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ASTO Exchange to OYT South's *John Laing*



Crew of the *John Laing* in Greenock.

This summer I was lucky enough to travel to Ireland and join the UK sail training vessel *John Laing* for the Tall Ship Race to Greenock, Scotland. It was an absolutely brilliant experience. I would like to thank Marcia and Lucy from ASTO, the amazing crew of the *John Laing*, the John Myatt Trust which funded the voyage, and BBI for nominating me for the opportunity.

Five years ago I learned how to sail (and a whole lot more) on the tall ship *Fair Jeanne*. On June 27<sup>th</sup>, I was in a small town in Ontario with her, undergoing her annual inspection as we do every year. This summer was different though. Two days later found me on a plane headed for Dublin, Ireland, about to become a trainee again on a completely different kind of boat from another country. I spent Canada Day sightseeing in Dublin and wondering what the *John Laing* would be like. That afternoon I caught a coach to Waterford, where the race would be starting from. Marcia had booked the ticket and said the other Canadian exchange participant, a girl called Mercedes from Halifax, would already be on the bus. With this in mind, I walked very slowly down the aisle and intently stared down every girl on the bus until one of them stared intently back at me instead of looking away. We awkwardly asked names at the same time and were relieved that we found the right people.

When we reached Waterford, the first thing that struck us was that the bus had to drop us off well out of town because Waterford is a tiny stone village (the oldest in Ireland, but somebody's reckoning) and with the Tall Ships Festival in full swing, it was impossible to bring a bus in. So instead we were picked up by a very harried but fantastic liaison who drove us into town, told us how to find our boat, and had the key to a townhouse that was under renovations for us to stay in for the night (we would be joining *John Laing* the next afternoon). Mercedes and I wandered around the packed town, which consisted of about 10 cobble-stone streets all on a

30° incline towards the harbour, before finding some groceries and going back to the townhouse. There, it turned out the stove and oven were among the things under renovation, as well as the shower, unfortunately. Fortunately however, we are pretty creative and don't mind being dirty. Mercedes' first instinct was to start a fire to cook her soup, and in fact we spent a few minutes considering the likelihood of finding firewood in Waterford. Then we took a moment to laugh at ourselves and knew we would get along great, since we were on the same wavelength about things like starting fires to accomplish lunch. Eventually Mercedes cooked her soup in the electric kettle and I heated my food on a plate over the toaster.

We then went to admire the harbour, which was absolutely packed with tall ships of all rigs and sizes. We got a brief tour of *John Laing* and met the skipper, James, who gave us bracelets that would let us get through the dock gates easier (we had to beg and plead to get past security to the *John Laing* the first time). Another important thing – the three days in Ireland were all bright blue skies and sunshine for the festival, not a drop of rain!

On July 2<sup>nd</sup>, we joined the *John Laing* along with 10 other people from England and Scotland. We were introduced to Colin, one of the watch leaders, and Kirsten, who was the bosun and very busy trying to fix the boat's refrigerator. Our first task was to retie the headsails at the bow so they would be tidy and ready for the sail parade the next morning. We were a pretty quiet group the first day, with only a few people having been on a boat before, so we sort of stood there shyly next to the large sail and looked around. My automatic reaction was to start directing people to hold certain bits and explain what to do, but I had to suppress that by reminding myself that a) I wasn't crew here, and b) I didn't actually know how they tied their sails up! Fortunately Colin came to our rescue, the sail was flaked and lashed to the rail with sail ties, and then we all gathered in the cockpit for in-house. Colin and Kirsten explained the three-watch system, emergency procedures, how to use the heads, how to use a winch (which I had never done before), and issued us our harness-lifejacket hybrids you see race sailors wearing that we had to wear at all times on deck while underway. We also got issued our matching foul-weather gear, which debunked the mystery of how yacht sailors always look so damn pro from a distance.

We then spent some time getting to know each other while waiting for the skipper to come back with the provisions. Some people already knew each other from school, everyone was keen to be there, and I liked everyone right away. They were mostly a bit older than the trainees back home, but I was still the oldest by far and decided to keep that to myself. Unfortunately our attempts to break the silence by answering questions in a circle went straight from "where are you from? Have you been sailing before?" to "how old is everyone?". I was determined to really be one of the trainees though, and fortunately one of the greatest things about sailing is that differences get left on shore.

Eventually we were introduced to the rest of the crew and split into watches. My watch leader was Kirsten, which was great as she was the only one of the *John Laing's* crew who also sails square-riggers. It meant we had lots to laugh about and she was good at predicting the things I did and



didn't know about sailing, or translating between yacht and tall ship terms for the same thing. We then "moved in" to our bunks, sort of. The forward half of the boat was where the trainees slept in 12 narrow triple bunks. While I was grateful not to be hot-bunking, the bunks were so small most people tied their lee-cloths even when in port, and the top bunk (which I had) required ninja skills to get into, especially when the boat was pitching about. We also needed to re-pack everything, including sleeping bag, when not in bed so that it would stay behind the lee-cloth. To make up for all this, the heads were awesome and never clogged.

