

ST AYLES SKIFFS

Rekindling the Spirit of Community



Open water racing in Scotland.

Bruce Stannard charts the extraordinary St Ayles Skiff phenomenon, the fastest growing community-based waterborne activity in the world, and now taking off in Australia.

Sequestered in the rural peace and quiet of his tiny, whitewashed stone cottage on the Isle of Skye, the slightly built and softly spoken Australian-born boat builder Iain Oughtred is an unlikely folk hero. And yet beneath that shaggy, bearded exterior there beats the heart of a genuine star of the wooden boat firmament.

Over the many years that 74-year-old Oughtred has lived and worked in Britain his design genius has created a vast fleet

of elegant and much loved small ships.

It is one of his most recent, the St Ayles Skiff, which has provoked an international upheaval in community-based waterborne activity. Over 200 of these eye-catching plywood kit boats have been sold to community groups in the UK, US, New Zealand, Netherlands, Canada and here in Australia, where 10 boats have been built or are building, the first three by women's groups ('WOW' Women on water!). Many more are now

under construction here, in New Zealand and throughout the world.

An 'Anzac' St Ayles Skiff Association is currently under serious discussion.

The idea for the St Ayles Skiff was born when boat kit manufacturer and keen rower Alec Jordan moved to the former mining village of East Wemyss, nestled beside the Firth of Forth in Fife, Scotland.

He drew his inspiration from the tales of the rowing regattas that once took place around the East Fife coalfields until the mid-1950s.

The miners built their own boats from timbers scavenged from the collieries, using the boats to supplement their food stocks by fishing, socialising and engaging in rowing races in their own and neighbouring villages.

Alec Jordan's vision grew out of his observation that Scotland, as the fisheries and other waterborne activities collapsed, had turned its back on the sea, and the strength and historic purpose that wrought.

Alec's vision from the outset was that it was now time for Scotland to turn its face back to the sea, that a one design community built class was the vehicle to revive that lost community spirit.



Auxiliary sail rig on Kiwi St Ayles Skiff en route to Franklin.



For some, the St Ayles Skiff meant seeing their own coast, from the sea, for the first time — An open water race start in Scotland.

The worldwide success of the St Ayles Skiff has vindicated Alec Jordan's original one design class coastal rowing vision, and the faith that inspired in the Scottish Fisheries Museum (SFM) when in early in 2009 they funded Alec's proposal to commission Iain to develop Alec's concept into working plans, for eventual class kit production.

How many imagined it was an idea whose time had come?

People have come together all over the world in friendly cooperative endeavour, rekindling the deep-seated community

spirit which once helped to define us as human beings. At its core is a powerful ideal and one that has resonated loudly and clearly with communities far beyond Scotland. It is best summed up by the clever aphorism: "a community building a boat, building a community."

Alec Jordan and the SFM had agreed that the proposed rowing boat would be based on the Fair Isle Skiff, a sea-kindly double-ender whose design origins could be traced all the way back to the Vikings, the sea rovers who in the ninth century conquered and colonised Orkney, Shetland

and the islands in between including tiny Fair Isle, far out in the North Sea.

The boisterous salt-laden winds that dominate Scotland's Northern Isles had left few trees of any substance. In centuries past that meant that the Norwegian Pine and Oak component parts for the Fair Isle Skiffs and other small lightly-framed fishing boats like the Shetland Yoies had to be imported from Norway.

Characterised by long overhangs and lots of flare all round, most of them were assembled in Norway, then disassembled and exported in an early form of flat-pack kit.

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WOW (Women on Water) building Australia's first St Ayles Skiff Imagine at Living Boat Trust Shed, Franklin Tasmania in 2008.

With this decision made, Iain then worked on taking the lines of the Fair Isle skiff and re-drawing it for the much lighter displacement offered by using marine plywood.

