

RS ELITE

The biggest boat to come from the RS stable to date is a classic keelboat, - a market which hasn't seen a new design for some time.

Gael Pawson and **Mark Jardine** put the Elite through her paces.

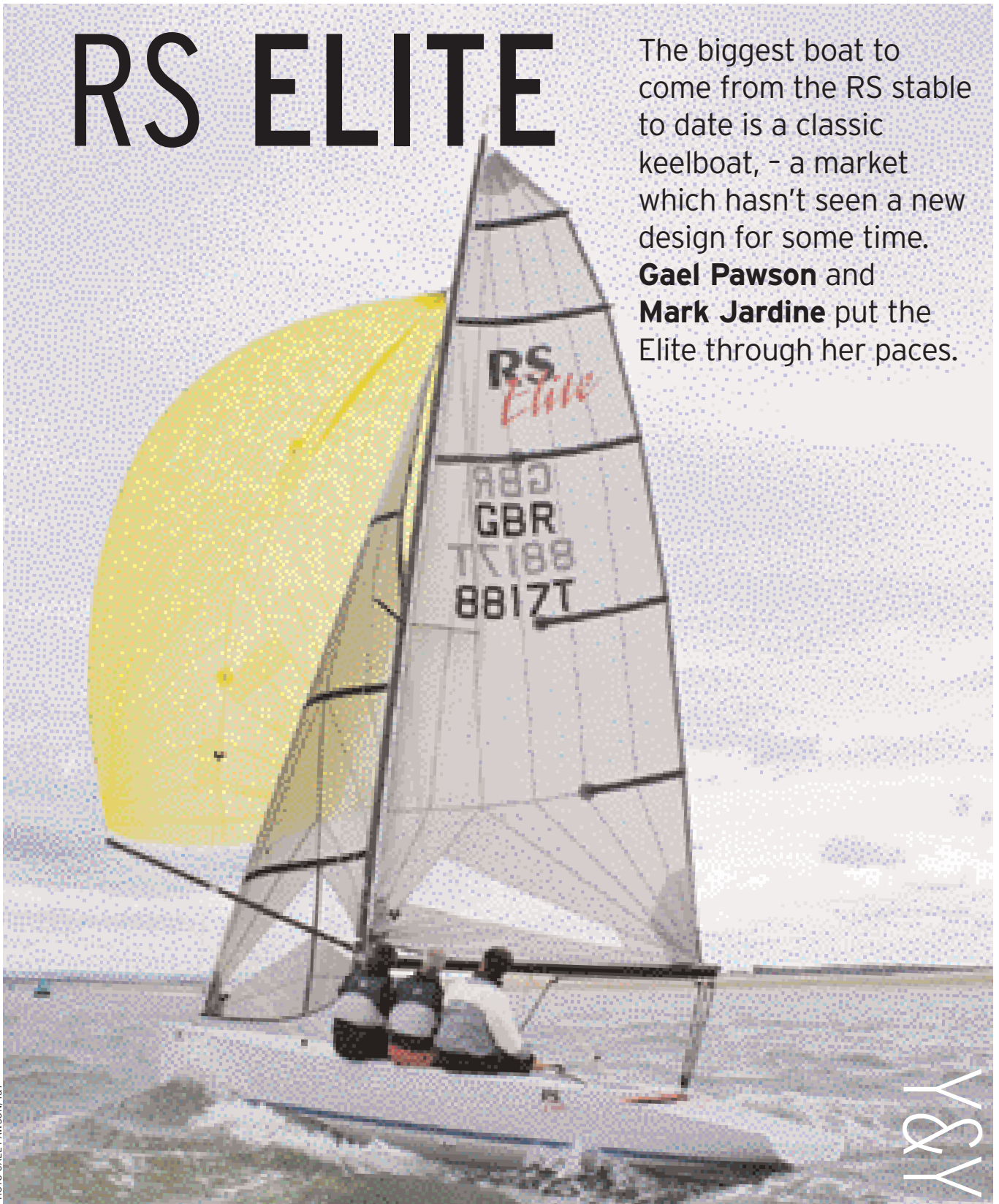


PHOTO: GAEL PAWSON/Y&Y

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Keelboats have always formed an important part of club racing, giving birth to a multitude of one-design fleets around the country. There was a time when almost every coastal club had its own one-design keelboat fleet, designed and built by a local professional to suit the waters of the area.