That evening we were free to explore the festival, and after dark we all watched over the harbour to mark the end of the festival. The next morning was clear and sunny again – this is a big deal in Ireland, so everyone was talking about it – and all the ships were preparing to leave dock for the parade of sail down the river to ocean, where the race would start in the afternoon. It was absolutely breathtaking to see so many ships together, slowly moving past the towns in the Irish countryside along the river, with people waving from the rocky shore the whole way. As we got nearer to the ocean, the class A ships were able to spread a lot



Chaos at the river mouth, where tall ships waited for the race to start.

more sail, passing back and forth with hundreds of trainees in the rig, while the smaller boats wove between the rest launching water bombs at one another. We got drenched for not being on the ball with the whole water-fight thing. A few trainees were somehow already terribly seasick on the river, though it turned out later that they more likely had really bad food poisoning. We also managed to run over a lobster pod just before the start time. So there we were, trying to cut the line around our prop while right in front of us the class A's were lined up and spreading all canvas for their race start. It looked like we were going to get run down by these mammoths, but Colin cut us free and we scuttled out of there. After that we christened our new lobster-pod Archie, and no one made fun of me for keeping a knife on me at all times anymore.



All the Class A ships getting ready for the race to start.

Our class was the third to start, but because there was quite light winds, we quickly passed the bigger boats that started first. Unfortunately the wind died completely that evening and night, leaving 60 tall ships floating



From this... to this in one day!



on the glassy water, getting sunburned (in Ireland!!) and trying not to run into one another. During the night we were going backwards with the tide, and one poor tanker who ended up in our midst must have had a hell of a time dodging everyone. Ironically, the race course had been changed to the east coast of Ireland because the wind was predicted to be too strong on the west coast. The second day the wind

picked up and so did the waves, big time. The next few days passed in a blur

of seasickness, standing watch, being cold, and sleeping in whatever bunk you were capable of crawling into (the top bunk became too hard after a while!) that felt like a week. Despite the cold, wet weather and the seasickness, it was pretty glorious to come up on deck and feel the wind, watch the grey waves race by, and take the helm, trying to keep a on course despite the plunge of the boat. None of us trainees had any proper sense of the passage of time and were genuinely shocked to find that we'd left Ireland on Sunday and arrived in Scotland on Tuesday. It felt like no one had ever been so happy as us to finally see the grey, dreary coast of Scotland through the rain. We arrived in Campbeltown that night and feasted on fish and chips from the town, followed by what would become the extreme sport of water-fight washing-up. The mood on the boat improved 1000%, and everyone began to "properly" get to know each other and bond over the trials of the past few days. As a bonus, we got to shower at the local pool!

We left Campbeltown the following day in company with another little boat called Black Diamond, who had won the Class D part of the race. Many of the crew knew each other, and their boat carried half the people ours did. We spent a beautiful, seasick-free day sailing along the beautiful Scottish coast. We even got to set the spinnaker, a huge and awkward downwind sail, which apparently had not been set on John Laing in a very long time. Between the trickiness of setting it, and the minor emergency when the wind suddenly backed, causing it fly sideways and drag in the water, I could see why using it was such a rarity. Later that afternoon the wind died, so both boats took in sail and slowly began to "drift" nearer to each other. We prepped our supply of water balloons and tried to look as innocent as possible. Black Diamond came up alongside us and then nimbly spun around right it front – we threw our water balloons but were shocked to find them throwing rotten fruit and cereal back at us! The two boats circled one another, coming back in for volley after volley of increasingly disgusting food. James, our captain, was the one to pass out eggs first, and the battle only finished when they ran out of food and began tossing their cookies at us, literally. An interesting thing about the sail training yachts here, they all seem to have sound systems on deck. So each boat was blasting their battle music

from the beginning – ours was Ride of the Valkyries. We later discovered that Black Diamond had, in fact, used up all their food in the fight.

For the next few days we were able to enjoy beautiful sunny weather with a strong breeze to sail about the Hebridean Islands. The camaraderie on board became really incredible. We changed to a two-watch system because each night we stopped in a different town, while each day we practised our manoeuvres until we could tack and winch and haul with the best of them. The day I was assigned to lunch duty, we were trying to cook sideways because we were so far heeled over! In Tarbert Harbour we met the crew of the Alba Endeavour, our Scottish OYT counterparts, and played some team games ashore. I was entertained by the Scottish-English rivalry that came up, rather than just ship-to-ship rivalry, even though half the people on *John Laing* were Scottish. The next day we sailed to Largs, home of *Waverly*, the oldest ocean-going paddle-steamer, the captain's granny, and some very famous ice cream that we made a special stop to



Black Diamond.



Jez advising Molly about helming.



Colin in charge of the washing up, Jez ambushing the operation with water pistols.

Finally we sailed into Greenock the evening before the festival was to start. While waiting for virtually every other ship to be docked before us, we started doing man overboard drills in the Forth of Clyde. Anyone looking at our GPS track at that moment, which my father was from his computer back in Canada, would have been very confused. I had mixed feelings about coming into Greenock; on the one hand, there were so many beautiful ships to see and the crew parade to look forward to, but on the other, it was really sad knowing this was the last moment we'd all be sailing together. The festival was overwhelmingly busy and beautiful, especially the crew parade. We didn't have much in the way of dressing up or music, as some of the other ships did, but we carried people on our shoulders and brought Archie the lobster pod. On the last morning we said goodbye to John Laing and her amazing crew, and began the journey back to our respective homes (but some of us took the train to Glasgow together!).