Once Oughtred completed the plans, Alec set about turning them into a kit, building the prototype to prove the design, making sure the kit would go together well. While this was happening, both Alec and former champion rower Robbie Wightman were using their many contacts to sell the idea, with the result that when the prototype was launched on October 31, 2009, plenty of spectators and eager participants came from distant parts of Scotland.

What they witnessed was the beginning of a global coastal rowing revolution.

Many visitors to the Australian Wooden Boat Festival in Hobart, in February this year would have admired these lovely 6m double-ended clinker-ply skiffs moored together, and later, on the Sunday, sprint racing in the picturesque setting of Constitution Dock and Watermen's Stairs.

About 50 rowers churned the seven boats in furious sprint racing heats, including a very popular refugee group of Iranian women and men from South Australia, the women's hijabs flying, to the roaring delight of the crowds; the slightly unlikely competitive energy of it all.

This pioneering Anzac St Ayles fleet included *John Liddy*, built by The Armfield Slip Shed in Goolwa, South Australia and *Cariad*, built by the Rev Jim Barr's Welsh Church congregation in Melbourne. With Tasmania being the centre of Australian Skiffeddom, *Imagine* built by WOW (Women on Water) in Franklin,



WOW Group in Goolwa built John Liddy.

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Cygnets from *Cygnets* and *Chiton* from the *Taroona* represented the home fleet. *Wee Tawera* and *Frank Worsley* were shipped in from New Zealand.

All went on to compete in the three day inaugural International St Ayles Skiff Regatta on the Huon River at Franklin, in which over 400 rowers from all over the world, including the very popular group of nine privately sponsored Iranian refugee women and men asylum seekers. The racing was almost non-stop, from 8:00 in the morning to 4:30 in the evening, with no break all day. The heats and finals were mostly over two kilometres, with one kilometre sprint courses on the last day, which also saw extremely well supported community and industry corporate events.

One of the highlights of Hobart's Wooden Boat Festival was the illustrated talk given by Alison Grant, a Scottish rower who spoke about the life-changing experience of building one of the skiffs with other members of her community at Portobello, on the shores of the Firth of Forth near Edinburgh. Ali Grant spoke of the way in which the normally reserved Scots threw off their inhibitions and came together to build the first boats.

"The spirit of neighbourly cooperation was something of a revelation," she said.



Team Iran coxed by Jim Barr, Welsh Church Melbourne.

"People who might have hitherto avoided contact with strangers, found themselves in animated conversations in the fairly tight confines of a boatshed. They learned to get on with each other and in the process they discovered something of themselves."

The first Portobello skiff was aptly named *Ice Breaker*.

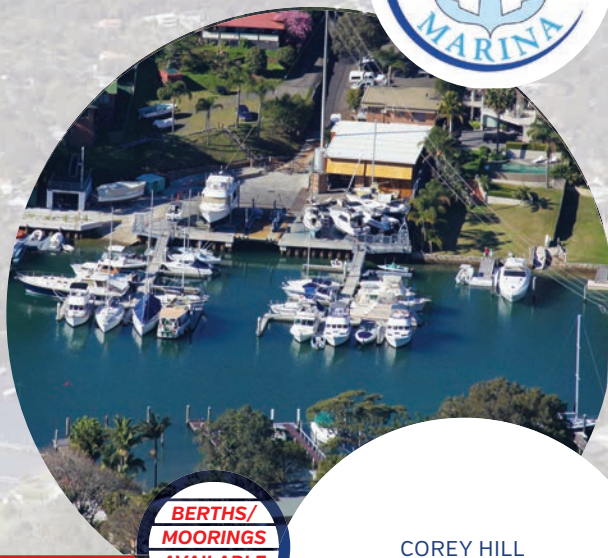
But the real joy, and it is one which has been replicated throughout the world, came when the rowing crews took the St

Ayles skiffs offshore from where they were able to look back and observe their coastal communities, some for the first time.

