

Labour as Leisure—The Mirror Dinghy and DIY Sailors

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The Mirror was conceived in 1962 by Barry Bucknell as a kit boat for amateur woodworkers. Bucknell was the first popular DIY expert, appearing on television programmes throughout the 1950s and 1960s. He played a major role in the popularization of home improvement as a leisure activity, particularly amongst men. In collaboration with Jack Holt, a yacht designer, he also managed to revolutionize the previously elite sport of sailing. This paper explores the place of the Mirror dinghy in the development of the post-war male's role in the home. Working with frameworks drawn from social and cultural theory, it argues that DIY and the home workshop acted as means of integrating men into family life, whilst simultaneously preserving existing masculine role models. The paper concludes that the success of the Mirror dinghy can act as a representation of increased social and economic autonomy for large sections of the British population in the last half of the twentieth century.

Keywords: do-it-yourself—dinghy sailing—domestic life—gendered consumption—home building and renovation—leisure

Introduction

Dinghies have provided an accessible form of yachting since the 1930s, offering a smaller scale version of the keelboat racing that started in the nineteenth century. Nonetheless, until forty years ago, the high costs involved in buying and running even a modestly sized dinghy meant that sailing remained the preserve of the privileged classes. Dinghies were expensive craft objects; generally hand built from solid wood, and made to order for wealthy professional men¹. In the 1960s the sport swiftly gained a much wider following, however, with a huge increase in the number of sailors, and a radical shift in their demography. The new constituency of dinghy sailors was likely to come from lower-middle-class and working-class backgrounds, and the large numbers of small sailing clubs that sprang up around the coast and on the lakes and reservoirs of Britain reflected a new, unpretentious approach to the sport.²

This paper focuses on a key factor in these changes—the development and launch, in 1963, of the Mirror

dinghy. The Mirror dinghy was conceived in 1962 by Barry Bucknell as a kit boat for amateur woodworkers. Bucknell was the first popular DIY expert, appearing on television programmes throughout the 1950s and 1960s and he played a major role in the popularization of home improvement as a leisure activity. The research finds that the self-build design of the Mirror dinghy coincided with an upsurge of interest in DIY, and that with increases in disposable income, greater leisure time, and improvements in lifestyle, the boat served as a unique introduction to the sport of sailing for thousands of people. It marks a confluence of a variety of historical factors: changing social and cultural conditions, developments in manufacturing technology, the importance of newspaper and magazine publishing—and even television celebrity.

Post-War DIY in Britain

This section explores the growth of do-it-yourself in post-war Britain and proposes that the general

increases in the levels of skill and ambition of domestic householders (and a change in the perception of do-it-yourself from an activity borne out of necessity, to a means for self-actualization³) created the conditions in which the Mirror dinghy could thrive as a new product.

Academic investigations of do-it-yourself activity are notable by their scarcity. In *Wild Things*, her wide-ranging examination of material culture, Judy Attfield has touched on aspects of do-it-yourself.⁴ Although she acknowledges that 'DIY is an aspect often mentioned in passing, but still not accorded much attention by design historians',⁵ in her own work she limits her discussion to the aesthetic distinctions brought into play by the strategies of appropriation and bricolage employed by do-it-yourself home improvement enthusiasts.⁶ Whilst offering insights into the role of active consumption in the formation of identity, this analysis only briefly touches on factors such as the role of gender in home improvement, the potential for self-actualization inherent in craft activity, and the economic benefits offered by do-it-yourself. In her discussion, Attfield tends to focus on the material outcomes of DIY activity, and the role of these outcomes in the construction of status and identity, rather than the significance of the making experience itself.

Stephen Gelber's *Hobbies*, and Carolyn Goldstein's *Do-it-yourself*, have both explored the phenomenon from an American perspective⁷, Gelber introducing an historian's interdisciplinary approach to the subject, whilst Goldstein's lighter touch gives a colourful illustrated portrayal of the period's do-it-yourself media. In his introduction, Gelber differs from Attfield by focusing more closely on the individual's personal experience of craft activity. He draws upon the work of the psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihaly who, over several decades of research, has developed the concept of 'flow'.⁸ Flow is described by Csikszentmihaly as a form of pleasure resulting from a merging of action and experience; a loss of ego that results when the participant is unable to reflect on their activity or consider the results, but nevertheless remains in control of his or her actions and environment. The ideal conditions for the state of flow occur when the participant is challenged but not overwhelmed by the activity. Rather appropriately, Csikszentmihaly uses the example of sailing in a fresh breeze to illustrate the idea of flow: 'It is what the

sailor holding a tight course feels when the wind whips through her hair, when the boat lunges through the waves like a colt—sails, hull, wind, and sea humming a harmony that vibrates in the sailor's veins'.⁹

