

The Classic Fireball Fleet

The question of creating a Classic Fireball Fleet was raised at the AGM during the 2002 Nationals at Mounts Bay. A lively discussion took place on creating a new category within the Fireball fleet to reflect advances in manufacture and structure in recent years and to preserve excellent racing for all.

For some years now the gap between the modern wide-bow, foam sandwich boats and the older traditional wooden boats has been apparent. It is obvious there is a difference in potential boat speed and performance. This type of manufacturing advance is not unique to our class - both the Flying Fifteens and Merlins have tackled the issue and developed highly successful Classic Fleets.

Fireball UK has therefore decided to create the Fireball Classic Fleet as a category within the main UK Fleet. Qualifying boat owners will be able to participate not only in National Championships but also in special competitions within these regattas reserved for Classic Boats. Once a Fireball, always a Fireball, and the intention is to give classic Boat Owners a chance not only to shine in their own arena but to show those white boats what they can do.

The Association has put great effort into researching Fireball development over the years – identifying boat builders and reviewing their methods - to come up with a fair definition of a Classic Boat. Not an easy task considering the wide range of materials and designs employed over the years. In the end, after a great deal of thought and deliberation, the following qualifying criteria have been decided:

Boat Builder	'Classic' Qualifying Criteria
Chippendale	All boats built
High Performance Sailcraft	All boats built
Plycraft	All boats built
R. Moores & Son	All boats built
Rondar	All boats built
Rowsell & Morrison	All boats built
Stanley & Thomas	All boats built
Bob Hoare	Numbers up to 13856
Goodwin	Numbers up to 14200
Severn Sailboats	Numbers up to 14000
Winder	Numbers up to 14109 plus boat number 14129

Amateur built boats with numbers up to 14000 will automatically qualify. The Technical Members on the Committee will assess boats over that number on a boat by boat basis.

These are intended as provisional qualifications for boats and the Fireball Committee retains the right to review and if necessary, change the qualification criteria of a boat builder or boat at any time.

To help promote the Classic Fleet there is also a four event Classic Series, see fixtures for information

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Fireballs come in a variety of different materials, which have advantages and disadvantages depending on the intended use.

Plastic boats (actually made of fibreglass) are among the oldest Fireballs, and are the most durable. These boats can be cheap to buy at as little as £100 (very sad) - £750 (very good). They require no maintenance whatsoever and are easy to mend if you have an accident. They are not favoured by racing sailors due to their relative lack of power in strong winds. However, they can compete reasonably well with more modern designs in anything up to a force 4. Look for sail numbers of 10,000 upwards with the really good kit being numbered above 13,000. As with all Fireballs, the later the model you can get for your money, the better. But, don't spend too much on one of these, they will always be 'bargain basement' material. Best buy is the Holt (mark 3) if you can find one.

Wooden boats tend to be somewhat newer, since the oldest examples have rotted away by now. Early boats were just painted and varnished, and required yearly attention to keep them sound. Many later boats were treated with epoxy resin on the hull (and possibly the decks), which is a virtually maintenance-free compound and makes ownership much easier. Boats without epoxy are rarely worth more than £500, and need careful examination. Epoxied boats can fetch between £500 and £1,200 depending on their age and condition. Look for any signs of damage, or evidence of peeling paint or worn/blistered varnish. If any of the wood is soft with moisture, don't buy it. Wooden boats are considered to be generally faster than 'plastic' boats, but need more maintenance, and are more prone to soaking up water, which makes them heavier and slows them down. Buy only sound examples from around number 9,000 upwards, or 13,000 if you plan to race it. Best buys are Winder and HPS.

