

THE BOATS: The Shannon One Design

David Beattie

Probably the most successful native one-design class of sailing boats in Ireland, the Shannon One Design (Shannon or SOD) will be encountered by users of the River Shannon on the two great lakes, Ree and Derg, and from time to time elsewhere on the river. This article explains a little about this special Shannon phenomenon and why the boats tend to attract more than their fair share of colourful sailing folk.

In the beginning

Sailing has flourished on the Shannon, and especially on Loughs Ree and Derg, for hundreds of years. Initially a means of transport, it gradually became a social event. In the eighteenth century, travel by water was the safest and most convenient way. Therefore if you were one of those who could say that "one lived in a fine house on the shores of a lake or (Cork) harbour", it was likely that "one" kept a yacht as a means of going on house visits.

This very quickly evolved into rendezvous for picnics, joint manoeuvres and ultimately competition. Two of these clubs still surviving are the Lough Ree Yacht Club (Ballyglass, Athlone), which traces its origins to 1770, making it the second oldest yacht club in the world, and the Lough Derg Yacht Club (1836) (at Dromineer). It was members of these clubs, along with representatives of the North Shannon Yacht Club (Lough Boderg), who met in the Prince of Wales Hotel, Athlone, in the difficult times of January 1920 and commissioned what was to become the Shannon One Design from a leading British designer of the time, Morgan Giles. Giles delivered the plans later that year and the trial first boat was ordered from Walter Levinge of Creaghduff, Coosan. She was delivered in 1921.



A one-design

Sailing craft have until recently been just that: crafted by hand and eye. Each builder learned — and incorporated improvements in each successive boat. Yacht designers did the same, and the sport of yacht racing therefore evolved into a handicap sport as the boats were all different. However, in the 1880s in Dun Laoghaire, Co Dublin, a group of amateur sailors got together and came up with the concept of the **One Design**: all boats would be built identically and only improvements agreed by the existing owners would be permitted. This avoided the need for handicaps. The boats concerned were the **Water Wags** and the Mark II version, designed in the 1890s, is still sailed there today.

As a one-design, the SOD is following in a proud Irish tradition. She is 18 feet (5.54m) long by 4 feet 10.5 inches (1.5m) beam, drawing 4 feet (1.23m) with her centreboard down. The sail area is 140 square feet (13.25m²) set in a single sail, giving the boat what is called a **cat** or **una** rig.

What do they do?

The SOD requires three people to race and this produces a very sociable form of sailing. Sailing Shannons has always attracted families, and generations in many cases have been involved in campaigning the same boat down through the years. Indeed many of the same family names that attended that first meeting in 1920 still feature in SOD racing today.

The SOD is an exciting boat to sail in a breeze of wind, and a serious challenge to sail well in any conditions. As a result, Shannon sailing attracts a wide range of sailors from far and wide, not simply limited to Shannon riverside dwellers. At the two main events each year, the week-long regattas at Ballyglass on Lough Ree and Dromineer on Lough Derg, up to 55 SODs have been counted. These will be sailed by a mixture of local sailors and others based in Dublin or elsewhere (as far away as the USA), most of whom return year on year to compete. It is not unusual to have two generations of the same family sailing together in a SOD or even have all three crew-members from the same family. There is also a very healthy influx of younger sailors joining the fleet to compete against older generations.

They say that if you start sailing dinghies in Ireland, inevitably you will end up in a Shannon! Certainly a very high proportion of our sailing Olympians, top team racers, top offshore racers and just plain sailing characters cannot be wrong.

Other events are held during the season, for example at Dromod in September (when the North Shannon Yacht Club is revived for a weekend each year), Terryglass on Lough Derg in October and the unique Long Distance race from Ballyglass to Portumna, over a weekend in June. The class also travels to Lough Corrib in May and has been sailed at many other venues over the years. The two clubs also hold regular sailing at weekends and during the week in summer.

How to get involved

Shannon sailing is very sociable and many people have learned to sail in SODs over the years. However, because of the close competition, turning up at one of the two big regattas with no sailing experience is probably not the best way to start. It would be much better to contact one of the clubs or someone already involved.

The class has grown from literally one boat to sail number 157 (although they started with number 32 — and that's another story!) through attracting new people who want to sail a competitive, attractive, craftsman-built wooden boat in beautiful surroundings — and have a convivial pint or two afterwards.

