

CHAPTER 7

America's oldest dinghy class

One-design sailing dinghies are now commonplace in the sailing world. A century ago they were unknown and the few enthusiasts in Britain, America and Germany who raced centreboard dinghies sailed under handicap rules which later blossomed into restricted classes. The idea of 'One Class - One Design' appears to have originated in the nineteenth century at Kingstown, Ireland, then part of the United Kingdom. The 'Water Wag' class was founded there in 1887 and was an example for the thousands of other one-design classes which have since spread across the world.

In America, similar ideas were stirring and the first one-design class there appeared in an unusual setting. The Maine island of North Haven is opposite to, and divided from, the adjacent island of Vinalhaven by a narrow channel known as Fox Islands Thorofare, after the original name of the islands when discovered by Champlain in either 1603 or 1605. The islands lie in the centre of Penobscot Bay, aptly described as the most beautiful bay in the world. The Thorofare forms a watery world of sheltered coves, resembling an inland lake rather than a salt water channel with a 10ft tidal range. It is protected on all sides from the open waters of the bay. The little grey and white town of North Haven lies on a short peninsular on the north shore of the island of that name, the Thorofare lapping its front, reached by the ferry from Rockland on the mainland.

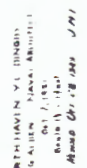
North Haven island is quiet and spruce-covered, with a ragged shoreline and many natural small harbours with good anchorages. Much of it is owned as summer property by people who spend their vacations there, as the fathers and grandfathers of many have before them. This 'settlement' reputedly descends from a Massachusetts yachtsman who, a century ago, became fond of the islands while cruising 'down east' and introduced friends to them. Perhaps to the astonishment of the independent island population these wealthy people began to buy land in 1883, when several Boston families had summer homes built overlooking the Thorofare and these still dot both shores, from Goose Rock Light to the Sugar Loaves and up along the island's north shore to Pulpit Harbor. The

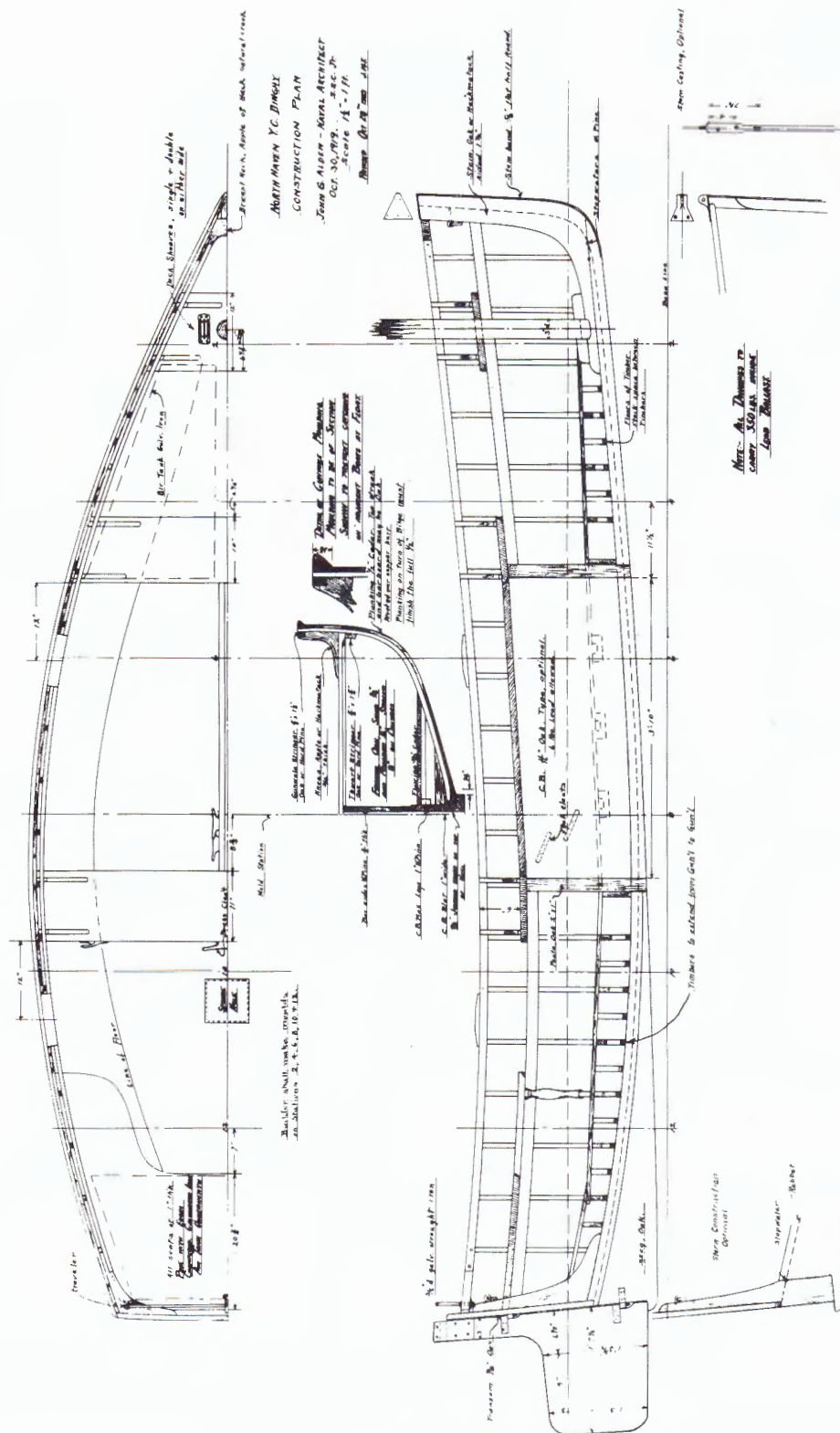
families sailed their yacht's tenders for family fun and picnics amongst the islands and sometimes against each other and the local small boats in informal races, which are always the most enjoyable kind.