Tim Dant, in his sociological account of the activity of windsurfing, also draws upon the work of Csikszentmihaly, in order to understand more fully the experience of interacting with material objects.¹⁰ For Dant, the activity of using a sailboard is closely linked to the apparatus and equipment with which the sailor interacts. He suggests that the equipment itself, rather than being an inanimate and passive part of the process, is an interactive and integral part of the human-thing experience: '... it is the set of properties of the windsurfing equipment that offers a systematic set of possibilities and constraints which will shape any developing line of action'.¹¹

This work seems to suggest that there may be significant parallels between the activity of constructing and maintaining the apparatus required to take part in sporting activity, and the pleasure offered by the action of the sport itself.

This study, however, tends to follow the approach adopted by H. F. Moorhouse in his *Driving Ambition*, a sociological account of American hot-rodding.¹² Moorhouse has used a case study model to explore the relationship between amateur construction and sporting activity, using a single instance of material culture as a starting point for the exploration of wider social and cultural issues. Like Moorhouse, who had to overcome the dearth of academic enquiry by accumulating 'thirty- and forty-year-old hot rod magazines in the sleazy book shops on 42nd Street at a dollar a time',¹³ much of the material for this section of the paper has had to be drawn from primary sources. These have included the do-it-yourself magazines of the late 1950s through to the 1970s, the various self-help DIY textbooks that have been published since before the Second World War, and the sailing magazines of the 1960s. Many of these are preserved in archives, whilst others have been sourced through second-hand bookshops and online auctions. Whilst a certain amount of historiographic caution needs to be exercised in the use of this material (for it can never be an unmediated reflection of the time in which it was published), the fact that the magazines, books and exhibitions of this period could be sustained as profitable enterprises is an indication both of the prominence of do-it-yourself in the popular

consciousness, and the economic significance of the industries catering for home improvement.

In post-war Britain support and information for DIY activity came from increased access to new forms of mass media such as television and magazines. W. P. Matthew, who had been broadcasting on the subject of DIY since the 1930s, had the privilege of presenting a fifteen-minute programme, 'Do-it-Yourself', during ATV's first week of broadcasts in September 1955—the beginning of commercial television in Britain. It was after his death in March 1956 that DIY expert Barry Bucknell took over as presenter of the show. A measure of Bucknell's subsequent popularity came in 1962, when his later programme, *Bucknell's House*, achieved viewing figures of five and a half million.¹⁴ The *Daily Mirror* TV column in January 1963 reported that speculators were clamouring to buy the house renovated by Bucknell as part of the programme. The column also reports on Bucknell's mail: with over 40,000 letters a week, the BBC is reputed to have employed a staff of ten, who sent out more than a quarter of a million information leaflets. Eventually the house was sold through auction for £7,000, against an initial outlay by the BBC of £2,750.¹⁵

By the mid 1950s, magazines had joined 'how-to-do-it' books and television programmes as a more regular and changing source of guidance and inspiration. *Practical Householder* was launched in October 1955 to an already large and well established market. The editor, F. J. Camm, opens the issue with an enthusiastic appraisal of a 'do-it-yourself' movement that 'has reached such proportions today that it can only be dealt with satisfactorily by a journal entirely devoted to it.' Camm emphasizes the shortage of skilled labour and the consequent rise in costs as an incentive for householders to carry out their own repairs and maintenance.¹⁶

Practical Householder was one of the longest-running DIY magazines, and continued to be published until the 1990s. Tracking the editorial emphasis and advertising content over the 1950s and 1960s gives a useful insight into the changing attitudes to DIY and home improvement activity, and helps to illustrate the social and cultural climate that led to the success of the Mirror dinghy.

The content of the first issue of *Practical Householder* is a mix of articles covering household maintenance (repairing plumbing and electrical faults), home improvements (making loose covers for a sofa and

laying lino floors), and even 'scientific' gadgets (such as a home made 'ozonizer', that appears to have been constructed from a home chemistry set). Remarkably, the issue also included the first article in a series entitled 'Build your own bungalow': 'This attractive two-bedroom bungalow, which has been specially designed for *The Practical Householder*, may be built by any handyman able to use simple woodworking tools and a trowel'.¹⁷

The following month's piece in the series showed readers 'how to prepare foundations and lay bricks'. The tone of the articles is largely utilitarian, and aesthetics plays little part in the agenda of the magazine. DIY and home improvements are primarily portrayed as a means of bypassing the use of tradesmen, and in the process both saving money and providing satisfaction.

