

# ALL AT SEA



**FIONA RUSSELL** LOOKS AT AN INSPIRING PROJECT THAT HAS SEEN COASTAL COMMUNITIES COLLABORATE TO RAISE FUNDS, BUILD AND RACE TRADITIONAL SKIFFS IN REGATTAS AROUND THE SCOTTISH COAST PHOTOGRAPHY: ULLAPOOL COASTAL ROWING CLUB; FIONA RUSSELL; MARK LEITH

**T**he shed looks very ordinary – just a large farm out-building similar to many others on the west coast of Scotland. But the noise coming from this modest-looking building on Seil Island, just south of Oban, is intriguingly out of the ordinary. From 20 metres away, the air is filled with the distinct sound of enthusiastic sandpapering.

Popping my head around the door of the shed, I watch quietly as five men and women busy themselves around the bare wood hull of a 22-foot-long rowing boat. The sound of the mass sandpapering by hand is very loud by now – and the smell of the wood as it is smoothed is delicious.

Every so often, one of the sandpaper workers stops for a short break, stands up to stretch their back and shake

out tired arms while grinning or shouting a few words of encouragement to the others. I notice, too, that a man is sitting cross-legged inside the bare boat, spreading some kind of glue onto the inside of the hull planks.

Even from a distance, it is clear that the atmosphere in the surprisingly warm out-building is relaxed and comfortable – and the group of islanders are enjoying the chance to come together and work on their boat project.

#### COMMUNITY CHALLENGE

As I discover, the Seil Coastal Rowing group has met every week for more than six months to collectively create a hand-built, traditionally-designed skiff that they plan to launch and row on the west coast of Scotland. Although a craft that has the looks of a boat built several genera-



tions ago, this traditional skiff is now at the centre of a boat-building craze. The Seil Island rowing boat is one of more than 70 such boats, all created from the same flat-pack kit design, that are being built by communities the length and breadth of Scotland. By the end of 2012, around 40 of the craft had been launched, and the rest are due to be on the water during 2013.

Thirty more kits have been bought by communities further afield. The skiff-building fever has spread to Newcastle, Norfolk and Essex, as well as the Netherlands, the US, Australia, Tasmania and even St Lucia. And in July, many of the skiff enthusiasts will come together to race in the first ever World Skiff Championships, to be staged at Ullapool.

Yet it is only three-and-half years since the birth of the skiff kit and the forward-thinking Scottish Coastal Rowing Project. The initiative was the brainchild of the Scottish Fisheries Museum in Anstruther, Fife which, in early 2009, approached Alec Jordan of local boat building firm Jordan Boats to run a traditional boat building

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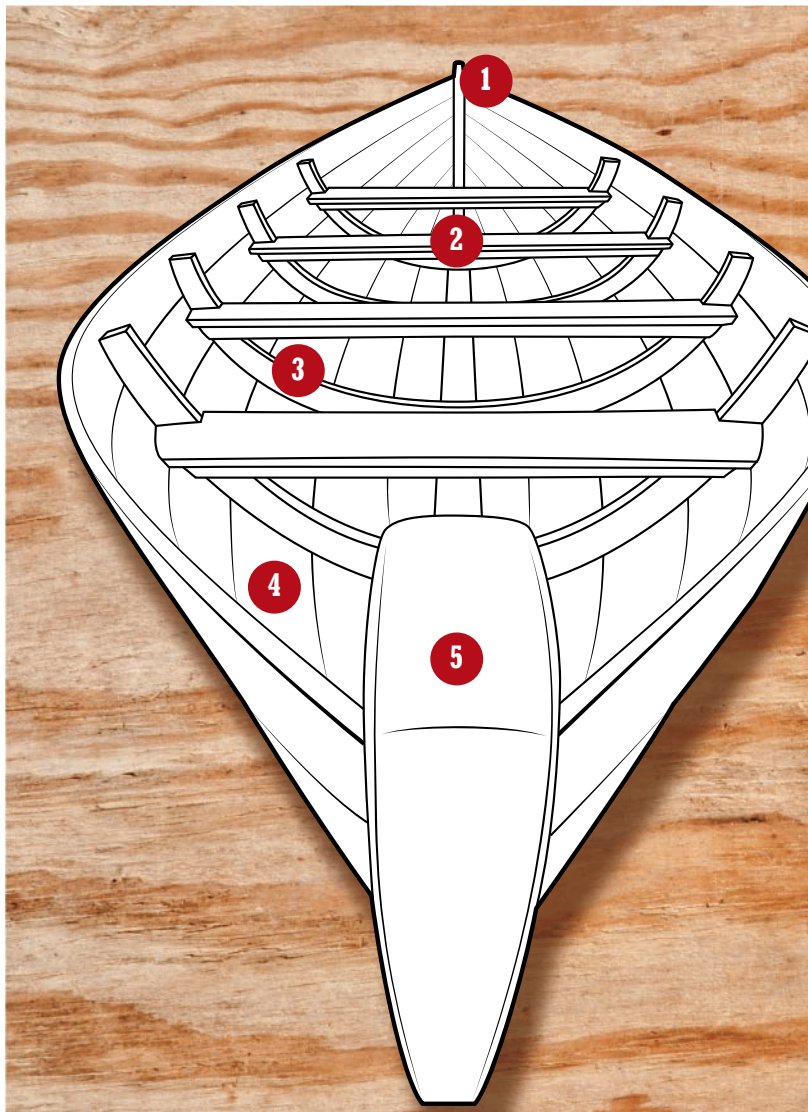
On the pull (left and right): action from the 2012 Coigach Regatta

