



REPORT OF PROCEEDINGS FOR THE GRAVESEND UNIT VOYAGE ABOARD TSB REMINDER WITH THE SEA CHANGE TRUST, JULY 31ST – AUGUST 5TH FUNDED BY THE ROYAL THAMES YACHT CLUB

Introduction

The Royal Thames YC were approached to seek funding assistance for 12 cadets from the Gravesend Sea Cadet Unit to undertake a sail training voyage with the Sea Change Trust aboard the Thames Sailing Barge REMINDER from Maldon on the East Coast.

The purpose of the voyage was to give the Cadets a rather different experience to that provided by the Sea Cadet Corps' own sail training vessel Royalist and the Corps' power vessels TS John Jerwood and Jack Petchey on which some of the cadets had already sailed. In particular, the intention was for the cadets to gain an insight into an area of sailing history which was of particular significance to the area where they live and as part of the project cadets undertook some research into the history of the Thames Spritsail Sailing Barge. In addition I was keen for them to experience the different training regime provided by the Sea Change Trust under their skipper Richard Titchener, one of the most skilled Sailing Barge skippers around today, which I believe places a greater reliance on the trainees being encouraged to use their own initiative.

The initial intention was that 11 cadets and one young female Petty Officer, recently promoted from Leading Cadet on reaching the age of 18, should form the party together with the Unit Chairman, Commander Ian Dunkley RD RNR as party leader who would also sail as mate.

Unfortunately, at fairly short notice, the arrangements had to be substantially changed for the following reasons:-

Firstly, the offshore office of the Sea Cadet Corps refused to recognise the voyage as counting towards Sea Cadet "Offshore" qualifications due to the MCA limits on the area of operations for Thames Sailing Barges. This meant that if cadets were to gain any qualification from the voyage this would have to be the RYA competent crew certificate which ironically is worth more in terms of Sea Cadet points than the level 1 SCC offshore qualification. To achieve this however meant the Trust would have to employ an RYA qualified instructor as Mate giving us a problem as regards available accommodation on board.

Around the same time one of the cadets who had booked for the voyage decided that they would leave the Corps for personal reasons and the young female Petty Officer who was to provide the adult female cover for the week was refused leave at short notice by her employer.

In view of the above the final party consisted of 10 cadets between the ages of 10 and 16 together with two adult leaders, Commander Ian Dunkley and Civilian Instructor Mrs B. Mackley who was able to step in at very short notice.



Report of Proceedings

Unlike the Sea Cadet Corps Offshore vessels, on this voyage the cadet party were entirely responsible for the victualling arrangements and for the actual preparation and cooking of all meals whilst on board. Under the leadership of Mrs Mackley, the cadets were fully involved in preparing the menus for the week and in arranging the purchase of the necessary supplies.

All cadets, kit and supplies were loaded aboard the Unit mini bus on the afternoon of Sunday 31st July and were driven to Maldon to join SB Reminder moored alongside Hythe Quay.

After offloading all the kit and supplies and embarking on board, the cadets were given a full safety briefing by the Skipper and Mate and then spent the next couple of hours being instructed in the working of the barge rig. They were also informed to their considerable shock that we would be departing on the ebb tide at 03:00 hrs.

The first meal was prepared by the adult party leaders whilst the on deck instruction was carried out and after supper and a short discussion about the voyage and what was expected of the cadets they eventually settled down to an early night prior to discovering there was more than one three o'clock in a day!

These post meal discussions were a key part of the learning experience provided by The Sea Change Trust which treats every individual on board as an equal and encourages all the trainees from the very youngest to have a say on the activities of the day and to articulate their own learning and other experiences to their peers. This was perhaps a new experience for many of the cadets who perhaps found being asked to speak their mind in front of a group including adults intimidating at first but by the end of the week all found it a valuable and enlightening experience.

Departing in the dark under sail without engine and with no shouted orders but just quiet instruction from the Skipper was an exercise which made a huge impression on the whole party. Cadets were fully involved in the working of the vessel from the outset and with the gentle instruction from both



the skipper and mate the vessel was worked down river to an anchorage in deeper water where the cadets were then able to return to their bunks for a couple of hours of by then welcome rest.