In 1957 the monthly magazine *Do It Yourself* appeared as a rival to *Practical Householder*. By 1959 it claimed to have a readership of in excess of three million, and began publishing an 'annual' in February of each year.¹⁸ Both publications also ran annual exhibitions, with the *Practical Householder* exhibition launched at Earls Court in February 1958, and the *Do It Yourself* exhibition opening for the first time at Olympia in September of the same year. Do-it-yourself had become a major economic force, and both magazines devoted around 60% of their pages to advertisements placed by manufacturers and suppliers of DIY-related goods. These ranged from paints and building materials, through to tools and equipment, and sheds large enough to house the handyman's trappings and to provide a space to work. Manufacturers and retailers had responded to the growth in interest in DIY by developing and marketing new building products aimed specifically at the amateur market—they were easy to use, and importantly, they were easy to buy. Products that had previously been aimed only at tradesmen began to be sold in smaller quantities, and in forms that were undemanding for an amateur to understand and use. Power tools began to be designed with the home workshop in mind, and products such as the electric drill were marketed as versatile do-anything products that brought even the most complex tasks within reach of the home handyman. Advertisements showed drills being adapted for use as jigsaws, circular saws, polishing machines and even paint sprayers. Products were sold with a direct appeal to the financial benefits of DIY, using phrases such as

'Save money all over the house',¹⁹ and 'Make money with the king of power tools'.²⁰

As the market for DIY matured, the emphasis in specialist magazines changed from one of utility and economy to a stress on DIY as a way of improving the style and aesthetics of the home. By the early 1960s, *Practical Householder*, which had been dominated by articles on the basics of home maintenance, had refocused on becoming a catalogue of design ideas [1]. The August 1959 issue seemed to pre-empt this change of climate in an editorial that promoted the activities of the Council of Industrial Design, recommending to readers '... if you are in London with a little time to spare, and want to see the latest designs

in anything from flowerpots to food mixers... call in at the Design Centre in the Haymarket...'.²¹ Helped by the addition of colour photography, the magazine began to specialize in the inclusion of detailed plans for furniture to be made at home, and by 1965 home build projects had almost entirely superseded house maintenance tasks.

So, in the period between the end of the War and the 1960s, a huge interest in home improvement and home craft activity had developed in Britain. As a response to this, publishers and manufacturers had developed new periodicals and product ranges, which in turn further stimulated demand. By the last half of the twentieth century, home ownership had grown



Fig 1. During the 1960s it became increasingly common for do-it-yourself magazines to include measured drawings of home-build projects. Plans for the construction of a table lamp, reproduced from *Practical Householder* August 1961, p. 821

enormously (in 1914 home ownership in Britain stood at only 10%,²² but by 1971 had risen to around 49%²³), and the attitude of the householder had changed. Home improvement was no longer tackled only out of necessity, but as part of a project leading to more aestheticized lifestyles, and as a means of establishing status and identity.

Labour, Leisure and the Family

The emergence of do-it-yourself as a significant leisure-time activity raises questions about the nature of leisure time itself. Even though the activities of home improvement are in many ways identical to the paid work carried out by tradesmen, the meaning of this labour in each case is quite different. In his vivid portrayal of the emergence of time and work discipline in late eighteenth-century Britain, E. P. Thompson describes how the nature of leisure time was fundamentally changed as result of industrialization: 'In all these ways—by the division of labour; the supervision of labour; fines; bells and clocks; money incentives; preachings and schoolings; the suppression of fairs and sports—new labour habits were formed, and a new time discipline established'.²⁴

The fluidity of pre-industrial work time was lost as work became more and more segregated from leisure and increasingly commodified. As blocks of time were either sold for wages, or withheld for leisure, the concepts of work and leisure became increasingly oppositional. Gelber draws upon Thompson's findings to account for the emergence of hobbies and pastimes in the nineteenth century.²⁵ Over time, as the idea of the work ethic became established, the guardians of public morals become progressively more concerned that unregulated time would be spent getting into trouble; in other words 'the devil would find work for idle hands'. Gelber notes how since the nineteenth century morally desirable alternatives to work have been promoted in the form of hobbies and pastimes. These oppositions between labour and leisure can be further developed in order to understand more fully the place of DIY in the formation of the home.

