

FLYING 15



PHOTO: RUPERT HOLMES

Sixty years after Uffa Fox designed this planing keelboat, the class is as popular as ever. **Rupert Holmes** sails the latest incarnation from Ovington Boats and Pinnell and Bax, and finds an exciting boat able to hold its own against designs half a century younger.

A breezy winter's day on Rutland Water with the latest Flying 15 amply demonstrated why this design has retained its strong following. I came ashore grinning from ear to ear – there are few boats that can match the downwind speed and exhilaration of the 15 in a good blow.

The design has been updated over the decades, although (apart from upgraded deck gear) each of the changes has been relatively subtle. However, the overall effect is significant. The fleet is split into three divisions: Classic for boats with sail numbers below 2,700; Silver for sail numbers 2,700-3,200; and Gold (or open) for the newest

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Right The spinnaker is a big sail and can easily pull you across the boat unless you are hiking hard with your bum well over the side.



PHOTOS RUPERT HOLMES

models. The Portsmouth Yardstick for the Open fleet is 1025, for the silver fleet it is 1039 and for the classics, 1051, showing the effects of the design changes over the years. It's a system that also allows a low-cost entry route into the class.

Middle Nene SC near Kettering, for instance, has a fleet of classic Flying 15s that was established when older members started to look for a design that would provide the thrills of a performance dinghy, but without the spills. With prices starting

at well under £1,000, it was a popular decision and the fleet built quickly in size to around 20 boats.

Development

After Uffa Fox, Roy Windebank has had the biggest influence on the class, having carefully examined the rules and exploited the tolerances allowed in the measurements to tweak the hull shape – up to an inch of deviation was allowed at one time. In particular, as a member of Hayling Island SC, he did most of his sailing on the sea and so made the front four hull sections as fine as possible. He also pioneered a change from favouring the heaviest boats to those of minimum weight. His boats dominated the class, particularly in the UK, from 1982 onwards, starting with his mould No IV, which won the worlds in 1984, as well as six UK championships.

Roy's mould No IX was the next big step forward, winning the worlds in its first year. This has a little more buoyancy aft. These individual changes were very subtle, but the competitiveness of the fleet is such that they make a significant difference to regatta results. Roy semi-retired after building a dozen IXs and passed the mould to Dave Ovington.

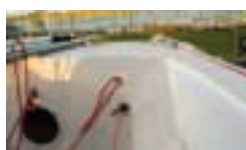
In the early 1990s, Dave fully faired the mould, which was then dubbed the Ovington Smoothie. At this point the class rules were tightened to reduce the tolerances, and thus modern boats are more uniform than was historically the case. Another change made by Ovington was to change from a conventional polyester fibreglass construction to a vacuum bagged epoxy e-glass foam sandwich, which gives a significantly stiffer structure and longer competitive life. Whereas top sailors frequently replaced their hulls every couple of seasons, six and eight year-old Ovi models are still seen at the front of the fleet.

The Ovington Mark 10 dates from 2002 and is a subtle progression from the Smoothie, with more

Right The 15 is very sensitive to sail trim and weight, making it very tactical in light conditions.

Below The addition of a block position where the spinnaker sheet tube exits the aft buoyancy tank reduces friction and makes the sail easier to play.

Bottom The spinnaker chute is closed off with this simple cover to reduce the amount of water that is scooped up.



buoyancy aft of the keel, which helps to push the bow down, thereby creating a longer waterline length. Roughly two-thirds of the 15-20 boats Ovington builds each year are fitted out by Pinnell and Bax – Alan Bax races 15s competitively and is a former world champion – while most of the others are completed by Phil Evans in Cumbria.

Layout

Late last year, a new deck moulding was produced. Again the changes are subtle, but lots of experience and expertise has gone into refinements that make the boat more ergonomic and easier to sail to its maximum potential. The organisation of controls has been optimised, in particular it's now easier to play the spinnaker in a strong blow – there's a lot less friction in the system, thanks to the realignment of the tube through which the sheets pass in the aft tank buoyancy tank, and an extra block where it emerges into the cockpit. Changes have also streamlined the fitting out process, which helps to contain production costs.

Carbon is used in the construction of Ovington 15s, but it's restricted to the high load areas of the mast step, keel and chain plates, unlike some of the Australian-built boats, which use the material more extensively. Ovington's Dave Hall believes theirs is the best compromise in providing maximum stiffness where necessary, without adding unnecessary expense.

We tested the second boat with the new deck moulding on a breezy November day at Rutland Water. Immediate impressions are of a boat that is bang up-to-date in terms of deck layout and equipment. In fact – like all the best classics – there is no hint whatsoever of the age of the design.

Sailing

Having sailed other older designs that are comparatively pedestrian in their sailing qualities, but offer close one-design fleet racing, I was expecting the 15 to be of a similar mould. I could not have been more wrong. The boat is a delight to sail, more like a big performance dinghy than a keelboat, but with the benefit of added stability. Picture adding a little more power to a fast dinghy, then swapping the trapeze for an efficient low centre of gravity keel.