Many were re-establishing an ancient bond with the sea, a connection that was severed when the Scottish fishery collapsed in the 1950s. Offshore, some of the rowers had life-changing encounters with marine wildlife, observing sea birds, giant basking sharks, seals and Orcas. Building and then rowing the St Ayles

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St Ayles Skiffs on Loch Broome in Scotland.

Skiffs became a journey of discovery and adventure.

The Scottish Coastal Rowing Association was formed and by 2013 there were so many skiffs in action that the inaugural St Ayles World Championships were held on the spectacularly beautiful waters of Loch Broom, a deep sea loch at Ullapool on the west coast.

Over a thousand rowers came from around Britain, Australia, the USA and Netherlands to row the 34 skiffs in 19 race categories including an under 17s race, over 40s, over 50s, and over 60s. Some competitors were well over 70 but all had one thing in common ...

They were all enjoying themselves with that species of blissful fun that can really only ever be enjoyed in a boat afloat on the water.

The first two kits have just been sent to the Freshwater Bay Boat Club in WA. These will be overseen in the build by Steve Ward, inspired by the legendary John Longley who built *Endeavour* and also 'gets' the idea!

Longley says the boats have been funded by individual members of the Royal Freshwater Bay Yacht Club and will be built by interested members of all ages and genders.

"We have been allocated a small shed on the premises to build the boats. It will be cosy but should be fine. The build will be overseen by Steve Ward, who built *Australia II*, so we are in good hands.

"Our plan is to have the first boat finished by Opening Day in October and the second in the New Year."

Good hands? For sure!

Strong interest is now coming from nearby WA clubs, QLD, NSW and in Victoria the Royal Geelong Yacht Club are working a two boat proposal. The common theme from these clubs is the wish to provide a more varied social and boating activity for their club members. A further 10 are likely to be ordered for Navy Cadets in WA. In New Zealand four are on the water with seven more building.

The enthusiastic Kiwi response was encouraged by the remarkable generosity



At only 190kg for one St Ayles Skiff, a simple trailer will carry two boats.



Race Start at Franklin.

of the philanthropist yachtsman Mike Mahoney, owner of the beautifully restored 1928 Logan cutter *Tawera*.

Mahoney 'gets' the community aspect of the programme and the idea of open water coastal rowing, expeditioning and competition. In a highly imaginative form of philanthropy, he purchased 11 of the Australian kits in one go, and donated them to various New Zealand community groups where a need has been identified.

In 2013, there were 34 boats at the 'Skiffie Worlds' at Ullapool. Iain Oughtred came down from the Isle of Skye and stood, unobtrusive as usual, by the loch shore. When a stranger innocently asked him what he did for a living, Oughtred replied that he was a "boat designer".

"And are there any of your boats out there?" asked the stranger gesturing toward the fleet lined up for the start.

"Oh, aye", Oughtred replied in his best Scottish burr, "34 of them." ↴

Footnote:

The name St. Ayles refers to the early Celtic Christian monk of that name. The remains of his stone chapel form the entrance lobby to the Scottish Fisheries Museum at Anstruther. In Australia the 300kg St Ayles Skiff flat-packs (2500mm x 1220mm x 350mm) are promoted and manufactured by Robert Ayliffe's Stray Dog Boat Works in Mt Barker, South Australia.

The \$4,650 cost includes moulds and kit specific instructions. The dimensioned solid timber, Bote Cote Epoxy products gudgeons and pintles are provided separately. The building notes, instructions and an international building conversation may be found on the Scottish Coastal Rowing website <scottishcoastalrowing.org>.

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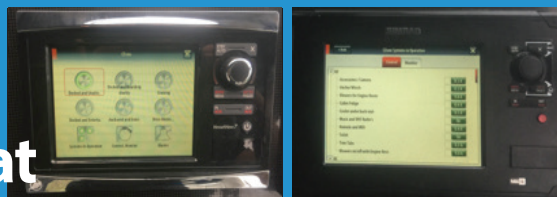
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