

Portaferry Sails & Sounds: 22-25 June

The June sun shone on Strangford Lough. Passers by and locals could not but stop and admire the beauty of 'Vilma' and 'Soteria', the topsail schooners visiting Portaferry Sails & Sounds Festival and the NIOGA Youth Project.

The stunning vessels luxuriated in their glory with happy crew aboard following successful passages from their home ports; time generously donated to allow local school pupils the opportunity to partake in a day sail experience on Strangford Lough.

Growing on the fantastic success of 2016's inaugural youth project, our reach was extended to 12 pupils from three secondary schools in the Ards Peninsula area. The aim was to encourage shared education and collaboration for schools and pupils alike. Following a hearty breakfast and donning their new Youth Project sailing shirts, a keepsake to remind them of the wonderful experience ahead, pupils and accompanying teachers alighted the pontoons to meet the crew and their vessel.

All pupils received pre-sail training before the event, learning safety at sea, rope skills, basic sailing techniques and terminology, emergency procedures and, most importantly, basic lifesaving skills. Our gratitude must go to NIOGA's Eilish Wylie for donating her time and expertise to deliver the course.

Onboard, pupils were set to work in pairs or teams, closely supervised by accompanying crew. They were literally 'shown the ropes' then set course up the Lough. Lunch was enjoyed as crew and students alike took in the beautiful scenery. Some pupils were experiencing the joy and beauty of sailing on Strangford Lough for the first time, despite a lifetime living along the shore!

On their return pupils gained confidence tending the sails and steering the schooners. They took the opportunity to admire the many other traditional boats in attendance at Portaferry Sails and Sounds. Certificates for each pupil were presented at a special prizegiving outside Portaferry SC and everyone went home safe, happy and tired!

Once again my gratitude must go to Michael Breen, Headmaster of St Columba's School and the Headmasters of Strangford College and Glashy High School for supporting the NIOGA Youth Project. It takes courage and foresight to provide 12 fantastic kids for the day given the potential hazards! Thanks also to the teachers in attendance for giving their Saturdays to come and help supervise. I would like to thank the crew of both vessels for providing the children with such a fun and engaging day. Commendations must go to NIOGA's Johnny Mitchell for his invaluable help and support in setting this year's project up, his skill and enthusiasm have been vital to the running of the Project. Finally I must thank Scott Metcalfe and Gerry Brennan for bringing their beautiful boats to Strangford Lough and generously donating their time to the Youth Project. It is fair to say sailing on these wonderful craft really touches something inside you, myself included. It provided these children with a fantastic lifetime experience they will never forget and always treasure.

Report and photos:
Sheila Lyons, Northern Ireland Area

Youth Project report