Labour, in its worst-case scenario, is defined as structured, repetitive, and extrinsically rewarded. Leisure, on the other hand, is controlled and regulated by the individuals themselves, and is seen as containing intrinsic rewards. Do-it-yourself and home improvement contains all the qualities of a leisure activity

whilst actually consisting of the kind of work that would be seen in another context as undesirable labour. Gelber argues that the home workshop was crucial to the construction of identity for the post-war American male. Although, in both America and Britain, men's role in this period was primarily seen as a provider of stable income, the amount of leisure time available to them was gradually increasing. Paid holidays became commonplace, and the working week shortened, often giving men weekends free of work for the first time. Between 1950 and 1980 the average working week for UK manual workers declined from between 45 and 50 hours with one or two weeks' annual paid holiday, to between 35 and 40 hours with at least three weeks' annual paid holiday. In the period between 1970 and 1977 UK expenditure on leisure went up by 8 per cent, and by 1981 one-third of all UK consumer spending was on leisure-related goods and services.²⁶

As a result of these changes men were expected to spend more time in the home, supporting their family, and contributing to the running of the household. Men found themselves in a situation where they were required to be, simultaneously, masculine and domestic. There was a new fear for men that they would become subsumed into an undifferentiated identity with their wives. This was in opposition to previous notions of masculinity that had developed in the nineteenth century around technology and industry. Unlike the predominantly private world occupied by female members of the household, the masculine sphere of work was for the most part public. In addition, whilst the man's role could be characterized as one of production, women were more likely to see themselves (and be seen) as consumers.

As these values were carried over into men's function as homebuilders, a new domestic masculine space developed—the home workshop. DIY and home improvements allowed men to participate actively in family activities whilst retaining spatial and functional autonomy. Household repairs and maintenance allowed men to stay at home without feeling emasculated. They replicated and reinforced work values and gave a sense of psychological fulfilment. Because jobs around the house had an economic value attached to them, they also carried the legitimacy of masculine skilled labour. Women could carry on the role of prime consumer by making decorating decisions and buying specially packaged tools as gifts for their

husbands, whilst men could sustain and reinforce their role as producers by labouring within the home.

Father–son relationships were key to these activities, and home workshops were seen as a healthy way of building respect amongst the male members of the family. Like sport, craft became an emblem of masculinity—an equivalent to the public sphere of work but in the domestic environment. It was considered good for the son to see the father working and reinforced the father–son bond. It is interesting to note that Barry Bucknell, a keen sailor, as well as a do-it-yourself broadcaster, was initially motivated to develop a self-build dinghy by his youngest son, who could never get the chance to sail in the Bucknell family boat.²⁷

The Mirror Dinghy

Barry Bucknell originally conceived the dinghy in 1962. Bucknell had been a popular TV handyman since his appearance as an expert on ‘About The Home’ in 1956, demonstrating how to put up shelves or clad doors in hardboard.²⁸ Although some women viewers described Bucknell as their idea of an ideal husband, in an interview towards the end of his life, his wife revealed that he was actually hopeless at finishing jobs around his own house.²⁹ Bucknell was more accommodating, however, when it came to providing a new sailing dinghy for his young son. Looking for a cheap and quick way to produce a boat, Bucknell used a system previously devised by a canoe maker, Ken Littledyke—a technique of bonding adjacent panels of ply using glass fibre tape impregnated with polyester resin. The panels are stitched together using copper wire to hold the hull in shape, and then cemented in place with the glass fibre. Using card models Bucknell quickly developed his initial design. His approach was pragmatic and inventive—typical of the trial and error approach of DIY design. The first prototype was later seen by Paul Boyle, a writer from the *Daily Mirror*. At the time, the newspaper’s publicity department was looking for new ideas to promote the paper, and it was thought that boats bearing the name ‘Daily Mirror’ might usefully keep the title before the general public. It was not new for a national newspaper to promote a sailing dinghy—the *News Chronicle* had been very successful sponsoring the *Enterprise*, and the *Sunday Times* had created the *SigneT*. It was unusual, however, for the staff of

the *Daily Mirror* to have had such a direct involvement in the development of the Mirror dinghy. In order to ensure that the product did not let down the reputation of the paper by drowning its readers, Jack Holt, an established yacht designer, was drafted in to help Bucknell develop the design further. Holt had already developed the first home build kit dinghy, the GP14 in 1949, this time sponsored by *Yachting World*, and he used his experience to refine the final details of the boat.

The dinghy itself is 10 feet 10 inches long, can accommodate two or three adults at a squeeze, and can be sailed, rowed or powered with an outboard motor. It is also light enough and small enough to be transported on the roof of a family car [2], and driven to the nearest available water for the day. To buy a kit in 1963 would have cost £63 11s for everything but the paint.³⁰ As well as buying a kit, potential sailors could also buy an unfinished version that required sanding, painting and varnishing, and a completely finished version ready to sail, costing £95 11s. At the time the cheapest similar alternative in the form of a ready-to-use boat would have cost around £250. Credit was also made available, allowing potential sailors to make a down payment of £15 followed by twelve monthly payments. As one of the advertising campaigns pointed out: ‘You’ll hardly feel the 12 monthly payments... Not once you’ve got her on the water... You can race her. You can take the whole family cruising in her. And you can carry her from one place to another on the roof of a mini!’³¹