Monday dawned bright and sunny with a light breeze and after a fairly late breakfast all hands made sail for the first of five days excellent sailing between the River Blackwater and Harwich. The weather throughout the week provided a wide variety of experience from the difficulties of sailing in light airs to some reasonably challenging conditions with winds of about Force 4 and heavy rain on the return leg from Harwich.

Apart from spending Wednesday afternoon in Harwich, approximately 6 – 8 hours was spent each day under way, and of that total time no more than three hours in total were under engine.

The cadets were gradually encouraged step by step in the unique handling characteristics of these craft and by the end of the week were able to almost entirely take charge of getting under way from an anchorage and making sail with very few prompts from the Skipper and mate. I think for many, one of the highlights was undertaking man overboard drills under sail, again with the cadets doing all the work including taking the helm and making the decisions under the very patient and watchful eye of skipper Richard Titchener.

In addition to the excellent sailing experience, time was found for a very informative visit to the Buoy yard and the Operations Room of the Trinity House Lighthouse Service. For this visit, the cadets much impressed both the Skipper and Mate and indeed the locals at Harwich by quickly changing from their rather piratical boating rig in which they arrived alongside and turning out on deck ready for the visit very smartly turned out in neatly pressed working Sea Cadet Uniform which they had been keeping ready for such an occasion.



Prior to leaving Harwich on the Thursday morning, the Coxwain of the Harwich Lifeboat Station kindly opened the Station early for the cadets and gave them a guided tour of both the inshore and all weather lifeboats as well as providing an opportunity to purchase souvenirs.

Apart from the one night alongside at Harwich, the remaining nights were spent at anchor which gave the opportunity for the Gravesend cadets, mostly from very urban backgrounds, to experience the delights of the remote Essex coastline. Undoubtedly, some of the highlights were rowing ashore to a remote island for an early evening picnic with a game of football and a swim and rowing up one of the creeks on a still bright sunny morning to watch seals.

Most evening, off watch cadets spent their time crab fishing over the side whilst others prepared the evening meal and after dinner each evening the Skipper led a discussion on the days activities with each cadet being given the opportunity and encouraged to say what they had got out of the day.

We returned to Maldon on the High Tide of Friday afternoon and following a thorough clean ship and disembarking all kit ashore a presentation ceremony was held where all the cadets were presented with their RYA competent crew certificates that they had justly earned.



Conclusion

Undoubtedly this was a very successful week away for the 10 Gravesend cadets albeit a very different experience in many ways from the usual offshore Sea Cadet training experience. All very creditably obtained the RYA Competent Crew certificate and all agreed that it had been one of the best experiences they had during their time in the Corps.

Whilst the approach to sail training by the Sea Change Trust who are more used to dealing with school parties and groups of “dysfunctional” children is more relaxed, there is undoubtedly a greater encouragement for self development and self discovery than is perhaps offered in the more rigid “navalised” routine aboard Sea Cadet vessels. All of the cadets who had sailed with the SCC Offshore fleet previously expressed surprise at the amount of decision making they were allowed and indeed expected to make and all responded remarkably well rising to the challenges this offered.

This is not in any way meant to denigrate the splendid training opportunities offered by the Sea Cadet Corps Offshore fleet but simply to highlight that this was a very different experience offering some interesting challenges to which the cadets responded magnificently.

The opportunity to experience back to basics sailing with no engine and just the rudimentary aids of magnetic compass and hand lead line were a considerable eye opener for those who had previously experienced the somewhat more high tech wheelhouse of the SCC power offshore vessels.

Surprisingly it seemed that none of the cadets missed their computer games and forgot about mobile telephones for most of the time although they were allowed access to these during the evening to contact home if they wished. For some they discovered the joys of crab fishing and beachcombing along remote island shores for the first time in their lives!

The costs of this voyage were of course more than cadets would normally be required to find for SCC provided offshore training given that we also had to fund the victualling for the week and the unexpected additional cost of the second RYA instructor. However, this was I believe a worthwhile and unique experience for the cadets which will remain with them for a long time.

The Cadets, Staff and Trustees of the Gravesend Unit of the Sea Cadet Corps wish to thank the members of the Royal Thames Yacht Club for providing the Unit with the opportunity to undertake this voyage of discovery.

Ian M Dunkley