

PRACTICAL

THIS MONTH INVINCIBLE WALTER GREENE TRIMARAN • EMERGENCY DROPS • TRANSATLANTIC ROUTES • GROUNDINGS

73%
of pupils at Greig City Academy are statistically classified as disadvantaged



Rounding the Rock was a highlight for many of the Fastnet crew

SPECIAL REPORT

HELEN FRETTER ON PROJECT SCARAMOUCHE

How do you improve access to sailing? Rather than wait for sailing clubs to open their doors to them, one inner-London school has taken a very different approach to getting pupils on the water.

At the Greig City Academy in the London borough of Haringey over 70 per cent of pupils receive free school meals, and there are over 50 different first languages. The demographics of the pupil body are markedly different to that of a typical RORC crew, yet this summer eight of its boys completed the Rolex Fastnet Race on the school yacht *Scaramouche*, becoming the first state school to do so.

The school's sailing programme is not based

on taking pupils out on the yacht as a one-off experience, but on developing their skills and involvement to as high a level as possible.

Jon Holt, head of sixth form, explains how they started in 2013: "We've got a school that really believes in outdoor education, but it didn't include any sailing because we thought it would be difficult to get large numbers of school children out."

"The only place that could provide sailing for 25 students at a time was Poole Harbour. So we started dinghy sailing down there and 12 of the boys really enjoyed it and wanted to take it further. We tried to facilitate that, and initially we sort of made it up as we went along."

Holt found a dilapidated 22ft MacGregor on eBay, which the school bought and restored, but the pupils had set their sights higher.

"We then decided that we wanted to enter races, but the only schools yacht race is the Arrow Trophy, and you have to be a fee paying school so we couldn't do that one." Holt says the Academy approached the Arrow Trophy organisers twice, and was 'refused point blank'.

Undeterred, they decided to enter the association of sail training organisations regatta, the ASTO Small Ships race, with a plan to then do some RORC races. "But we didn't have a boat that could do the Small Ships, and we didn't have one that could go offshore."

An impractical dream?

Famous Whitbread skipper Lawrie Smith was Holt's childhood hero, and he was searching online for Smith's old boats when he stumbled on *Scaramouche* for sale in Sweden.

The Frers-designed 45ft *Scaramouche* was

built in aluminium by Palmer Johnson in 1981 and represented the USA in the Admirals' Cup. She originally sported IOR features such as wire sheets and a hydraulic main, and was later refitted as a training vessel for the US Navy.

When Holt found her she had been on the hard for four years and in need of considerable work. "The designer emailed me, to say: 'That's too big a project, it's not a school boat.' But by then momentum had built," recalls Holt. "So we put in an offer of £17,000 and ended up with *Scaramouche*. So this is like our mini-Rothmans. Or mini-Intrum *Justitia!*"

Scaramouche is not the typical cruiser-racer used by sailing schools. It is unashamedly rough and ready down below and at the end of the Fastnet looked very much as you'd expect a 37-year-old yacht crewed by teenagers offshore to look – sweet wrappers and headphones, damp socks and an overflowing galley sink. But the boys were not on board for comfort, they were there for the challenge. >

The school team will be competing in Miami in the Etchells in 2018

Below: taking to the stage at the Fastnet pre-race press conference



Paul Wyeth

Sportography.tv

Over **1,000** pupils have gone sailing with the Greig City Academy since it began its sailing programme

All the important bits – safety kit, rigging, sails – have been thoroughly restored or replaced thanks to fundraising by the pupils, and a lot of good will from the marine industry.

“We did our first ASTO race and we got line honours in that, which we weren’t expecting,” recalls Holt, “Then they did a sequence of maybe 40-50 talks to sailing clubs and suppliers. The boys did all of it. All of the money for this, none of it comes from the school, it’s all money they’ve raised through talks.”

Holt estimates that the *Scaramouche* project costs around £100,000 per year, with sponsor Pioneer Underwriters covering some of the basic running costs. The school uses talks to raise additional funds, and support from industry suppliers – Ocean Yacht Systems has donated standing rigging, Marlow Ropes and English Braids gave the boat new running rigging, Spinlock supplied lifejackets free of charge. Lawrie Smith has since become a valued mentor, coaching the crew and negotiating with suppliers for donations or reduced fees.

“It needs a huge amount of work, and I have to prioritise safety,” says Holt. “I’ve got to be clear that the work’s done to a really high standard, so we’ve been using Hamble Yacht Services refit and repair.

“Each time one of the invoices comes through, if we can’t afford it then we just go out and do more talks, we do more applications to trust funds.

“We’ve found that the industry wants to help. But a lot of schools find reasons for not doing stuff. Like our head teacher says, they always ask, what if it goes wrong? And they never ask, what happens if it goes spectacularly well?”

Holt believes that, rather than just adding complexities to the programme, using a vintage yacht like *Scaramouche* helps draw interest. “I don’t think the likes of Lawrie Smith would have been involved if we’d just bought a standard production yacht.

“Then the crew are unusual, and they know it themselves. Their ethnicities are not particularly well represented at the moment within sailing.”

Eat, sleep, sail, revise

One factor Holt doesn’t spell out is the huge amount of extra work and sacrificed time by Greig Academy staff. The sailing programme fills 38 weekends a year, including dinghy residential courses, offshore training and



Whitbread Race skipper Lawrie Smith has mentored and coached the team

rather than a friendship group, so some of them are in a watch with students they wouldn’t normally socialise with in school. And they’ve learnt how to manage themselves.

“The key thing they’ve learnt is resilience, and they are a resilient bunch of kids.”

“Those boys just stuck at it. Four of them have got their Day Skipper qualification. They found sailing qualifications really aspirational. My generation sometimes see them as a bit of a hassle, something you’ve got to get, whereas they see it as a really good exam pass.”

Besides the Fastnet, in which they finished 142nd overall out of the 368-boat fleet, a team raced at the invitational Gertrude Cup in Etchells, where they finished an impressive 4th, and will compete at Miami next year. The Academy also raced at Cowes Week with both girl and boy pupils on board – safeguarding reasons mean that for the offshore race programme the crew had to be single sex.

Holt is already planning a return to the Fastnet in 2019. “I honestly thought there would be bits of the Fastnet that they really might not like. I was worried that they would do the race and find it overwhelming.

“It’s been the complete opposite. They were absolutely buzzing the whole way back from the Rock. They coped well when it was hard. They enjoyed it when it was exhilarating. I will never forget Montel on the helm, surfing downwind in the middle of the Irish Sea with very big waves.”

“And then as we were coming in, everybody’s asking ‘When’s the next race?’ So I think they’ve got the bug for it.”

But Holt sees the biggest gains extending far beyond sailing, as some of the older boys complete their university applications: “Their social radar has been widened. The majority of Fastnet crews come from fee-paying schools. I think it’s made them realise they can compete against anyone.”

FROM CITY TO SEA

The Shadowfax Racing charity is another scheme that focuses on taking disadvantaged young people yacht racing,



using a fleet of matched Sigma 33s. The charity runs five-day programmes with teenagers from central London and Portsmouth who would not otherwise get the chance to experience sailing. The charity welcomes approaches from experienced sailors who may be able to help run the programme.

Shadowfaxracing.org.uk

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