

Sailing the 'John Laing'

8th - 12th July, Gosport - Falmouth

Last summer during Yarmouth Carnival week I entered a competition naming the parts of a sailing boat and was lucky enough to win a voyage in the 'John Laing' with the 'Ocean Youth Trust'. I decided to book onto a voyage in July expecting to experience relatively easy sailing in calm, warm weather. Of course this is Britain and it didn't quite work out that way! Unfortunately we were in for several days of rain and force 7 winds!

I arrived in Gosport and met the other 10 crew members aged between 12 and 17 and the 6 sea staff that I would be spending the next 5 days with. I had only sailed once before and that was in the Mediterranean where the conditions are totally different, so I was worried that the others in the group would know a lot more about sailing than I did. In fact most of them were complete beginners.

As a result of the violent winds in the Solent we were unable to set off immediately after our introduction so we were split into two watches; Red watch and Blue watch, and learnt how to safely use the winches and tie a few useful knots. The staff kept us informed on the latest weather reports and we made a wise decision not to set off until morning when the wind would not be so strong.

I woke the next morning at about 5am to find that the staff had already got up and were motoring out of Gosport harbour. When they had told us that we would be leaving in the morning none of us expected it to be this early! Nevertheless everyone was so excited to be setting sail that we all jumped out of bed and quickly got dressed into our oilys and lifejackets to help put up the sails. As this was the first time most of us had ever put up sails it took almost an hour to get everything sorted but the time passed so quickly and soon we were well and truly underway. I remember passing Yarmouth but the thick cloud prevented me from seeing the harbour in much detail; I could just make out the life boat! There was a rota for the two watches which told them when they had to be out on deck and when they were off duty. Most of the time this was in four hour shifts however each watch had one 'Dog watch' which was only two hours. I was in Red

watch and we were required to be out on deck until 8am that morning. Our jobs whilst on watch included looking out for other boats and buoys and adjusting the sails. As the wind was still reasonably strong, my watch leader, Emma taught us how to put reefs into the main sail which meant that the boat did not tip as much and we lost a bit of speed. Believe me this was a good thing!



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Soon it was time to switch with Blue watch and I went below deck to get some sleep. I expected there to be a bit of a sway but it was almost impossible just to stand up straight! Once you're in bed though, you can tie up your Lee cloth and don't have to worry about falling out of your bunk. The rota continued throughout the morning and early afternoon switching every four hours and sleeping when off duty. Unfortunately the bad weather returned as we were passing Poole and we had to anchor in a bay for the night. We were all shattered and looking forward to going to bed, however, because we were at anchor we had to follow another rota for anchor watch. This involved three

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people being awake at all times and recording measurements every half an hour to make sure that our anchor had not dragged.

The next morning was another very early start, we were all woken at 3am to help put up the sails and get going again. Little did we know that we would be sailing continuously from now until when we reached Falmouth. Everyone got into a routine very quickly and most people slept during their 4 hours off watch despite it being the middle of the day. I found that as we sailed continuously through day and night I lost track of the days and was never sure what time of day it was. For example, early morning would seem like lunch time and midnight would feel like morning! Looking back and trying to explain to others what happened when, is almost impossible as time and normal routines were meaningless.



My watch kept ourselves amused whilst on deck by singing along to cheesy pop songs and having endless tea and biscuits! This also helped to take our minds off the seasickness! Once the wind died down slightly I jumped at the chance to take the helm for a while. I had to keep an eye on the main sail to make sure it was not flapping and stay on the right bearing so we would still end up where we had planned! In fact we had planned to go all the way to Penzance but because of the strong south-westerly winds we knew we would only be able to make it to Falmouth.

After several days (I think) at sea, we entered Falmouth harbour and everyone got back out on deck to help take the sails down and put out fenders. I thought this was the perfect opportunity to show off all the knots I had learnt! We were all desperate for showers and clean clothes but first we had to tidy up the deck, have some lunch and clean the inside of the boat. Eventually we sorted ourselves out and went into the town for a bit of retail therapy and to get away from the boat for an hour or so! It was strange walking on land for the first time in 5 days and everything still seemed to be swaying slightly.

Before we all left to go home the next day, we were given our certificates and reflected on what we had learnt over the past few days on board. I passed my 'starting yachting' certificate and hope to be back on the 'John Laing' next summer to try for my 'competent crew'. I had a fantastic experience on the boat; I met some great people who I will keep in contact with and learnt so much more about sailing which I know I will use in the future. Thankyou Ocean Youth Trust!

Hazel Aslin