course. During discussions, Alec suggested that the boat should seek to revive the rowing regattas that took place around the east Fife coastline until the mid-1950s. In those days, miners built their craft from timber scavenged from local collieries.

This suggestion was enthusiastically taken up by the museum and Iain Oughtred, an expert in historic boats, was commissioned to design a modern version of the skiff. Iain has based the design on a Fair Isle Skiff, which itself descends from a smaller Viking skiff.

Using Iain's plans, Alec created the kit from which he built a prototype named the St Ayles Skiff. At first, it had been thought that the coastal rowing project would focus on Fife, but by the time the prototype was launched in October 2009, word had travelled across Scotland and Jordan Boats was soon inundated by interest in its skiff kits. In May 2010, the Scottish Coastal Rowing Association (SCRA) was formally constituted and since then demand for the kits and entries to a host of new regattas have continued to grow.

Perhaps it is the relatively modest cost of the St Ayles Skiff that has given rise to a traditional boat-building **D**



### ANATOMY OF A SKIFF

- 1 - Stern\***
- 2 - Rowing Thwart**  
One of four for sitting on
- 3 - Frame**  
If a traditionally-built boat, there would likely be more of them and they'd be called timbers
- 4 - Plank**  
These are clinker, i.e. overlapped, smooth ones are called carvel
- 5 - Bow\***

\* Because the boat has two 'sharp' ends, 1 and 5 could both be called sterns – the aft stern and the forward stern respectively

**D** trend. With an estimated completion price of around £4,000, even a small community, such as that on Seil Island, can finance their own project.

Many communities have chosen to divide the cost into 64 shares, as is the custom in the maritime world when registering a ship. "With 64 shares and a skiff building cost of around £4,000, we didn't need to ask for a big outlay from each person," explains Ewan Kennedy, one of the boat builders of Seil Coastal Rowing and a retired Glasgow solicitor. "We found it easy to raise the funds and some people generously gave more than they were asked."

Richard Pierce, another member of the group, is a renowned professional boat builder who travels world-wide with his work but "couldn't resist the opportunity for yet another small hobby project near his home". Describing the kit as well thought out, he says: "The basic kit comprises all the plywood parts for the frames and the planking, as well as the moulds over which the hull is built. In addition, we've needed to source timber for the keel, hog, stems and gunwales, as well as extra bits and pieces such as sandpaper, glue and paint. We have stayed on budget with the project, but it does require people to give up their leisure time for free."

Without exception, however, the projects I spoke to

have found that people are more than willing to devote many hours to the boats. It would appear that another attraction of the Scottish Coastal Rowing initiative is the chance to make new friends.

In 21st century Scotland, when many communities have become fragmented and people are not always familiar with even their closest neighbours, a hands-on boat-building project unusually calls upon people to get together.

As Ewan Kennedy points out: "It's natural that new friendships will be made and communities will become better acquainted when there is an all-inclusive project taking place. Our Seil Coastal Rowing group has a core of about 15 who meet regularly to work on the boat, but there are also many others with a range of skills who are involved at different times.

"For example, we have local schoolchildren working on ideas for names of the boat and others keen to paint the boat. And, of course, we will need rowers. There is a role for almost everyone in a community."

#### COUNTRY-WIDE INTEREST

The same has been happening across Scotland. In Portsoy, Aberdeenshire, where a group of women have founded the Portsoy Skiffettes, many new friendships



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To the sea and back: Cúl Mór, built by Ullapool High School students, on her launch day (top); choppy conditions at last year's Portsøy regatta (below)

have been formed. Wendy Clements is a mother of six-year-old twin boys and a devoted member of the skiff building team. She was also a former rower and competed in world championships in her youth.