Fig 2. Barry Bucknell in an early publicity shot demonstrating the potential for the car top transport of the Mirror dinghy

The mast is constructed from two pieces, allowing it to be stored within the boat, and the hull is built primarily from 5 mm marine plywood. The selection of this material by Bucknell allowed the design to be both light and strong. The boat gets its strength from a series of box shaped tanks that are integral to the hull, also giving a high degree of buoyancy. Because Bucknell had developed his design using cardboard models, when the panels are joined together they literally fall into the correct shape. This method avoided the complicated and accurate jigs that were normally associated with boat building, and allowed even the most inexperienced wood worker to achieve satisfactory results. As an author of a 1964 guide to dinghy classes eagerly noted: ‘Tests have shown that two novices can have the boat constructed, ready for painting and varnishing in about 50 hours’.³²

For their part, the *Daily Mirror* designed the boat’s insignia and suggested that the sail colour be Viking Red to reflect the paper’s front-page masthead. However, the boat reflected the values of the *Mirror* in a wider sense. By 1964 the *Daily Mirror* had readership of five million (the highest in Europe) and had so much money that in 1961 it was able to build its new Holborn Circus building at a cost of nine million pounds, without having to borrow a single penny from the bank.³³ It was a mass circulation newspaper with a left-of-centre editorial policy, and a predominantly working class readership. The *Mirror* had supported the Labour party since 1951, and in its credo published in 1956 had stated: ‘We believe in the ordinary people... We stand for equal opportunities for all children, good homes and robust health for everyone, a high standard of living for all’.³⁴

As well as bearing these worthy intentions, under the leadership of Cecil King and Hugh Cudlipp the *Mirror* also carefully planned its content to appeal to what it saw as a changing readership. Backed up by a piece of academic research produced by Mark Abrams of Sussex University,³⁵ Cudlipp and King believed that young Britons, born after the war and enjoying all the benefits of the welfare state, were better educated than ever, and would have increasing amounts of leisure time to spend on hobbies (such as yachting). Cudlipp, the editorial director of the *Mirror*, aimed to capture a more affluent readership from the *Express*, and perhaps the *Guardian*, while not losing the older, less well educated war-time and pre-war audience.

Although only one of a number of ventures initiated by the *Mirror* in order to capture their projected readership, the *Mirror* dinghy was probably the most successful attempt to symbolize the values of the paper. The boat effectively provided the working man with an introduction to a previously elite sport, and in a letter to *Yachting World* in 1963, Bucknell states: ‘The *Daily Mirror* has gone to great lengths to make the purchase and construction as easy and inexpensive as possible and to promote the class generally. Everyone concerned is hoping that this combined effort will bring sailing within reach of a very much larger section of the community’.³⁶

The boat was launched with a mixed reaction at the 1963 London Boat Show. The show itself was sponsored by the *Daily Mirror*’s direct rival the *Daily Express*, who made a last minute objection to the display of a dinghy advertised as the ‘Daily Mirror Boat’. Eventually a compromise was reached, and word ‘Daily’ was masked off leaving the boat to become simply the ‘Mirror Boat’.³⁷ Its unorthodox shape with the flat, i.e. ‘pram’ bow led to some negative comments, but the overall concept was well received. In fact, supported strongly by the *Daily Mirror*, who ran the owners’ association and organized class events until 1971, the boat went on to become an unprecedented success. The *Mirror* dinghy can be seen anywhere in the UK where there is water. They crowd dinghy parks of local sailing clubs, live in the drives and front gardens of coastal houses, and are often seen in various states of decomposition on beaches and foreshores. By 2004, over 70,000 boats had been built³⁸ and they are distributed throughout the world [3].³⁹

To put this in perspective, the average design of sailing boat would be lucky to number more than three or four thousand over the same period. By 1966, just three years after the launch of the boat, the *Yachting World* editor was noting: ‘... the *Mirror* Class Dinghy has reached a staggering figure: there are 5,000, and this, if nothing else, reflects the growth of yachting. Ten years ago, 500 was considered impressive, but to-day 5,000 passes almost unnoticed’.⁴⁰

Margaret Dye, whose husband Frank became known for sailing his open dinghy across the North Sea to Iceland and Norway, describes how she had built her own boat in 1969: ‘Whilst Frank was on one of his long trips, I sent off for one of these kits and built it in the dining room. Of course when Frank got



Fig 3. A Mirror dinghy being sailed by its builder and his son off Cape Town, South Africa, 2003