Winds on our test day were a consistent 20 to 25 knots with gusts to over 30 – enough to keep most dinghy sailors ashore, but the 15 handled it with aplomb. Hiking upwind is a comfortable, though wet, affair and a lengthy beat won't unduly strain muscles.

Downwind we flew, the helm hoists the kite



dinghy-style, for which we needed to be well downwind in the prevailing conditions. With the sail set, luffing on to a broad reach saw us accelerate to speeds well into double figures. Despite the unusual rudder shape, the boat remained responsive and under control even in the strongest gusts, providing we stayed reasonably flat.

We broached once – a gentle, graceful affair from which it was easy to recover, without resorting to uncivilised measures such as standing on the keel. One of the changes to the new deck moulding is intended to limit the amount of water that will gather in the bottom of the boat. When we came upright there was little left on board, and what remained quickly drained out through the self-bailer. The boat has considerable built-in buoyancy, which makes it arguably more seaworthy than many larger and apparently more capable keelboats – the three Dragons that sank in the Solent last season, for instance.

In lighter weather, the 15 is a very tactical boat, sensitive to the smallest movement of crew weight and sail trim. With very small differences in speed between the boats in each fleet, the design offers class racing at its best.

The class

The class has a strong and well-established organisation at both national and international level. There are numerous fleets worldwide in countries including, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Hong Kong, Ireland, France (including a recently established large Silver fleet in St Malo), and Spain. World championships are held every second year and generally alternate between northern and southern hemispheres, giving an excellent excuse to combine traveling with sailing. This year's world championship (June 3-16) is in Port de Pollença, Mallorca, where a growing fleet of more than 30 boats is now firmly established.

UK national championships are invariably well attended, particularly in non-world championship years. This year's figure of 62 was bettered by only two keelboats (Squibs and XODs). The SB3s are chasing close behind, but have yet to match the size of the 15 fleet. In addition to the nationals there are important traveling events, primarily the various area championships.



Above left Downwind the boat feels like a performance dinghy, easily hitting speeds in double figures.

Top Besides a new deck layout, the new F15 has additional buoyancy aft to push the bow down and maximise waterline length.

Above The control console helps keep all lines easily accessible.

Below left The new cockpit layout has been made more ergonomic for spinnaker handling – the helm hoists the kite, dinghy-style.

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ANSWER BACK

from XXXXXXXXXX

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There are Flying 15 fleets at more than 30 clubs around the UK. Many of the main fleets are inland, the largest being at Grafham, Bewl Valley, Draycote, Windermere and Derwent Water. On the coast, Hayling Island SC also has a large fleet, there's a growing one at Torquay, plus one at Cowes, where the class also has its own start at Skandia Cowes Week.

One of the benefits of the design's light weight is that it can be towed by almost any car, and the shoal draught makes it easy to launch from a trailer, so visiting open meetings and championships is as easy as it is for dinghy sailors.

Of course, any class in which Uffa Fox has been involved will have many stories to tell. One of these concerns the opening of Pitsford Reservoir (and Northampton SC) in the early 1960s. Uffa was keen to race his 15 on the new stretch, but apparently not so enthusiastic about towing it to the venue – he arrived with the hull and spars on the roof of an old Humber car, and the keel in the boot. While he performed the opening ceremony, his crew hurriedly attached the keel to the boat, just in time to make the start. ■

Above Hiking upwind is surprisingly comfortable – although a little wet.

Flying 15 specifications

DESIGN:	Uffa Fox in 1947	
LENGTH:	6.1m	
BEAM:	1.5m	
DRAUGHT:	??m	
MINIMUM WEIGHT:	307kg	
SAIL AREA:	UPWIND	13.94sq m
	SYMMETRIC	13.94sq m
PRICE:	£16,000	

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WEBSITE: www.pinbax.com

CLASS ASSOCIATION: www.flying15.org

COMPARISONS... Where does the Flying 15 fit in? Here are some alternatives...



■ SQUIB

Although a foot shorter, the 40-year-old Squib is effectively a larger and heavier two-man keelboat, but will surf downwind. Offers close one-design racing throughout the UK. Older boats can be competitive.

LOA:	5.78m	
BEAM:	1.87m	
DRAUGHT:	0.9km	
DISPLACEMENT:	680kg	
SAIL AREA:	UPWIND	16sq m
	SPINNAKER	13.5sq m
GUIDE PRICE:	£14,000*	



■ LASER SB3

High stability, blistering performance three-man one design. Massive 46sq m asymmetric makes for adrenaline pumping downwind. Rapidly growing competitive fleet with top-notch racing, although little overseas as yet.

LOA:	6.15m	
BEAM:	2.15m	
DRAUGHT:	1.5km	
DISPLACEMENT:	625kg	
SAIL AREA:	UPWIND	27.3sq m
	SPINNAKER	46sq m
GUIDE PRICE:	£17,500*	