“The project has brought together so many women and I have thoroughly enjoyed getting to know them all,” she says. “These friendships have come from outside my usual connections and it has been refreshing to meet people who have the same love of rowing and the outdoors.”

Another project, based in the more unusual urban location of Govan in Glasgow, has been able to bring together teenagers from two religions. Ben Duffin, who is lead boat builder with charitable trust GalGael, says: “Our work at the trust includes practical projects such as boat building and furniture making, and through these projects we aim to combat some of the ills in society, such as addiction, worklessness and sectarianism.

“Building two St Ayles skiffs offered the chance to bring

together protestant and catholic children in the city. The idea was that they would work as a team on the boats, with the hoped-for outcome of building bridges between the two religious viewpoints. The kids really enjoyed the process of the boat building.”

Ultimately, the SCRA also set out an objective of encouraging more communities to “use the sea for fitness”. Rowing offers a fantastic all-round strength and cardiovascular workout – and calls on people to pull together as a team. The skiffs require crews of four and a coxswain, and many people are now being given the chance to enjoy rowing for fitness, fun – and competition.

So, what is it like to row one of the craft? “The skiffs are lively but not scary, and you feel that you go a long way for each stroke,” explains Topher Dawson, a member of the 60-strong Ullapool Coastal Rowing Club, which built the second St Ayles skiff following the prototype. “When everyone is rowing in time it feels effortless and you stride along. You can talk to each other as you row and it is great to see the scenery and the wildlife go by. On really windy days it’s an effort to row against the wind at all, but you come rushing back when you turn downwind. In calm conditions, it can be ethereal with absolute quiet around you and the ripples of the wake spreading out. In the dark, it is like flying.”



“I WANTED TO TRY SOMETHING NEW AND GET FIT AT THE SAME TIME ... I SEE ROWING AS MY AMAZING NEW HOBBY”

**D** Topher seems tickled pink that Ullapool will host the inaugural SCRA World Skiff Championships and the idea of “all those rowing communities busily preparing for regattas and thinking up ways to be faster and better”.

He says: “It’s all friendly rivalry, but already things are hotting up at the regattas that have been taking place across Scotland. While the basic design and kit of a skiff’s hull remains the same, each community can enhance and innovate when fitting it out. You see crews checking out the competition and getting tips on how to make the boats faster. The oars are also of bespoke design and there has been lots of whispering about how each community will make their secret rowing weapons.”

The crews, split into male, female, mixed gender and in different age groups, are sure to be putting in the training, too, as the world champs loom. Grinning, Topher reports that Ullapool have some “very strong crews that will be training hard this spring”.

The Portsoy Skiffettes also hope to put in a good performance in 2013, having just launched their stunning, bright pink boat named Soy Quine. Wendy sees her experience with the Skiffettes as “something of a mid-life crisis thing to do”. She says: “I wanted to try something new and get fit at the same time and like men who take up road cycling, I see rowing as my amazing new hobby.”

Back on Seil, the boat builders also have a glint in their eye when talking about forthcoming regattas. It turns out

that Sue Fenton, who retired from Inverness to the island just as the rowing project launched, rowed for Britain in the 1970s. “I have most probably forgotten it all,” she says modestly, “but if we get

enough ‘old ladies’ together we will definitely be making an appearance at the world championships in the female veterans class.

“I just love how this project has united people and brought new friends together to enjoy something that is sea-based and outdoorsy. It’s such a satisfying pursuit to be involved in and I think it’s great that Scotland is leading the way with these skiffs.” ■

Sticking an oar in (clockwise from top): the Portsoy Skiffettes in their new boat; taking a break at the Coigach regatta; enjoying just being on the water

## HOW TO GET INVOLVED

### Getting started

Communities that are interested in building a skiff can find out more at [www.scottishcoastalrowing.org](http://www.scottishcoastalrowing.org)

Boat kits can be bought from Jordan Boats, [www.jordanboats.co.uk](http://www.jordanboats.co.uk)

### Regattas

There are around 15 regattas on the Scottish skiff racing calendar this year, [www.scottishcoastalrowing.org/2013-calendar](http://www.scottishcoastalrowing.org/2013-calendar)

One of the most popular is the Scottish Traditional Boat Festival at Portsoy, Aberdeenshire, 22–23 June. [www.scottishtraditionalboatfestival.org.uk](http://www.scottishtraditionalboatfestival.org.uk)

### World Champs

The inaugural SCRA World Skiff Championships takes place on Loch Broom, Ullapool, 8–14 July. [www.skiffeworlds.com](http://www.skiffeworlds.com); <http://ullcoastrow.wordpress.com>