In modern times, the demand for national as well as club competition has seen various designs adopted more widely. The 1720 is the most famous

recent example, designed for the Royal Cork YC. The Elite comes from the same tradition, created by RS following a request from Hayling Island SC. Demand from elsewhere has already been proved, and this is a boat which will appeal in particular to those clubs looking for a cheaper, modern alternative to an aging, wooden one-design class, or as a way to revive their keelboat programme and attract new blood.

The 1720 has proved extremely successful, and

TEST



Above Overall the boat's performance was superb.

Below The foot bars mounted on the cockpit floor look odd at a first glance, but they work well.



Right The sloping sugar-scoop stern gives the Elite its classic looks.

the Elite promises to do the same, but attracting a rather different sector. A three-man displacement keelboat, rather than Sportsboat, its sloping transom works well and gives it a 'modern classic' look. Something like a mini-America's Cup yacht and in the tradition of the Dragon and Etchells. It's easy to forget this is a 24ft (7.3m) boat as its narrow (1.72m) beam disguises its size – the same as that of a Melges or J/24 – worth remembering if you're thinking of keeping it in the drive or a shed!

Hull and fittings

The hull and deck are infusion-moulded polyester GRP. Keeping the boat upright is its encapsulated lead keel. The lead bulb is cast straight into GRP keel skins and around a stainless steel keel strut that slots into the hull, up to the level of the cockpit floor level where it is bolted through. This means there shouldn't be any need for fairing, and the bottom of the boat should be an absolute one-design in shape and weight.

She might be 7.3m long, but the Elite's shallow (1.1m) draft is a major advantage. There are many places that have shallow waters and this keelboat draws about the same as a dinghy. Due to its shallow draught the keel has a longer chord than the equivalent, deeper-keeled Sportsboat, to ensure sufficient lateral resistance in light winds. An eye bolt in the cockpit floor provides a single-strop lifting point for launching.

There is plenty of room in the cockpit for three crew, in fact you could easily take along an extra passenger when not racing, and if you fancy a day cruise, the long sloping transom promises an ideal picnic area. Unlike boats such as the Etchells and Dragon, the hull has minimal overhangs, which means it maximises sailing length. The sugar-scoop stern helps keep weight out of the back of the boat.

The thwart in front of the helmsman's seating area houses the mainsail track controls on the aft side, and on the forward side the kicker and cunningham are ideally situated for the middle man or helm. The thwart also doubles as a light wind seating position for the helmsman, as stylishly demonstrated on our test sail by RS's Nick Peters.

An outboard bracket slots into two holes in the deck, and the engine itself has a neat stowage area in the transom aft of the tiller. We weren't able to try this out as the bracket had gone for a swim the previous day, but the narrow hull should be easily driven under engine. Mooring on the pontoon after sailing, the extent to which the Elite carried her way is characteristic of a keelboat of this type.

Rig and sails

With an easily-driven hull the rig isn't huge – in fact, as with a number of the RS boats, it was reduced a bit during development in order to achieve a good balance. Our test was carried out in around 15-20 knots; obviously we were into depowering mode, but everything pointed to the power being there for lighter conditions. The boat features a keel-stepped single spreader carbon mast, keeping the rig light and, together with a pivoting heel, making it easy to raise by hand. Boom and spinnaker poles are aluminium, with a conventional kicker system.

The sails were by Dick Batt and appeared well cut. The non-overlapping jib is fully battened – which should increase its racing life – as is the top

half of the mainsail. In a departure for RS, the intention is to offer a choice of sailmakers for the class, but the options are yet to be decided. The sails will not be strict one-design, but constrained by dimensions allowing for some healthy development in this area.

Sailing

Overall the boat's performance was superb. The balance on the rudder is really good on all points of sail and is something which certainly impressed.