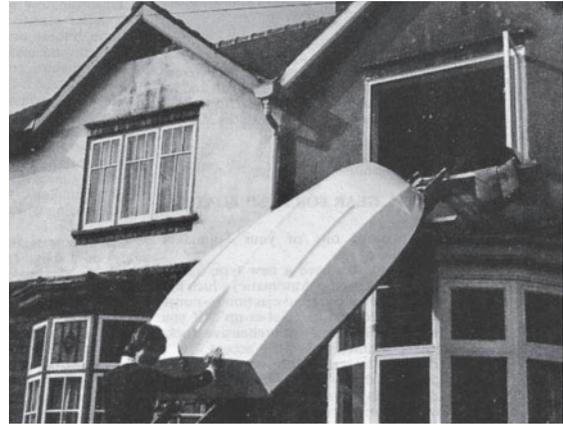


Fig 4. Many Mirror dinghies were built in domestic houses often requiring the removal of window frames in order to remove the finished boat

back he had to remove the window frames so we could get the boat out of the house' [4].⁴¹

Margaret felt that she was probably unusual being a female builder of a Mirror dinghy. Although the advertising often featured women, she is convinced that nearly all Mirror dinghies were actually built by men. The early advertising strap line 'she's lighter than most wives' seems to confirm this suspicion.

The Mirror dinghy was always conceived by Bucknell and Holt as a kit. This allowed them to control the design of the boat, and prevent dinghies with incorrect dimensions or unsafe structure being built—qualities that could not only offer an unfair advantage in races, but could also endanger the lives of the sailors. Since the beginning of the twentieth century kits had been produced as an easy way into home hobbies, and they reached the peak of their popularity in the 1950s.⁴² Kits ranged from home sewing and tapestry through to model aircraft to be constructed at home. The 1959 *Do It Yourself Annual* featured an article on home boat-building, mentioning six existing designs that could be either built from scratch using plans, or assembled from a kit.⁴³ The development of resin bonded waterproof plywood during the war, combined with new synthetic resin glues, suddenly brought boat building within reach of the home handyman, and even a magazine devoted to the subject, *Light Craft*, was published for a period.

Bell woodworking, the original manufacturer of the Mirror dinghy, had also been making home assembly kits since the end of the Second World War. Jack Holt's design for the GP14 had been produced

by Bell, and they were no strangers to promoting kit boats. The key to the success of the Mirror dinghy, however, lay in the involvement of the *Daily Mirror* marketing department. They used their knowledge of the media to ensure that the Mirror dinghy would be seen as a quite different proposition to the normal sailing boat.

The Mirror dinghy was launched in the *Daily Mirror* on Wednesday 20th February 1964 with a double-page spread entitled 'Presenting the Mirror Boat—a revolutionary idea that makes sailing cheap for everybody'.⁴⁴ Effectively an advertisement, the article contained photographs of the boat being built and sailed by the journalist and his girlfriend, whilst the text emphasized the access to freedom and fresh air, and the progressive approach to the design of the kits by 'Barry Bucknell, the famous TV handyman'. The *Daily Mirror* continued to publish prominent editorial pieces throughout 1963⁴⁵ with the *Daily Mirror* staff even launching a Mirror dinghy onto the Serpentine lake in London's Hyde Park in order to generate publicity for the boat—under the pretext that a 110-year-old by-law banning sailing on the lake had recently been lifted.⁴⁶ 'The Red Sails of Freedom' published in the newspaper in November 1963 announced to readers that on the following day they could see Barry Bucknell build the boat live on television, and proclaimed, 'Imagine a boat of your own! A passport to freedom...you don't need a licence. You don't need a number plate. You are free'.⁴⁷ As if

in an attempt to extinguish any doubts that sailing might be an appropriate sport for *Mirror* readers, the article goes on to describe ‘burly miner’ Brian Taylor putting the finishing touches to his boat before taking part in a sail racing regatta on the River Medway.

The paper continued to publicize the boat throughout the 1960s, though by 1969 this took the form of semi-display advertisements in the short-lived *Mirror Magazine*. Included in the price of the Wednesday edition of the newspaper, *Mirror Magazine* was launched in July 1969 as an upmarket and progressive complement to the paper itself. The boat was advertised in every other edition under the strapline ‘Join the Mirror set’—the Mirror was becoming an aspirational product [5]. Unfortunately the editorial policy of the magazine was a little too progressive for its parent newspaper, and it was closed down after a July 1970 issue devoted to a ‘Guide to Sexual Health’.⁴⁸

As well as appearing in the popular press, the Mirror dinghy was also heavily promoted in specialist yachting magazines. Bernard Hayman, the editor of *Yachting World*, had been involved in the development

of the dinghy with Holt and Bucknell, and his magazine carried a series of advertisements throughout the 1960s. Within the yachting press, advertising was still relatively undeveloped, and tended to rely on a straightforward use of text and image, whereas the Mirror dinghy advertisements reflected the sophisticated visual language of their sponsor. They stand out from their backdrop by addressing the reader directly, and stressing the experience of the consumer rather than the technical quality of the product. The bold sans serif typography, and use of exclamation marks and straplines conveyed the novelty and excitement of the dinghy, and began to attract a completely new audience to sailing [6].

