain locker passes along the lower part of the storage bag, starboard side of foc's'le. Here contact between stainless steel bits in a seawater damp environment can cause corrosion to the copper, which can be hazardous. Aged piping should be renewed and run through a clear plastic tube to provide better protection, with the ends of the plastic tube raised above 'risk' level.

Nuts, bolt ends and washers of the steel keel fastenings will almost inevitably be suffering surface corrosion. Ensure that washer plates are not badly corroding, the development of rust scale can exert considerable pressure, but at failure will loosen the fastening security.

The resin 'flow-coat', usually applied liberally throughout the lower bilge areas, not only gives a reasonable, cleanable surface, but also serves as a useful 'tell-tale' to local strain in the structure. This coating will often crack first before damage occurs to the laminate.

Clean the bilge area, check for any cracking and mark the extremity of any that is found. Monitor the condition to note developments.

Peter Tier
YDSA surveyor



decks also offer ample space for the racing crew to work, although obviously weight is kept abaft the mast whenever possible.

Below, there is a quarter berth each side extending under the cockpit, with an L-shaped saloon berth to port and a fold-up chart table above. Opposite is the galley, and a door leads forward to a proper sea head and vee berth. Headroom is 5ft 8in just inside the main hatch with ample sitting headroom on the berths. There is a comfortably roomy feeling and all spare space is used for practical stowage.

The accommodation in a racing boat has a hard life: people hurrying to get sails, moving awkwardly in bouncy conditions and abrasive oils rubbing against joinery, but *Sunny Side Up* had stood up to it well and had obviously been looked after. The deck and hull, too, look in good shape, with the exception of the scar left on the side deck when the boat fell (still in her cradle) in the October 1987 storm.

The structure stood up well to this drop test and what repairs were necessary were straightforward, but to remove the final cosmetic defect would be prohibitively expensive and unjustified. Overall her condition looked very good for a boat that has been sailed hard in all weathers and over a good number of years.

As a sideline: if you are considering buying any second-hand boat built before that storm, or the one in January 1990, it is worth discovering where she was at the time.

It should go without saying that such a popular boat is a joy to sail, and she is. We had smooth water with around 12 knots of true wind for our test and went upwind under full sail (and with only two crew on the rail) at a comfortable 5½ knots. Off the wind we broad-reached at six knots with little apparent wind under John's favourite, if battle-scarred kite. Shy reaching with the same big sail, *Sunny Side Up* proved highly controllable. It was like sailing a big dinghy: she was delightfully responsive – just as you would hope – and the whole experience was thoroughly enjoyable.

While the Impala's success as a cruising boat is much admired, for most owners that is an added bonus to the one-design racing. Fleets can be found in all the popular areas – in the Hamble, east and west Solent and the West Country, on the south-east, east and north-east coasts, in Wales, both sides of Scotland, Northern Ireland, the Dublin area, and Cork, a few in Germany and the Netherlands and a match racing fleet in Hong Kong.

John likened the Impala's appeal and the class association's approach to the MG Owners' Club. In rather the same way as classic car clubs hold spares for members, the association holds a spare mast, available for immediate use and, with the help of suppliers, are looking at batch production of other items, to maintain boats to class standards. □