Two spritsail-rigged dinghies were built by Henry Calderwood, an island carpenter and occasional boatbuilder, in an attempt to beat the existing boats. Racing reputedly stemmed from a challenge issued by William F Weld, owner of the yacht *Gitana* and a summer visitor to the islands with a home at Iron Point, for anyone to sail against a dinghy he carried on board. It was accepted and Weld lost, but the following summer, 1884, he had a new dinghy which won all the local races. His brother, Dr Charles G Weld, had the lines taken off this new dinghy and that winter four identical boats were built from the plans by local boatbuilder J O Brown, establishing the first North American one-design class. Until then the boats all seem to have been rigged with a spritsail but at that time the North Haven dinghies adopted a single gaff sail on a mast stepped well forward (cat rig) and the hull freeboard was slightly increased, the final design being set from the dinghy *Elfin*, built at North Haven by J O Brown and still winning races 65 years later.

The first formal 'Grand Dinghy Race' was not held until August 1887 when the boat *T Downed* by Tucker Duland and sailed by Dr Weld had a luffing match with Charles K Cobb's dinghy, which enabled the *Guffin*, owned by Alfred Bowditch and sailed by Miss Ellen Hayward, to win. A woman competitor was then very rare in sailing races and Dr Weld is said to have presented Miss Hayward with the sloop *Wayward* in recognition, which she sailed in Penobscot Bay for many seasons.

The dinghy class grew and racing became very keen within the limitations of the hull form and rig, but as one-design all were theoretically equal in a potential speed. The centre of this dinghy activity was and is the North Haven Yacht Club, which was formed about 1902 by the summer visiting residents. In its heyday the club float was crowded with fifty or so dinghies lying gunwale to gunwale before the club 'Casino' - an





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Lines of the 14ft 5½in 'North Haven Dinghy', the oldest established one-design class in America.

Courtesy John G Alden and Co

OPPOSITE:

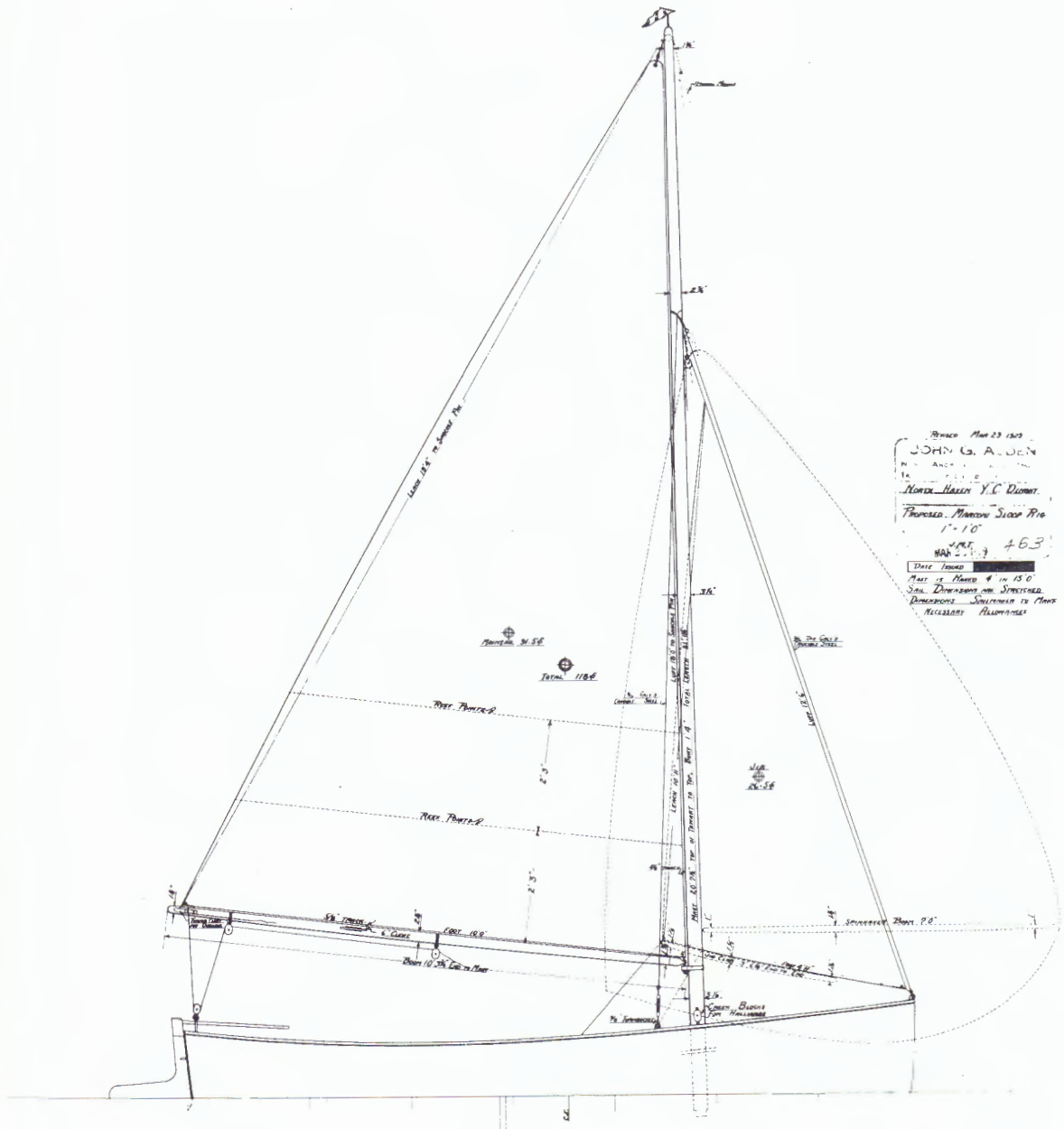
Construction plan of the North Haven Dinghy class.

Courtesy John G Alden and Co

BELOW:

Bermudian sloop sail plan of the North Haven Dinghy class.

Courtesy John G Alden and Co





Edwardian term for a clubhouse which combined various sports facilities, such as sailing and tennis.

In the early years J O Brown built the North Haven dinghies for \$425 but by 1949, when a number of the North Haven dinghies were built of wood, his grandson J E Brown was building them for \$750 each. The price continues to rise.

In 1919 the North Haven dinghy committee considered that detailed plans should be made of the boats and the office of Boston yacht designer John G Alden took off the lines and all details of the dinghy *Ridzo* to produce plans from which future North Haven dinghies would be built. These plans were again revised in 1929 and are reproduced here. These show an overall length of 14ft 5½in, a beam of 4ft 11in and a draught of 1ft 1½in which extends to 3ft 10in with the centreboard lowered. The considerable rise of floor and fine ends make these boats lively under sail and the hull form shows the origins as a rowing-and-sailing boat, with a touch of Sam Crocker (who then worked for John Alden) in the bilge and bow sections and a finely formed tuck in the stern sections.

The cedar planking is ½in thick and garboards and sheerstrakes are oak. The oak timbers are ¾in sided x ½in moulded, spaced 8in centres. The planking is fastened with copper boat nails clenched on burrs (roves). Keel, stem, gunwales and thwart risings are oak and the somewhat heavy construction results in long life and little distortion, though the position of the mast can lead to some movement forward.