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Foam sandwich boats (each surface is a layer of foam enclosed by two layers of grp or kevlar) are the 'state of the art'. They are low maintenance, although not as durable as 'plastic' boats in an accident (the outer layer punctures quite easily, and water can get into the foam). They tend not to be painted, but to retain the gel-coat colouring, which makes evidence of injury easy to spot. However, minor prangs are commonplace and do not devalue the boat. These boats are stiffer than 'plastic' or wood, and more likely to be 'down to weight' (ie as light as class rules permit). They are therefore favoured by racing sailors. Sail numbers start at around 14,000, and prices at around £2,500. 'Composite' boats have wooden decks which are nicer to look at and would have cost more initially, but require more maintenance than a plastic deck. Best buy would be a composite Winder at around £2,000 - £2,500, or if your budget is a bit tight, go for a composite Severn Sailboats item. For around £1500 - £2000 these are criminally cheap. The all foam 'White Winder' boats start at around £4,500 second-hand.

Brand new Fireballs – nearly always all-foam sandwich 'White' boats these days, can be yours for around £8,000. They don't go any quicker than a 10 year old composite boat, but you will look good if you buy one.

All Fireballs should come equipped with a mainsail, jib and spinnaker, as well as a rudder and a trolley. Check that all these are present and in good order. Also check that the mast looks straight when viewed from the front and fairly straight viewed from the side. It should not be kinked or twisted. Put rig tension on and look up the mast track for S bends and other nastiness. Some Fireballs have a spinnaker chute, others have bags. It is marginally easier to launch and recover a spinnaker from a chute, but the chute itself adds weight, reduces buoyancy and may take on water in rough conditions. Bags are more popular these days. Also, check the foils (rudder and centreboard). Old stuff is painted, the good kit is wood encased in fibreglass or epoxy with nice clean leading and trailing edges. Take a long hard look at the seams between floor and side/front/rear tanks, and at the base of the centreboard case - nastiness here is serious. Also check for splits in the floor (if the floor is painted then examine the underside of the boat carefully). Ideally, your new Fireball should come with a measurement certificate, although the old/cheap boats probably won't. Ask for it anyway. If you are buying a boat that 'needs some attention', make sure it's very keenly priced - boat parks across the country are littered with this kind of 'bargain'. If you are planning to race the thing then ask what level of competition it has been raced at; is it just club raced, or has it been to open meetings, nationals, Europeans, world championships etc. Has it won anything worthwhile, and if so, has it been significantly mucked about with since?

The important thing to note about the foam sandwich Winders and Severns is that the hulls on these boats do not deteriorate over time, so your investment

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will not devalue significantly and you won't ever have to get the glue or paint tin out. Composite boats will need the deck varnish touching up every now and then, but this is really not a big deal. The same is true of fibreglass boats, but they are not very fast in a blow so avoid these if you intend to race. Delange boats are comparable to a composite wide bow Winder, but not as well made internally and can need maintenance. The White Northampton boat was the first all foam and fibreglass production boat, but many suffered from trouble around the seams. There are some solid ones out there, but it's hard to tell which ones they are. They are no longer in production, and are generally quite cheap.

If in doubt, ask the fleet captain for his opinion.

Price Range	You can afford	Sail number range
£0 – £150	Wooden boat which needs some attention before you can sail it.	Any
£150 – £350	Wooden boat which you can sail, but may have some bits missing/bent/broken. Fibreglass boat in reasonable working order.	Any, but 10,000 + is advisable.
£400 – £700	Wooden boat in good working order. Epoxyed hull if paying over £600. Preferably with spinnaker kit. Fibreglass boat in good condition with spinnaker.	12,500 +
£750 – £1200	Wooden Winder or HPS with nice foils, decent sails, epoxyed hull and all the racing gear White Northampton boat, but be prepared for some DIY fixing.	13,000 +
£1500 – £2500	Severn Sailboats composite boat with racing gear.	14,000 +
£2000 – £3000	Narrow-bow Winder composite boat with racing gear.	14,000 +
£2750 – £3500	Wide-bow Winder composite boat with racing gear	14,350 +
£4000 – £7000	White Winder	14,450 +
£7000 +	New or nearly new White Winder	14,600 +