

January 2010



Big Boat Build - Participant Testimonial

“Being a native of West Cork, from a fishing family and having spent my youth from age of 4 to 18 on various wooden boats I have always had a great appreciation for the skills required to create and build these beautiful craft. I joined the Merchant Navy at 18 and 15 years, later in 1988, I had the honour of serving as Chief Officer and Master on the most beautiful of all the Irish wooden ships, ASGARD 2, which sadly foundered in Biscay in Sept. 2008 and was abandoned by the Irish Govt.

In 2009, through my efforts in campaigning for the salvage of ASGARD 2, I learned of this wonderful maritime adventure which was taking place in West Cork, in Hegarty’s Boatyard, on the banks of the Ilen river, where one of my father’s fishing boats had been built in the early 1960s. I was surprised to learn that for a small contribution towards the restoration costs I could actually work in the boatyard, see first-hand these revered and amazing skills and be involved in the re-build of AK ILEN.

I signed up for a 3-day big-boat-build and headed off to Oldcourt like a child going to see Santa Claus. Laugh you may, but if I have to explain the affection which some of us mariners have for wooden boats, you wouldn’t understand.

I was further amazed to meet young people in their 20s and 30s who held the same reverence for the shipwright’s craft and who had already completed previous workshops. Some were professional woodworkers in their own right, eager to extend their vocational skills as well as contribute to a worthy cause while others were from all walks of life with a shared love of wooden boats and the sea.

‘tis rare indeed, in these materialistic and self-serving times, to meet kindred spirits enthusiastically giving of their precious time and money to preserve and restore our proud maritime heritage and pass something beautiful on to the next generation. For 3 days I was lost in time, watching and helping Fachtna and Liam turn out intricate frames from the rough-sawn slabs of oak, learning the facts about Irish Oak from Anthony and getting a run-down of ILEN’S history from Gary.

Every lunch-time we were fed to the gills with the finest West Cork Food in the adjacent Oldcourt Inn and new friendships were forged on the tranquil banks of the Ilen river from which the ship received her proud name. For myself and many of the other volunteers this was one of the most rewarding and heart-warming activities in which we have ever participated and we resolved to return again as often as we can until the day when she slides back into her native river as a born-again sea-going Irish wooden sailing vessel carrying a little piece of our hearts into the future.

“She will go down to the sea again, to the lonely sea and the sky and we’ll cast our eye to the distant sky for a star to steer her by”

Captain J.G. Burns, MNI, Serving Master Mariner