

Big Class Yachts in the 1930s

17th November 2011 - Roy Underdown Pavilion

At this meeting Society members enjoyed being taken back to the 1930s to view the Big Class Yachts racing. This was an era when wealthy yachtsmen built large magnificent yachts to compete in a series of regattas around the coast from Harwich to Falmouth or to challenge for the America's Cup.

Rosemary Joy, from the Classic Boat Museum on the Isle of Wight, showed a unique film and talked about the Big Class Yachts in the 1930s. This included sailing onboard King George V's famous yacht 'Britannia' and the J Class 'Endeavour', which had many Hamble connections. Part of the film showed 'Endeavour' being built and launched by Camper and Nicholson at Gosport. There was a huge public interest in these expensive J Class yachts during this period of economic depression.

At this time there were no guard rails on these yachts, so occasionally a member of the crew fell over the side into the water. Most of the crew could not swim and they were paid £2 10s 0d a week. The mainsails would weigh about a ton and when racing the bath was removed to save weight. The race courses in the Solent were restricted due to the large depth of the J Class' keels.

Very few of these yachts have survived but following the Second World War the mud of the Hamble River was the home of the 'Endeavour', 'Velsheda' and 'Lulworth' for many years. This saved them so they could be restored to be, once again, much admired super yachts today.

A number of Hamble people were involved with these yachts and one of the most renowned was George Williams. He gained his first sailing experience from his father Bob Williams, who was a sea going skipper of one of the fishing boats sailing out of Hamble. George was the skipper of Thomas Sopwith's racing yachts 'Shamrock', 'Endeavour' and 'Endeavour II'. The 'Endeavour' became the British challenger that came closest to winning the America's Cup. Unfortunately, when returning from the following America's Cup after skippering 'Endeavour II', in another unsuccessful challenge, he died with a gastric problem in mid Atlantic and was buried at sea.

At the end of the meeting everyone present was talking about their pleasure of watching Rosemary's superb film of these magnificent yachts.