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Wind of tradition gets new course going for would-be boatbuilders

By Katie Macleod

A new boat building course combining creativity and carpentry is currently underway at The Nicolson Institute.

The project, run as a weekly after-school club by Master Mariner Angus Smith, started at the end of September and saw a small class of students introduced to the world of boat building.

"It is traditional style boat building," says Angus Smith, who is also Chairman of the Port Authority and a boat builder by trade. "The first boat we're going to build is a St Ayles Skiff, the boats that have been built all over Scotland for the Scottish Coastal Rowing Project, and after that we'll move on to traditional local-type boats."

The Nicolson Institute were looking for students "genuinely interested" in the scheme, Depute Rector Angus MacLennan explains. For those hoping to prepare for apprenticeships, or maritime careers with companies like Clyde Marine, involvement in the project "will be very good for CV purposes."

The wooden St Ayles Skiff has gained in popularity in recent years, thanks to the success of the Coastal Rowing Project, which encourages boat building and rowing racing in coastal communities. Built purely for rowing, there is space for four rowers and a coxswain in the boat, which is based on the traditional Fair Isle skiff.

Created in the 'clinker' style – where one plank overlaps the other – the boat will hopefully be completed by next summer. "We'll be working with wood. It's a good transferable skill for someone who wants to go into joinery or carpentry, or even to an extent art or sculpture," Angus Smith explains.

"Initially the basic skills will be carpentry, as far

as joints are concerned," he continues. "I don't want to romanticise it, but there's a certain artistic or imaginative element to it as well, everything is curved. It encourages a bit of free thinking – there are no straight lines on a boat."

In the workshop on Rigs Road, the students will be learning "very practical skills" as well as engaging their imaginations, and "not only learning them, but practising them as well." Students will be required to read and interpret drawings before building a boat they will eventually be able to use.

"What's nice about this is that they start off with a bit of flat wood, and then see a boat growing in front of them," says Angus Smith. "I'm hoping the enthusiasm will move them to see the finished product, and use the finished product."

It's not the first time Angus Smith has been involved in teaching the trade of boat building, and he is hopeful that in creating another St Ayles Skiff – there is already one in Stornoway, built by volunteers – other schools and groups will be encouraged to do something similar. As he points out, the more competition that can be created, the better it is for the rowing industry.

It's an industry that's seen a surge in popularity recently – the inaugural World Skiff Championships were held on Loch Broom in Ullapool in July, and attracted more than 100 rowing teams from across the world. "There were around 800 people in Ullapool at one time; there's the potential for that to happen in Stornoway too."

While plywood will be used for the St Ayles Skiff, the students will eventually progress onto more technical activities, including timber selection. "There are different types of wood for different parts of the boat. You need to identify the way the grain is running in the wood, to get the most strength out of it," Angus Smith explains.



Angus Smith, centre, on his ocean going yacht Elinca

This will be the technique used later for building local-style boats, which Angus Smith expects "will probably have a certain sailing element, with traditional dipping lug sails." Boat-building and sailing have always had a place in the history of the Hebrides: "The most famous local boats were sgoth niseachs, but the boats from various areas all over the islands, from Scarp to Uig and Bernera, all had their own little peculiarities."

Angus Smith is well versed in this history, having been involved in the building of An Sulaire, a sgoth niseach, in the early Nineties. A boat builder to trade, Angus has also skippered super yachts, sailed thousands of nautical miles across oceans, and captained ships around the world.

"We are very fortunate to have secured the services of experienced boat builder Angus Smith," says Include-Us support worker and qualified joiner DJ MacLeod, who will also be involved with the after-school club. "The boat building exercise will give pupils at The Nicolson Institute a great insight into the challenges and craftsmanship involved with building a boat. An interesting by-product of this initiative is that the school will be the proud owner of a first class boat – which can then be put to use for many years."

"We're looking to widen what's on offer to pupils, to add value to what's already being

done," says Angus MacLennan of the school's educational approach, which the boat building course epitomises. "We need to make use of skills that are already in the community; it's very good to be able to work in partnership with someone like Angus Smith who can provide technical expertise to build this craft."

He explains that the after-school club "fits in with general strategy of making more effective use of partnerships at all levels, adding value to what students are already doing in the curriculum: building skills and team work; working with the community; and applying what they're doing in technical subjects, such as art and design – applying these skills to towards an identifiable end product."

Given that the intricacies and traditions of boat building have been in decline in the islands for years, the new course is not only bestowing students with skills that will stay with them long into their working lives, but also helping introduce a new generation to a practical aspect of Hebridean culture. Angus Smith is hopeful: "If we can revive the skills that were prevalent on the islands for generations, then we will have achieved something."



A St Ayles Skiff under construction



Traditional boats under sail in Stornoway Harbour