Upwind this is a boat which will sail with an angle of heel. The Elite is very responsive, tacks easily, spinning on her keel, and she cuts her way through the chop. The tacking angle is tiny and it is easy to oversteer if you are used to wider keelboats.

All the control lines seemed quite easy to use and were close enough to hand. The mainsheet traveller was a bit heavy under load but needed very little adjustment once set. The main can be trimmed by the helmsman or middle crewmember and this will simply be a question of personal preference.

The jib is self-tacking and the sheet system is led back each side so it can be trimmed from the windward rail. The jib car position seemed quite an important control, but only has the stoppers to adjust it on the windward side, so the effect will only be seen on the new tack. We thought an adjuster for this would be useful, but fully understand RS's desire to keep the controls simple.

The seating position for helmsman and crew is comfortable, with everything easily to hand and plenty of space to breathe. The metal foot bars mounted on the cockpit floor look odd at first glance, but they are well placed and quite simply work. They provide a really comfortable sailing position – you naturally find yourself using them to step on during a tack, and the ability to hook a foot underneath gives you a 'safe' feeling as you sit out. That said, this isn't a hiking boat; class rules forbid it – keelboat sailing really is rather easier on the stomach muscles.

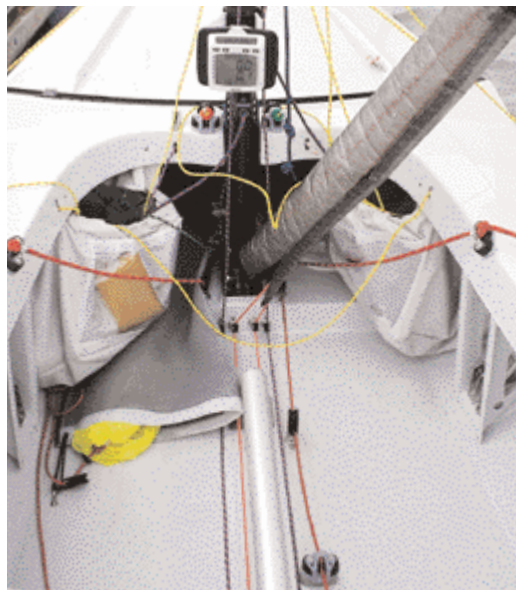
Downwind the symmetric spinnaker uses a single line hoist/retrieval system into a chute which sailors of many modern dinghies will be familiar with. The system works well with little load, although the retrieval line was a bit too long on our boat and caught itself under the bow on one occasion. However, the rounded bow should avoid too many torn spinnakers on the drop. The sheet and guy are led back through tweakers and below decks to a ratchet, which meant the loads were manageable by non-gorillas even tight reaching in a breeze. Speed-wise we saw 12 knots as we caught one wave, but downwind was mostly around 10-11.

The boat felt well balanced on both two and three sail reaches and handled the gusts easily. The rudder remained balanced at all times even when heeled. Since the boat will be used in restricted waters on courses that don't necessarily involve windward-leeward racing we thought this very important and was obviously a point RS had considered.

The twin spinnaker pole system takes some getting used to. The thinking behind the system is that no load is transmitted from the sail when setting the poles making it easy to do from the cockpit, removing the need for foredeck work. The system means more rope and correct technique, but RS feel the advantages outweigh the



Above The Elite is very responsive and tacks so easily that initially you may find yourself oversteering.



Left The jib is self tacking and the sheet system is led back each side so it can be trimmed from the windward rail. The symmetric spinnaker has a single line hoist/retrieval chute system.

disadvantages, especially for less strong and less agile sailors. The poles are stored on the boom, which rather slows down the gybe when you have to take one pole off, stow it, gybe, unclip the new pole and connect the new one. We felt we would prefer the option to use a single pole system.

The bailer system is really quite simple and neat. We gave it a good test, bearing away with the mainsheet on in order to get water over the side and see how quickly it bailed. A whirlpool actually appeared while it was draining.

