

My Adventure aboard the John Laing

ASTO Canadian Exchange 2015

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OYTS's John Laing

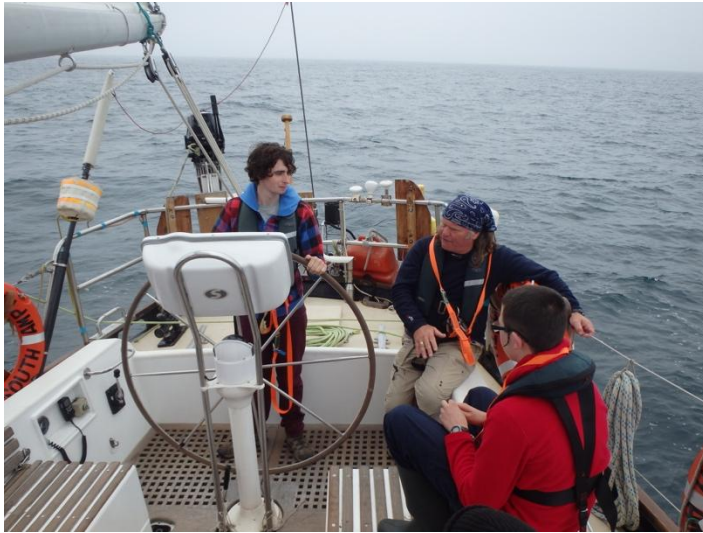
Last spring, I got a call from the Sailing And Life Training Society (SALTS), located in Victoria, Canada. I had volunteered and sailed extensively with SALTS, and put in many hours helping the crew maintain their two classic tallships, Pacific Grace and Pacific Swift. The crew and office staff knew me well, and the voice I heard on the other end of the phone was a familiar one. "How would you like to go sailing in England this summer?". "I like the sound of that" I told them.

Every year, ASTO, the Association of Sail Training Organizations (which should really be called the British Association of Sail Training Organizations) selects a few lucky sailors from the United Kingdom to sail with sail training organizations in Australia, New Zealand and Canada. In exchange, two sailors from each of those countries comes to sail with a sail training organization in the UK. I was one of those lucky individuals. The trip was generously sponsored by the James Myatt Trust, a charity dedicated to helping young people experience the joy sailing. Within a month I was registered to sail with Ocean Youth Trust South (OYTS) on they're 70 ft steel-hull ketch John Laing, sailing from Poole to London in two six day trips.

This was the first time I had travelled truly on my own, and I was travelling to a place I had never visited before. When I arrived in Poole I found the John Laing moored at the quay. I yelled hello down to the crew and all of them looked up with excitement. "It's the second Canadian stowaway!", they shouted. The first stowaway was a girl named Maria-Jose, from Quebec. She had arrived earlier that morning.

The crew introduced themselves. I met skipper James and bosun Harri, the two professional crew members, as well as the volunteer first, second and third mates. Colm, the bosun's mate, showed me around the vessel and found me a berth. Despite being tired from the long flight, I was too interested in looking around John Laing too sleep. I myself had been a bosun's mate aboard the Pacific Grace, and was eager to see what this new ship had in store.

The rest of the trainees, 10 in all, showed up the next day. We introduced ourselves and after a short safety briefing we left port. The plan was to sail to the Channel Islands overnight. At dinner we all shared a bit about ourselves and played games afterwards. By the time we went to bed it felt like we'd all known each other far longer than 12 hours. Our watches rotated through the night to keep the vessel on course. While on deck we told riddles and watched for shooting stars. Having come from the west coast of Canada, I was surprised at just how busy the English Channel was. In a given 4 hour shift I could usually expect to see one, perhaps two other vessels. "Freighter-dodging", as the OYTS crew call it, was a completely foreign concept to me.



We arrived at the Channel Islands the following day and enjoyed a fun tour of the little island of Sark, featuring a bank that looked like a cottage, a delicious chocolate factory, and a lot of cows. We had a barbeque on the beach that evening and everyone ate very well.

The next morning, we sailed to Guernsey. This was the first time I got to see the John Laing under sail in daylight, and I was very excited to try to figure out the rig.

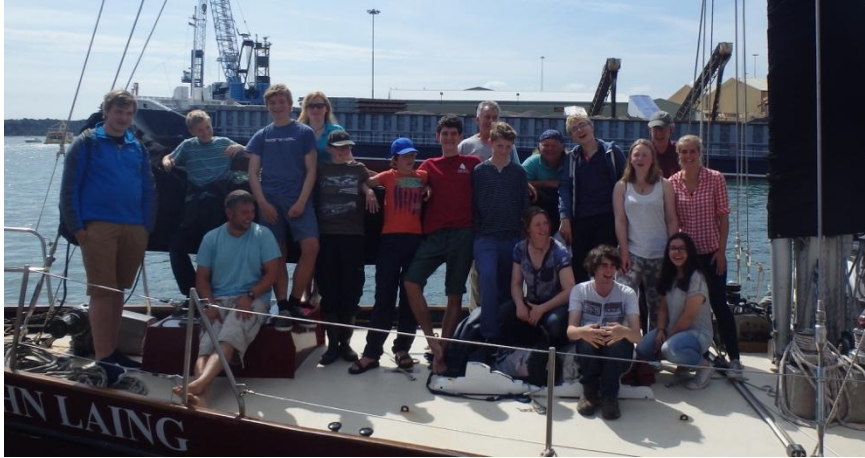
Trip 1; Colm at the Wheel

The ships I was used to were all traditionally rigged, so the fancy two-speed self-tailing winches of John Laing were totally new to me. The crew showed us how to handle each winch, and explained how to use them to raise and lower each sail. This was surprisingly difficult, and it quickly became a competition to see who could raise the foresail by hand the fastest, if at all.