The advertisement shown, placed in mid-1960s editions of *Yachting World*, is one of a series that consistently occupies a characteristic and prominent position on the page—the first in this magazine to consciously make use of page layout to create additional impact. By 1968 the Mirror dinghy brand had expanded to encompass a number of other boats, all bearing the Mirror name in one form or another, though none proved as popular as the original Mirror dinghy. They were also the only class of dinghy whose manufacturers were able to place full colour double-page spreads in the yachting press to advertise their boats. They built up an identity for the Mirror dinghy that successfully lived in the minds of consumers over decades, and ensured that the continued use of the boat eventually transcended the original experience of building a kit in the garage. Furthermore the class association, initially run from the *Daily Mirror* offices, helped to construct a community of users who would exchange ideas and meet to race their boats. Mirror racers followed the conventional sail racing rules, governed by the International Yacht Racing Union (IYRU), and in this sense their racing experience was identical to that of a wealthy yacht owner. The smaller scale of the racing and the cheapness of the boats, however, vastly increased the accessibility of the sport, and a number of children who learnt how to sail in the Mirror have gone on to compete at Olympic level in the sport.⁴⁹

Conclusion

It is clear that the Mirror Dinghy project was an outstanding success, and remains a unique episode in the history of the sailing dinghy. This research has

Join the Mirror set



If you like sailing, racing, meeting people or just messing about in boats, you'll love the *Mirror Dinghy*. It's a boat for all moods. Easy to sail, light and very robust. And it packs neatly on top of the smallest car.

Mirror owners and their families have plenty of opportunities to get together at races and events throughout the year. All over the world, over 20,000 enthusiasts have bought the *Mirror Dinghy*. Join the *Mirror set* this summer and have fun.

Price £117.14.6 ready-built or
£73.9.0 in kit. Send for a
colour brochure to Mirror Class
Association, Daily Mirror,
33 Holborn, London E.C.1.



**MIRROR
CLASS
DINGHY**

Fig 5. One of a series of advertisements placed by the Mirror Class Association in the *Mirror Magazine* during 1969 and 1970

Fig 6. One of a series of advertisements placed in *Yachting World*, during 1965

explored the context for this success, demonstrating how the significance of material objects depends on the confluence of a complex web of interlocking external factors. Illustrating, as it does, the effects of the social, economic and cultural changes that took place in post-war Britain, the Mirror dinghy belongs to a class of object that offers a rich seam of study for design historians. Firstly, the accessibility of new forms of mass media helped to create and sustain a culture of do-it-yourself activity, both through the marketing of new products and the provision of advice and support. This, coupled with increased leisure time, created conditions where home handymen could gain confidence in their craft skills, and take on increasingly challenging tasks. Additionally, the development of new and sophisticated materials such as polyester resins, waterproof glue and marine plywood helped designers to develop kit boats, channelling the enthusiasm for home construction into other sports and pastimes.

Nonetheless, it was the support of the *Daily Mirror* that had the biggest impact upon the success of the Mirror dinghy. As increases in disposable income, greater leisure time, and improvements in lifestyle began to allow access to newly democratized forms of sport and leisure, the free time that had been used to perform household maintenance tasks became a vehicle for social aspiration. By using their expertise in communication and marketing, the *Daily Mirror* team managed to capture this spirit for their evolving readership. They used their resources not only to develop and fund editorial and advertising material promoting the Mirror dinghy, but also to sustain an association of owners linked by newsletters and regular meetings and events. By the end of the 1960s, the opportunity for people to leave rented accommodation and become homeowners, to have the time and freedom to determine their own leisure activity, and even their autonomy from the 'secrets' of tradespeople, all in some way came to be encapsulated by the Mirror dinghy's 'Red sails of freedom'.

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Notes

- 1 In 1946 the Merlin racing dinghy cost £130—over £10,000 in 2002 values. (Calculated using the average earning index over this period: <http://eh.net/hmit/ukcompare/> accessed 3/3/05).

