

Sail Caledonia Raiding Experience 2018

We must be one of the smallest clubs to row Celtic Longboats in Wales but four of us from Borth in Mid-Wales were determined to enter this year's Sail Caledonia even though we really needed a minimum crew of 5. Such is the rowing club mentality in Wales, we knew we could offer a place to any of the other crews going as they would have surplus and thus it proved to be the case in an astounding week of discovery, challenge, joy and camaraderie in the spectacular but ever changing Scottish landscape along the Caledonian Canal.

We decided to go for the challenge of taking a week to row the length of this infamous waterway, but look upon it as a journey of discovery rather than a race; we weren't really going for the racing, honest!! Needless to say we took part and every day usually came last or third out of the four Celtic rowing boats who took part. Until the final day that is... but that comes later.

For me this was a particular challenge as I am still trying to adapt and get my head around not being able to be as physically active as I used to be as a result of a spinal injury which left me as an incomplete tetraplegic. The rowing club was one of the first things I tried to get back to once I could get to the boat with my sticks and bless them, club members, have done everything they can to include me and get me in the boat from the slipway when we go out rowing on our local estuary and along the coast. I love the sea and used to sail many years ago so to take part in the Sail Caledonia Raid was a really important test for me which I must admit I was finding daunting leading up to it, but had decided I had to close my eyes and jump, just go for it. Trouble was it wasn't just a challenge for me, it was also a distinct challenge for my other three crew members Sarah, Dave and Rose to help accommodate me on the journey, on Ros Crana and in our Celtic boat during the week. We didn't really know what to expect as Welsh Celtic longboats had never been catered for alongside the sailing raiders before and nor had a person with some real mobility issues. After some negotiations with Martin who was in charge of safety and who to be fair just wanted to know if I could cope with falling over board (luckily I float like anyone else, especially with a life jacket); rough weather on the Ros Crana and in our row boat and various other scenarios. After that he and the committee were happy that I was being realistic and to let me participate as they consider and even emphasise that all are welcome to take part as long as our crew could look after one another.

I couldn't believe it when we arrived after two days travelling through rain, wind and grey to be faced with a hurried safety inspection and launch of our boat (we were late!) and we were straight into a race up Loch Linnhe from the Lochaber Yacht club to Corpach Loch basin in beautiful warm sunshine with a light breeze. How could that be? This is the west of Scotland, notoriously worse than the west of Wales for gales, rain and wind! It was lovely and to crown in all we were ceremonially piped into Corpach Basin by a local piper – how magnificent is that? It felt so special. This we subsequently found out would happen at the end of every day's racing and it felt special every time too! Not least because our piper from then on was Mark a blind musician who revealed he taught music and played about another four instruments! Amazing and marvellous; what a welcome.

Sarah and I had a cabin onboard Ros Crana, whilst Dave and Rose were with the camping contingent. I loved Ros Crana; the food was lovely, accommodation really comfortable and the crew and captain (Swampy) were incredibly helpful and welcoming. Poor Nimbus Swampy's cat was more than a little overwhelmed by all the people piling onboard though. She stayed in the wheelhouse from then on or occasionally hid under the canoes on the foredeck if she wanted some sun, peace and quiet.

The crew spent the week fuelling us with well thought out breakfasts, packed lunches, soups and evening meals; helping us all with locks, on lochs, with logistics and briefing us every morning on deck about the day ahead. Although not 'crew', John the race officer briefed us on the days race course ahead of us with a very beady eye for detail, if we listened then everything was clear and any questions answered with patience and humour. John didn't take prisoners but was a delight to listen to, not just in briefings but at other times. He and Norna the club secretary seem to know just about all the sailors taking part now and in the past and by the end of the week, us newbies too; Welsh rowers and any new sailing contestants were made to feel so welcome and at home. He even managed to pronounce our Celtic boat name 'Gwyddno Garanhir' by the fourth day!

I thought we would settle into a routine, which we did but I was not prepared for the diversity of the scenery and the weather. It was the end of May beginning of June; there was still snow and ice on Ben Nevis and a few other mountain tops along the route but we were in sunshine and mid twenties degree Celsius temperatures and we heard our first cuckoo of the year. It took two days to lose sight of Ben Nevis and each day got warmer as we moved up the loch system. Sunscreen was essential, with water and head scarves/ hats to keep the sun off our heads. I don't think we saw our waterproofs until we entered Loch Ness when we had quite a head wind and spray.

Neptune's Staircase from Corpach to Banavie kept us crews busy whilst all vans were transported to North Kessock for the week. The staircase of locks kept us busy and trained us for the procedure of getting all 21 'sailing and rowing Raiders' into lock basins and out again efficiently so that we did not disrupt the waterway and hold other craft up too much. The safety crew and boats escorting us soon cajoled, yelled and sorted us out so that we were all bunched up and helping each other out to rise and ascend the canal in a big social, excitable gang. It was a great way to meet the other crews and get to know individual boats and their idiosyncrasies. The sailors soon learnt that Celtic longboats came with wacking great oars and no motors to rely on so had to be hauled alongside with 7ft oars held vertically upright; we learnt to judge the last pulls to take us alongside gently before retrieving oars from the water.

