

Trade Secrets

DART SAILS & COVERS

First published in *By The Dart* magazine August 2016

Dart Sails & Covers, based at the end of Dartmouth's Foss Street, has long been the first port of call for local boat owners looking for repairs, alterations or new sails and covers for their boats. Owned and run for a number of years by Simon Unwin and his sister Jane, it was sold early last year to **Sean Semmens** and **Dominic Hanley** who previously worked at Westaway Sails based in Ivybridge.

Westaway Sails connects you all? Sean; "Yes, I joined Westaway as a teenager in 1987. Simon used to run Westaway for a number of years and I often raced with him during that time. When Simon sold Westaway and then started Dart Sails, I then became Westaway's main point of contact with customers and took over responsibility for the design of sails etc. Dominic joined Westaway as a trainee in 2008, spent some time getting experience with another sailmaker before returning to the business. When Simon indicated he was looking to retire and sell up, it was like coming home and reuniting the old "Westaway" family. Although Jane retired, Simon is still with us part-time looking after the books and general admin. Customers appreciate that type of continuity."

Has the business changed much? "Not really – it's fundamentally the same but we are putting more emphasis on sail-making than we did previously. With both Dominic and myself focused on sail-making and with much experience between us means we can now do more for clients. We've a state-of-the-art sewing machine so we can handle bigger and more sophisticated sails e.g. carbon sails. We spend more time with customers, understanding their needs in detail so we can ensure that any new sail, or indeed cover for that matter, suits their needs. Although sail repairs represents 40% of our working time, it's only 20% of the total value so making new sails is where we want to grow the business."

Who's your target market? "It can range across lots of different boats but I suppose our target is the local 30ft cruising yacht or cruiser/racer. Our customer base is expanding, particularly to Plymouth where we have many former contacts. We cover much of the South Devon coast from Torquay to Saltash."

For a small business, we can offer a lot more than the large sail lofts. We use sophisticated CAD (computer aided design) and use many of the latest techniques. We will often keep original moulds and detailed measurements of boats which helps greatly when customers return for new sails after many years.

We can also use our local knowledge to good effect enabling us to design and make sails that work particularly well in the local boating environment eg we know what works best in the unique conditions of Start Bay. We will also go out with clients on their boats to coach



them in getting the best out of their new sails. Our specialised advice is our greatest strength – we give customers an honest and informed response to their questions which we believe sets us apart from our competition."

Who looks after the Covers? "Jamie is our 'covers' man. He previously worked with Jane so knows a lot about this side of the business. There's not much we can't do – e.g. we have recently moved into domestic architectural work creating canvas screens for stair inserts. We have the knowledge and machinery to do many things and can cope with the growing demand for more sophisticated products e.g. fire retardant, more breathable fabrics and anti-fungal characteristics to reduce condensation. We are also the exclusive supplier – from Falmouth to Poole - of 'Sumbrella', which is a quality material from the USA."

Do you still do the usual repair work? "Absolutely. There's always a need to repair sails that have become torn or chafed. There are now more of us to cope with this type of work so we can turn work around quickly, often on the same day. We can repair more sophisticated sails and materials and during Dartmouth Regatta we'll be offering an overnight repair service."

What advice would you give boat owners to get the best from their sails?

"They should always service their sails every year or get us to look over them. Sails need to be washed – salt is particularly abrasive – and then stored dry and tidily. Owners must realise that UV light has the biggest adverse impact on a sail's longevity and usefulness. A typical Dacron sail will lose 50% of its operating strength in just one year if left on the boat without a cover and become useless in just 5 years. A foresail left on a furler will be useless if the protective UV strip on the sail is not doing its job i.e. make sure you have the furler the right way around. If you are away from a boat for a long period either cover up your sails or take them off completely. You're literally pouring your, often significant, investment down the drain if you don't look after them."

Dart Sails & Cover. tel: 01803 839196

26 Foss Street, Dartmouth TQ6 9ED

01803 839196

Dart Sails & Covers

www.dartsailsandcovers.co.uk