- Price sourced from the article: ‘Merlin, designed by Jack Holt’, *Yachting World*, January 1946.
- 2 Data available from the Royal Yachting Association, the governing body of the sport in the UK, indicate that the number of RYA-affiliated sailing clubs in the UK grew from 8,430 in 1959 to 31,089 in 1970. (www.rya.org.uk accessed 28/1/05).
 - 3 This process seems to concur with Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. Psychologist Abraham Maslow placed ‘self-actualization’ at the pinnacle of the hierarchy of human needs, to be satisfied only after the basic needs for food, clothing and shelter, safety, belonging, and esteem. The realization that the consumer culture of the 1960s was ripe for new ‘self-actualizing’ products led to a revolution in marketing in 1970s’ America.
 - 4 Judy Attfield, *Wild Things; The Material Culture of Everyday Life*, Berg, Oxford, 2000, p. 209.
 - 5 *Ibid.*, p. 73.
 - 6 *Ibid.*, pp. 202–211.
 - 7 Stephen M Gelber, *Hobbies: Leisure and the Culture of Work in America*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1999; Carolyn M. Goldstein, *Do It Yourself: Home Improvement in 20th Century America*. Princeton Architectural Press, New York, 1998.
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 - 9 Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow, The Classic Work on how to Achieve Happiness*, Rider, 2002, p. 3.
 - 10 Tim Dant, ‘Playing with things: interacting with a windsurfer’ in *Material Culture in the Social World*, Open University Press, Buckingham, 1999, p. 129.
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 - 12 H. F. Moorhouse, *Driving Ambitions: An Analysis of the American Hot Rod Enthusiasm*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1991, p. 3.
 - 13 H. F. Moorhouse, *Ibid.*, p. 144.
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 - 15 ‘Bids roll in for Barry’s house’, *Daily Mirror*, Wednesday January 30th, 1963, p. 18.
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 - 19 Wolf Cub Power Equipment, *Ibid.*, p. 846.
 - 20 Bridges Power tools, *Ibid.*, p. 859.
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 - 26 Chris Rojek, *Capitalism and Leisure Theory*, Tavistock, London, 1985, p. 14.
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 - 29 ‘All Mod Cons’, Television Documentary, Wall to Wall Television Ltd for BBC North, 1997. (Researchers Penny Sparke and Scott Oram).
 - 30 Review of London Boat Show, *Yachting World*, March 1963, p. 153.
 - 31 Mirror advertisement, *Yachting World*, January 1965, p. 210.
 - 32 Edward Delmar-Morgan and Peter Roberts; *Sailing Craft*; Odhams Books, London, 1964.
 - 33 Chris Horrie, *Tabloid Nation; From the Birth of the Daily Mirror to the Death of the Tabloid*, Andre Deutsch, London, 2003, p. 102.
 - 34 Bill Hagerty, *Read All About It! 100 Sensational Years of the Daily Mirror*, First Stone, 2003, p. 8.
 - 35 M. Abrams, *The Newspaper Reading Public of Tomorrow*, Odhams, 1964, quoted in Horrie, Chris, *Tabloid Nation; From the Birth of the Daily Mirror to the Death of the Tabloid*, Andre Deutsch, London, 2003, p. 115.
 - 36 Letter from Barry Bucknell, *Yachting World*, April 1963, p. 203.
 - 37 Barry Bucknell, ‘How it all began’ in *Reflections*, magazine of the Mirror Class Association, No. 8, March 1973, pp. 1–2.
 - 38 The convention of numbering sailing dinghies consecutively as they are built, and obliging owners to display this number on the hull and sails of their boat, gives an accurate indication of the quantity of boats that have been built within any class. The highest Mirror dinghy sail number in the 2004 Racing Classes guide published by *Yachts and Yachting* magazine is 70,337. *Yachts and Yachting*, 19 November 2004.
 - 39 The website of the International Sailing Federation (ISAF), the governing body of the sport, lists active Mirror Dinghy class associations in Australia, Ireland, Canada, Sweden, Russia, The Netherlands, and Japan, as well as the UK. (www.sailing.org accessed 28/1/05).
 - 40 Editorial Comment: *Yachting World*; May 1966, p. 233.
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 - 43 Peter Jordan, ‘Building a Boat at Home’, *Do It Yourself Annual 1959*, Link House Publications, 2 February 1959, p. 70.
 - 44 Scott Dixon, ‘Presenting the Mirror Boat—a revolutionary idea that makes sailing cheap for everybody’, *Daily Mirror*, 20 February, 1963, pp. 12–13.
 - 45 Further articles appeared in 1963 in the 16th March, 13 April, 1 July, and 23 November issues, and continued into 1964.
 - 46 Paul Hughes, ‘Sailing Along—on the Serpentine’, *Daily Mirror*, 1 July 1963, p. 9.
 - 47 Paul Hughes, ‘The red sails of freedom’, *Daily Mirror*, Saturday 23 November 1963, p. 12.
 - 48 Bill Hagerty, op. cit., p. 118.
 - 49 At the 2000 Olympics in Sydney, Ian Walker, the former UK Mirror dinghy national champion, won the Silver Medal in the Star class, whilst the Australian Tom King, the 1991 Mirror World Champion, won the Gold Medal in the 470 class.