The centreboard is oak and has 6lbs of lead fitted in it to ensure sinkage. In contrast to most modern sailing dinghies these boats were not intended to be capsized and 350lbs of lead ballast are specified, stowed in the bottom to aid stability in fresh winds. As they do capsize sometimes, three large galvanised steel buoyancy tanks are specified. Without crew on board the ballast makes the boats trim by the bow.

The rig is a single gaff sail of 118sq ft area which has two rows of reef points. Reefs are put in at the order of the race committee, not at the discretion of the helmsman – a wise rule when racing small open boats. Sail battens are forbidden. A marconi sloop rig was proposed in 1929 and Alden's office prepared a sail plan with the then typical long-boomed bermudian mainsail and an unusual partial boom (club) to the foot of the foresail. Spreaders and sail battens did not appear to be fitted. This sail plan was not adopted by the class.

Perhaps the popularity of this old-style class lies in the adherence to the one-design principle and

associated rules. Ballast is not allowed to be moved within 24 hours of a race and the boat may not be hauled out and scrubbed during that time. When racing, the crew may raise or lower the centreboard, hoist or slack the peak and move themselves about as live ballast.

The long immersed profile makes the North Haven dinghies relatively slow in turning but they go to windward well and are stiff enough with a crew of two sitting up to weather. They are not happy in open water and in a short chop can ship water over the bow. They can also be difficult to handle before the wind and in a seaway, when the crew need to move well aft to keep the head from burying and the boat from broaching, faults stemming from the lean bow and cat rig.

Edwin Thayer states that in 1929 the plans of the dinghies were altered to allow the centreplate to come up through the top of the centreplate case and so increase its area. At the same time a bermudian rig was proposed but never adopted. During the 1920s and 1930s the North Haven dinghies were so numerous that the class was divided into two sections.

In 1948 a North Haven dinghy was taken to Greenwich, Connecticut, where she sailed in an 'all comers' race, finishing ahead of the fleet which included 'Thistle' type racing dinghies and other modern boats. The girl helmsman repeated the victory in 1951.

During the 1970s racing in the class remained keen and twenty boats turned out regularly in the season, with about forty appearing for big events. Many boats are immaculate, with as much care lavished on them as many of their owners devote to their often large cruising or racing yachts. They race in two classes: one for adults, the other for children, and there are separate series of races for the months of July and August. Special races are held on the Fourth of July and Labor Day. Two of the season's races are unusual: one is up the rock-strewn Mill River, in which working the tide is crucial and competitors may be stranded; the other takes the dinghies out of the western end of the Thorofare and around the north coast of the island to Pulpit Harbor, where the race is concluded by a joyful gathering at one of North Haven's most attractive homes.

Ten or so wooden North Haven dinghies have been built since 1960 by J O Brown at their long, piled boatyard and some by Y-Knot Industries. Both shops have also completed glass reinforced plastic hulls for the class. Edwin Thayer, son of a boatbuilder who constructed many of the dinghies at Brown's yard, has built many himself. He estimated in 1974 that it took 600 man-hours and cost about \$4000 to construct the wooden hull and spars, with sails and rigging extra. During the early 1970s one owner suggested moulding the dinghies in glass reinforced plastic, but this was not done. The first plastic dinghies of the class were built in

LEFT:

Lincoln Davis at the tiller of his North Haven Dinghy class *Phoenix*, No 50. Note the gaff rig.

1975 by George Lewis and were corrected to a weight equal to that of the wooden boats. There were twelve or so racing in 1979 and others have been built by Brown's yard, by Edey and Duff at Mattaposienn, Massachusetts, and Lawrence of Southwest Harbor, Maine, but the wooden dinghies remain the core of the class.

People of all ages and relationships - bankers and bakers, state governors and senators, Cabots, Saltonstalls, Cobbs, Davises, Guilds and others long-established on the island - all enjoy the sport and informal fun bound up in the North Haven dinghy tradition, which will soon reach its century. Long may it flourish.

THIS PAGE:

Bow and stern views of Lincoln Davis's glass reinforced plastic North Haven Dinghy, showing the fine bow and attractively shaped stern, both exhibiting the rowing-and-sailing boat origins of the class.

OPPOSITE, ABOVE:

Helen Chandler's *Imp* (No 7) sailing off North Haven about 1900. *Imp* was given to her owner as a 12th birthday present in 1897.

OPPOSITE, BELOW:

A group of North Haven Dinghies racing during the 1920s.