Overall

RS set out to produce a true one-design keelboat that was satisfying to sail, with superb handling,

good performance and great looks, while minimising the cost and effort involved in purchase, maintenance and optimisation. The Elite seems to fit the brief completely, and we think its great value, at just under £18,000 will prove a hit.

As well as the potential for club one-design fleets, this is a boat likely to have its own class in the bigger keelboat regatta weeks. The prototype boat also competed in a breezy Round the Island Race, which was well within its capabilities, although the boats don't rate brilliantly under Sportsboat Rule.

While we don't expect the boats to fly out of the showroom in quite the way that some RS dinghy designs have done, we expect the Elite to steadily build fleets around the country and prove a class with a strong future. ■

Below The boat felt well balanced on both two and three sail reaches and handled the gusts easily.



PHOTO MARK JARDINE/Y&Y

ANSWER BACK

from Nick Peters

Gael makes the point that the RS Elite very clearly fulfils its design brief. The Elite had to be elegant, perfectly mannered and really easy to own. 'Superb performance' simply follows from getting it exactly right.

Credit has to go to Phil Morrison for his design and Richard Woof for his painstaking build process. The project has inspired massive enthusiasm, not just from Phil and Richard, but also from the first owners who have already built a very active class association. The RS Elite is a strict one-design in all ways bar the sails, and this is a concept that RS and the association are committed to. For myself, and many other sailors more used to dinghies, this boat truly beckons, and for the keelboat sailor stepping down in size it offers all the kicks without the hassle.

To get a handle on performance and the ease with which this boat sails, class secretary Peter Wareham and his helm, Mike Tong, went Round the Island and finished on a par with several of the popular Sportsboat classes and many significantly larger yachts. As Mike put it, 'we finished with boats that draw twice as much, vast kites and rails stacked with bodies!' This will be a boat that more normally races under IRC, rating around 0.900, and indeed won the first race it sailed under this rule. You can race against the keelboats under IRC and dinghies under PY. How many days are there in your week? For sure, it is the nip and tuck of class racing that the RS Elite will be all about and the initial class regattas are scheduled for later this summer. But if ever there was a boat you just want to sail and sail, it's the Elite.

RS ELITE SPECIFICATION

LOA:	7.3m
LWL:	6.6m
MAX BEAM:	1.72m
DRAUGHT:	1.1m
DISPLACEMENT:	925kg
MAIN SAIL AREA:	25.8sq m
JIB SAIL AREA:	7.3sq m
SPINNAKER:	25sq m

PRICE : £17,950

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THE OPPOSITION... Where does the Elite fit in? Here are three alternatives...



X ONE-DESIGN

The three-man XOD continues to generate close and competitive racing. The wooden hulls may not have changed significantly, but today's boats have modern sails, spars and fittings.

GUIDE PRICE:	£50,000
LOA:	6.31m
LWL:	5.49m
MAX BEAM:	1.8m
DRAUGHT:	0.91m
DISPLACEMENT:	1,304kg
MAIN SAIL AREA:	15.8sq m
JIB SAIL AREA:	7.3sq m
SYMMETRIC SPI :	25sq m



LASER SB3

The SB3 is definitely from the Sportsboat rather than the keelboat stable, with a large asymmetric rather than symmetrical kite and a lighter hull. UK nationals entry in 2003 was 32.

GUIDE PRICE:	£16,250
LOA:	6.15m
LWL:	5.5m
MAX BEAM:	2.15m
DRAUGHT:	1.5m
DISPLACEMENT:	625kg
MAIN SAIL AREA:	18sq m
JIB SAIL AREA:	9.3sq m
ASYMMETRIC SPI:	46sq m



ETCHELLS

Perhaps the most closely comparable alternative, the Etehell is well established in a number of countries, UK nationals attract around 30 boats and this year's worlds are in Australia.

GUIDE PRICE:	£31,000
LOA:	9.2m
LWL:	6.7m
MAX BEAM:	2.12m
DRAUGHT:	1.37m
DISPLACEMENT:	1,405kg
MAIN SAIL AREA:	20sq m
JIB SAIL AREA:	8.5sq m
SYMMETRIC SPI:	48sq m