



Big Boat Build - Participant Testimonial

"For more than a year I had promised myself a three-day excursion to Baltimore for the Ilen workshop, Ireland's largest wooden boat build. I have followed her progress for some time, on one occasion spending an afternoon in the company of her one-time skipper, Falkland Islander Terry Clifton, a wonderful man who, sadly, has since passed away. First stop was the Oldcourt Inn where I was just in time to receive a bowl of delicious seafood chowder from Anne and to meet the other workshop volunteers – Michael Ruane from Wexford, Eddie Cleary from Tipperary, local man and former fisherman Bill Roycroft of Mizen Head, Dublinman Jim Murphy and Dermot Falvey of Cork.

This motley crew had already begun work earlier in the day, so I had some catching up to do. No problem. Outside the great venerable grain store housing the skeleton of the Ilen in Hegarty's Boatyard, we gathered to hear Brother Anthony describe the particular qualities that make oak such an indispensable material in boat construction. His lucid talk veered from the technical to the sacred as he explained oak's strength and durability, as well as its enduring position in Irish history and mythology.

Having been introduced to the mysteries of oak, it was then time to begin the work of cutting and sculpting this hardy material to match the old oak frames of the Ilen. Barely audible whispers, mutterings and body movements were being exchanged by the three experienced shipwrights, brothers Liam and John Hegarty, and Fachtna O'Sullivan. Selecting suitable lengths of beautiful Irish oak from which to cut the individual scantlings and futtocks was a task not to be rushed. Fachtna disappeared repeatedly into the bowels of the old Ilen at this stage of the process, emerging each time clutching a handful of bevels and carefully marking each massive length of virgin timber prior to cutting it on the band saw.

Never was the saying 'Many hands make light work' more apt than when applied to the rebuilding of the good ship Ilen. For there was indeed much heavy work involved in unfastening and removing her old timbers and replacing them with new ones. What was striking though, was the good humour of all throughout the work. I had wondered would the presence of inexperienced men and women unnerve or annoy the shipwrights. As I tip-toed from frame to frame, at times swaying about unsteadily, there was no rebuke from the sure-footed shipwrights. Not at all, all three of them displayed admirable patience and good humour, pausing occasionally to listen to a story or to exchange good-humoured banter. Before I finished up on the Friday, I was convinced that not only did these shipwrights appreciate our assistance – however inexperienced – they enjoyed too the colour and the banter and energy we brought with us.

All of us novices were grateful too for the chance to contribute to this remarkable project, in this extraordinary place. By Friday afternoon we had helped to complete two frames and we were mighty pleased with ourselves. Roll on the next workshop!"

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