Banavie to Gairloch canal section was a rowing race where we- the Celtics came into our own and hauled away from the sailing raiders. We ended up in quiet Gairloch with a picturesque campsite and berth for Ros Crana. Our first full day spent in full view of The Ben. We would be leaving it the next day as it would be obscured by other mountains as we travelled down Loch Lochy to Laggan. This was my rest day but Dave, Sarah and Rose continued on to the amazement of other rowing crews; until the wind died in the afternoon and there was no racing for the sailors. It didn't spoil it though as the scenery was stunning with pristine beaches occasionally spotted on the shores of Loch Lochy. Swimming in the afternoon was a real treat for everyone including me as I got down the ladder and into silken loch waters; what a feeling on the skin. After that, there was no stopping the crew who soon realised how cold the water was once they had jumped in! Still, a quick warm up under Ros Crana's water outlet pipe soon helped acclimatize.

Tuesday was the day boats were judged for Best Dressed Boat. We had nothing with us and will have to remedy this if we are invited to the event again. After the morning race on Loch Oich, with some amazing needle work going on in the bow of one of the Porth Maddog Celtic boats, the majority started to dress their boats at lunchtime so that the lock keepers at Fort Augustus could judge the

colourful array of boats in the locks after the afternoon race. By the time we descended the canal for the first time to arrive at Fort Augustus everyone is looking forward to eating out in the town as it's the crews' night off on Ros Crana and they are resting in with a chip supper. We four head into town with me navigating pot holes with my wheelchair. It's the first time I have needed to use it to go some distance but once again there's no problem with crew hauling it off Ros Crana for me from its store on board. We find a marvellous back street bar with the scent of fish chowder wafting from it and tucked into some incredible food. Maybe we were hungry after the day's exertions and mixed weather, from heat to rain and then a steady and determined cooler wind. The calm of that bar and the food was gorgeous.

The next morning was our start of two days on Loch Ness. The only inland waterway in the UK with a Lifeboat and coast guard service. Fascinating. By the end of this day we knew why. We woke up to a stiff wind and found the whole eleven miles rowing into it to get harder and harder. It was energy sapping but we were all determined and we finished by crossing a hair raising stone bar to enter the wonderful little sheltered creek of Foyers. I wasn't the only one not able to stand up either by the end of that! Later that evening energy was found to toe tap to the musicians who came on board as the evening entertainment.

My day of rest again but I was joined by other rowers for a rest in the morning particularly as we were expecting another day of poor weather. So we discovered Gwyddno Garanhir tows beautifully alongside the Ros Crana with a couple of other Raiders who were also struggling. Turns out the Loch is misty and still in the early morning and this gradually lifts to reveal Urquart Castle on the opposite shore resplendent in sunshine by the time we arrive. The afternoon's race finishes at Aldourie before we cruise on up the narrowing channel to Dochgarroch in a much more pastoral landscape than we have been used to all week. All of a sudden roads and traffic are evident. The next day it's back to the realities of other people and housing as we pass along the final sections to Tomnahurich where we rally before our final race of the week across the Moray Firth to finish at North Kessock.

Whilst the Moray Firth is magnificent and the stretch of water we are racing on takes it out of us, my favourite for scenery has been the first half of the week where often we felt as though we were the only inhabitants of the canal and lochs. However, we found ourselves reinvigorated by this being our last race and were determined not to come last again. The course is set as a circular course which entails us crossing the river, moving upstream and re crossing the river again. This is completed two and a half times before we disembark and haul the boats onto their trailers for the trip back to Dochgarroch for a second night and a celebratory evening. We have something to celebrate too as we hold off our Welsh rivals and the sailing boats. Whilst the first two legs of the river crossing was close by the third leg we are storming ahead of the competition but don't let up as we cannot believe we are doing this!! Our rhythm, strength and determination under Dave's coxing is as one and we finally nail a race. We don't just come first but we are four or five minutes ahead of the competition instead of being a minute or two behind. Big cheers from the shore and race line mean we are elated as well as exhausted and almost crying. So much for not racing!! Heaven help us if we ever do race; we would be turbo charged.

So we have something to celebrate on the final evening even though it's a bit sad that we will be going home the next day. The Ros Crana has to be vacated by 9am with Dave and Sarah going back with the boat and Rose hitching a lift from the Porthmaddach crew. I'm getting a taxi to the airport

at 5am as I am flying back to Manchester and getting picked up from there so I must make sure I don't over- do it in the evening. Little did I know that whilst we were all expected to do a party turn and we did the poem of our local legend about the drowning of Cantre'r Gwaelod; there are presentations to be made. The committee present race prizes and awards to those who did the official Caledonia Challenge of which a few boats took part receiving no luxuries like meals, help and accommodation like the rest of us easy cruisers. They were self-sufficient for the week and were admired by all especially as one crew were comprised of a dad and two children who didn't even lapse for ice cream!!

I was incredibly touched to be presented with a beautiful Quiach cup myself for the 'Best Endeavour' of the week. It was an incredible surprise and means a great deal to me. It has a host of happy memories embedded in it despite sharing multiple drams of whiskey from it that evening as tradition dictates. I did make the taxi on time the next morning with Sarah's help and my Quiach cup takes pride of place on the bookshelf at home. In addition to the week's wonderful shared experiences with Borth crew and the participants of Sail Caledonia 2018. I have gained some confidence in my abilities again and am not as hesitant when I remember our efforts on the Caledonian raid.

I hope Celtic Longboats are invited to participate alongside the sailing Raiders again in the future. We appreciated being invited and realise we do alter the arrangements a little because we are rowers and have no capacity to sail but Borth Celtic rowers would love to 'Raid' again with you as we had a ball.