

coastal rowing

Iain Oughtred's new St Ayles Skiff, and Alec Jordan's Scottish Community Coastal Rowing program

by ALEC JORDAN

We all have dreams of things we would like to achieve; how rare and sweet it is to live the dream!

For me, it was the timing.

HAVE BEEN WANTING TO GET OUT ROWING on the sea for years, but Scotland's coastal rowing scene has been limited to the Shetland Isles, and a couple of small pockets of die-hards keeping the traditions alive from the clubs which thrived in the late 19th Century, but slowly and sadly sank into oblivion as the 20th Century ran on.

I have been making kit boats since 2003, starting with stitch and tape designs, and moving on to clinker ply a couple of years later. In the past five years, we have kitted most of Iain Oughtred's design catalogue; these kits are made and distributed in Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific by Robert Ayliffe at nisboats.com 0428 817 464 (soon to be rebadged as Stray Dog Wooden Boats)

In May 2009, the Scottish Fisheries Museum approached me with a view to having a boat built



Community offshore rowing racing was popular in Scotland at the turn of the 20th Century.

in their boat yard by students from the local college, using a clinker ply design. During one of the initial meetings to discuss the project, the question of what to do with the finished article was raised. At this there was a distinct silence, and I ventured my idea that we try to restart coastal rowing around the Fife coast - there had previously been a strong tradition of coal miners building and racing their own boats locally.

This suggestion met with hearty approval from the museum, and it was agreed that Iain Oughtred would be commissioned to design a clinker ply hull based on the Fair Isle Skiff, a traditionally planked design built to handle the turbulent waters of the north of Scotland.



A racing skiff built by a Fife mining family in 1931.

Discussing the idea a few days later with a boatbuilder in Edinburgh, it transpired that another former sliding seat rower had been of the same mind, and was already talking to people on the south side of the Forth. I soon had Robbie Wightman's phone number, and after a very long chat that evening, we had the makings of a new project.

Building space being a major problem for some groups, the length of the boat was restricted to 22ft. From this, Iain drew up the plans to give a boat with a beam of 5'8", able to take four rowers

and a cox. The weight of the prototype is 155kg, light enough to be carried by six average people.

As soon as Iain Oughtred completed the drawings, I translated these into the kit, then set about first building a model which started to attract interest from the boating blogosphere, and then, with the help of a retired friend from Ullapool, Chris Perkins, the prototype.

While this was going on, Robbie Wightman was speaking to his contacts on the south of the Forth, and the interest started growing. Seven weeks after we started the construction, the prototype was lowered into Methil Dock for her first sea trials. Immediately, it was obvious that we had a beautiful, and easily rowed boat, and we were set for the official launch the following weekend - Halloween.

The last day in October in Scotland is not normally associated with warm sunny weather, but this was our foretaste of what is starting to be known as Skiff Weather. In brilliant sunshine, the St Ayles Skiff made her official debut, and by the end of the day, many people had had a row in her.

Within a few days, orders for the kits began to come in.

One of our main objectives in the Coastal Rowing project was that the cost of the skiff would be kept to the absolute minimum. The idea is that the communities who want to race them will raise the funds and build the boats themselves rather than raise a lot more money and go along to the local boatbuilder to have her built. In this way the cost of the boat is kept to a manageable level, and hopefully, with the boat being built within the community, it would start acting as a focus for that town or village. The rules of the build were written with this in mind, so that a community with deep pockets will not have a significant advantage over the less well off places. Composites are banned, as are expensive fittings, except where absolutely necessary such as the rudder pintles.

Otherwise, the rules are fairly loosely drawn, so that the builders are encouraged to try different

The model that got the blogosphere buzzing.



ideas to make the boat run better. Another objective has been to re-invigorate interest in wooden boatbuilding, so that youngsters will learn, and hopefully gain an interest in actually making things themselves rather than just buying something. The effects of this approach have for me been extremely encouraging as I have heard the tales back from the builds.

In Achilitibuie on Loch Broom, just the fundraising brought the community together, surprising the main organiser, Lesley Muir. Apart from a small grant and further loan from the local community council, the money for the *Coigach Lass* was raised by ceilidhs, curry and karaoke nights, general begging, and the effects of Lesley's silken voice in scrounging free and discounted items necessary to complete and then row the boat. "We've had more fun just raising the money for this boat than we have had for years," was her comment to me on one occasion. When the *Coigach Lass* was launched, more than half the population of the Coigach peninsular came to watch her being piped into the water.



Port Seton and Cockenzie's *Boatie Rows* at the Eyemouth Regatta.

In North Berwick, the club formed to row the skiffs took the approach of a very regimented and perfectionist build, probably too perfectionist as their first boat was fit to row only at 2am on the morning of the first regatta.

Port Seton's approach was a little more relaxed. The harbour owners kindly gave the use of a workshop which became the morning social centre for the pensioners who had taken on the task of building their skiff. With the workshop being open to the public to see what was going on, the build attracted such interest that well over 300 people turned out for her launch.

It probably also whetted more local interest as Port Seton are now one of the strongest clubs with over 80 people rowing regularly, club

sweatshirts which nearly everyone wears, so that the Port Seton presence at a regatta is a maroon invasion!

The first regatta at Anstruther on May 29 saw six boats ready to race, if not actually quite completed. The racing was preceded by the inaugural general meeting of the Scottish Coastal Rowing Association. David Tod, the museum trustee who had instigated the original boatbuilding project and had been chairman of the steering group which had run the project over the winter handed over to the Association with the words "When the museum took on this project, we had no idea that we were grabbing hold of a Tiger's Tail." At that point, there were another 13 boats under construction, or ordered. The total at the time of writing in August is 28 with immediate interest in another 15 or so.



Going for it at Eyemouth.

The summer racing season has seen another three major regattas, and more boats joining the fleet. As I had hoped there have also been more than a few local gatherings, often organised at



A break in the day's racing at the Scottish Traditional Boat Festival at Portsoy.

short notice, where two or three closely located clubs will get together for a few hours of racing, followed by socialising afterwards.

Even at the big regattas, a shortage of crew will usually find a volunteer from another club who will row their hearts out for their temporarily adopted crew.

As experience of rowing the boat has increased, we have found her an incredibly good sea boat; she handles a chop with ease, and 10ft swells give an exhilarating surf (until you have to row into them!)



The Anstruther womens' 40+ crew. In their race at North Berwick last week they beat the opposition by 500m, over a 3.2km course! Only one of the crew was under 50.

Less than a year into the project, we can now safely say that it has been a raging success, and there has been interest expressed already from Australia, New Zealand, and the USA.

At the Portobello Regatta at the end of July, with no organisational responsibilities as I had at Anstruther and Portsoy, I was at last able to simply enjoy rowing myself and just watching the racing.

I think that the project is best summed up by the identical words from two other rowers that afternoon: "Alec. What have you started here?"

How sweet it is!



A new race starts. How sweet it is!