

Northern Ireland

On Saturday 16 January 2016 at the Old Gaffers AGM in London, a recurring idea that has popped up in my mind many's a time whilst attending OGA events cropped up again at the mention of Youth Project funding. An encouraging discussion with President Sean Walsh and a wonderfully brief phone call to Scott Metcalf, owner and skipper of 'Vilma' the beautiful topsail schooner, and the first ever NIOGA Youth Project was born.

The venue was to be 'Portaferry Sails and Sounds' Classic Boat and Music Festival. The date, Saturday 18 June 2016. Generously funded by the OGA Youth Project, I pushed ahead and pulled together a day's itinerary aboard 'Vilma' offering six pupils from the local secondary school in Portaferry a day's sailing experience on a gaff rigged vessel.

Principal of St Columba's College, Mr Michael Breen, was in full support of the project and only too keen to work with us. After a presentation to year 10, pupils were invited to submit in writing, why they should be picked. I was delighted by their response! Five boys and one girl were selected and they attended a half day introductory sailing

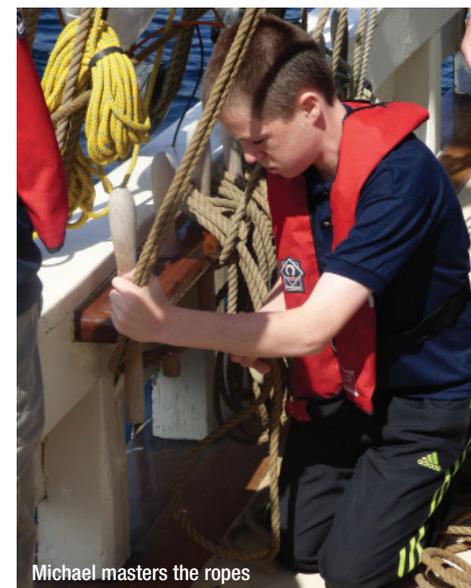


Water fight between 'Vilma' and 'Scotch Lass'

session, where myself and newbie NIOGA member, Cpt Mike Meharg, RYA Instructor, went over the basics of sailing, health & safety and acceptable etiquette aboard a sailing vessel.

Our day began with a hearty breakfast in Portaferry SC. This was followed by an introductory tour of 'Vilma', the obligatory press photos and then we were ready to set sail. We were blessed with beautiful blue skies and sunshine all day Saturday but only the slightest breath of wind. This did not stop Scott and his crew setting the students to work tending sails, adjusting the running rigging, steering the boat, keeping watch and performing all duties asked with gusto. The students were soon working in pairs, on tasks as allocated, sailing 'Vilma' along the beautiful shores of Strangford Lough. We were joined on board by Scott's wife, Ruth, Sue and Pete Farrer and Tom Rowlands with his beautiful dog Penny! A special thanks must go to RNIYC's number one RYA instructor Mr Andrew Vaughan, who kindly volunteered his time on the day as the NIOGA's official sailing instructor to the cadets.

Students were entertained by Tom, and what can only be described as his impressive acrobatics, climbing the rigging and performing his party trick by swinging from 'Vilma' to any nearby vessel and returning with a plundered souvenir! On this occasion, the 'victim' craft was 'Scotch Lass', who



Michael masters the ropes

returned fire in proper order, and a water fight began. Much laughter and fun was had by both crews. It certainly drew a bit of attention from passing competitors and photographers in the area!

After all the hard work, decks were dried, pots, pans, buckets and other means of throwing water at 'Scotch Lass' tidied away, and we enjoyed lunch on deck, in peaceful surroundings, basking in the sun.

Safely back on the pontoon, with sails, ropes and gear safely stowed, Scott gave the students an opportunity to climb the rigging. They took to it with enthusiasm! A presentation of certificates for each student was made at Portaferry SC, hosts of 'Portaferry Sails and Sounds', by OGA President Sean Walsh and NIOGA President Gary Lyons. Our students returned home, tired from the sea air, but happy and full of enthusiasm and appreciation for sailing after such a beautiful day on a beautiful craft through a truly wonderful day.

The weather was kind to us. All participants, students and instructors, have a fantastic

OGA Youth Project

memory of a day they will never forget, with one student saying, "it was the best experience of their life so far, and they wish they could do it all over again".

I would like to extend my gratitude for their support to Scott and Ruth for making the trip all the way over from The Menai Straits, to Sue, Pete, Tom and Andrew for their patience with the students on the day, and to Mike Meharg for his assistance in the preliminary stages of this project

Everyone spoke very highly of the pupils and were impressed by their behaviour and attention, given all the instructions they received on the day. A huge thank you also goes to Michael Breen and St Columba's College for participating in this project and of course, special thanks to Sean Walsh and the OGA for their encouragement and words of support helping to bring this project into existence.

Finally I have to thank Gary Lyons, NIOGA President, for having the confidence in me to take this project and run with it. I have thoroughly enjoyed the whole experience and look forward to doing next year's project. The question is, how to we top a square rigged topsail schooner, in the sun, in Portaferry Narrows, during 'Sails and Sounds'? I'm thinking next year we get the cannon out . . .

Sheila Lyons, NIOGA Youth Project Coordinator
Photos: Neil Ritchie



Students get ready to set sail, from front to back: Ryan, Michael, Oran, Gerhard, Niamh, Conor and Mr Breen