The next few days were spent sailing round Guernsey. We visited the island of Herme, and spent a day walking round St. Peter Port, one of the main cities of the Channel Islands. By now all the crew and trainees were very good friends.

On the last day we sailed back towards Poole. Our watch had the 12-3 shift, which made for spectacular night sailing. I spent my time on the wheel trying to get John Laing to go as fast as possible. I think we got up to 13.1 knots, pretty good for a 70 ft steel training vessel.

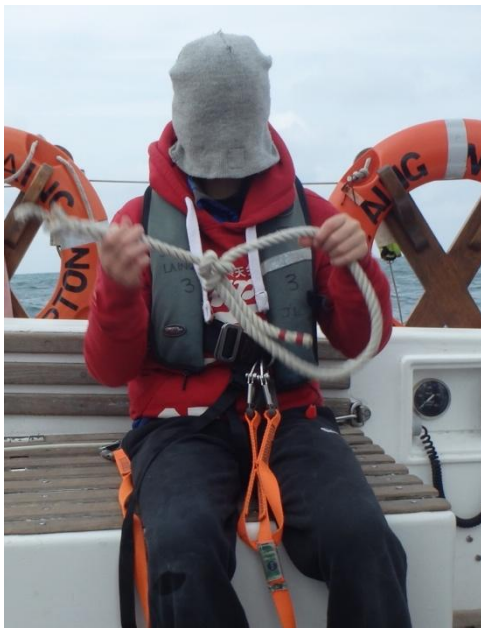
On the last day we cleaned out our bunks and said goodbye. Everyone exchanged contact information so we could share photos and tell stories about our trip. Most of the crew were rotating out as well. It was just myself, Maria and Harri that would stay on for the next trip.



In the morning the next round of trainees and crew arrived. Again we introduced ourselves and got on our way. The new skipper, Andrew, said we were going to try to make it to Dieppe, on the French coast. Once again, this would require some freighter-dodging.

Trip 1; See the one in the middle wearing the red shirt? That's me!

The tide was against us, so we anchored in Cowes for the night. We woke to find ourselves in the middle of the largest regatta I'd ever seen. On the start line there was every kind of boat imaginable, from little 20 foot wooden sailboats to 60 ft state-of-the-art racing catamarans. It was a miracle we got out of it without hitting anyone.



It took us 24 hours of motoring to get to Dieppe, and though it was well-worth the trip, we didn't get much sleep on the way there. Upon arriving in Dieppe the skipper held an all-hands meeting, where he gave us two options. Explore Dieppe, or sleep. The decision was unanimous. Dieppe would have to wait.

Dieppe is a spectacular place when well rested. The port was built during WWII and was designed to harbour massive warships the likes of Bismarck or HMS Hood (not quite that big actually, but you get the idea). But it's now a civilian port, and is instead filled with personal yachts. This makes for a very strange sight.

Trip 2; Blind knot tying

While in Dieppe we visited the Dieppe War Museum, which featured a stunning memorial devoted to Operation Jubilee, a 1942 raid on Dieppe fought predominantly by Canadian soldiers. Planned by the British War Office, it was designed to test the feasibility of a naval invasion, and is considered one of the worst military disaster of WWII. Seeing the memorial was both moving and educational, and I'm glad I got to visit it.



After a few days in Dieppe we left for the Thames estuary. This crossing was also long and full of freighters. Some were so long they had their length displayed in nautical miles on the Automatic Identification System. On our way there I was asked to act out a cardiac arrest so Harri could practice her first aid training. I was not a very good actor.

Trip 2; Me faking cardiac arrest

Sailing up the estuary was unlike anything I'd ever done before. The estuary is riddled with shallow sandbanks, many of which are marked only by wind turbines or WWII era watch towers. Passing by the dark silhouettes of these huge structures in the absolute silence of a ship under sail can only be described as eerie.



Trip 2; Tacking up the Thames

The next day we started sailing up the Thames proper. The wind built as the day went on and by the time we reached the Thames Barrier we were under full sail. Unfortunately, the wind was a westerly. This meant we had to tack back and forth all the way up the bustling river, avoiding fast-cat ferries and tour boats as we went. Thankfully we did not hit anything, but I have never tacked such a large vessel in such a tight space before. At times we had less than 3 feet of water under our keel, and at one point we got so close to shore I think I could have jumped to the river bank.

We tied up at HMS President, just downstream of Tower Bridge. Once again we cleaned out our bunks and said our goodbyes, only this time I was leaving the vessel too. I thanked the crew and waved goodbye as I left for the London Underground. Sailing aboard John Laing was a truly incredible experience and I would love to do it again if ever given the opportunity. I have so many fun stories to tell and know far more about sailing than I did before.

I would like to thank (B)ASTO and the James Myatt trust for offering me such a wonderful opportunity. It has certainly given me a very unique and memorable experience. I would also like to thank the wonderful people at SALTS for selecting me to go on such an amazing adventure and OYT South for hosting that adventure. It seems that sailing, no matter where you are in the world, is always filled with good friends and funny stories.

PS: Did you find all 4 hidden hyperlinks?