

Benji Steward-Shirley

Lowestoft: November/December

Having wanted to be a student at Lowestoft International Boatbuilding Training College for a few years, it felt a great relief to finally arrive here. Sometimes it can be hard to gauge the full size and layout of a place by photos. So walking around the college for the first time, I was actually surprised by the size and layout of the complex. There was lots of space to breathe. But key for me was being back into a learning environment. I never thought I'd be looking forward to handouts and worksheets again after leaving school.

Within the college, there are many tools and machines. Yet it is often said that tools are only useful so far as one's knowledge — which is where the band of tutors, technicians and tradespeople bring out their spark.

As we started in joinery, I found myself pleasantly surprised at the quality of the work I was producing. Our days were made up of step-by-step mentoring, moving together as a class. Those of us who were quick at certain stages would make up for our speed with regular blistering mistakes. Lesson learned: slow and steady. What I find interesting about joinery, is that the more you take heed of the wood's grain and lend constant attention to maintaining a razor blade edge, the process of joinery becomes easier and easier. Actually, the joinery shop proved to be an incredibly satisfying stint.

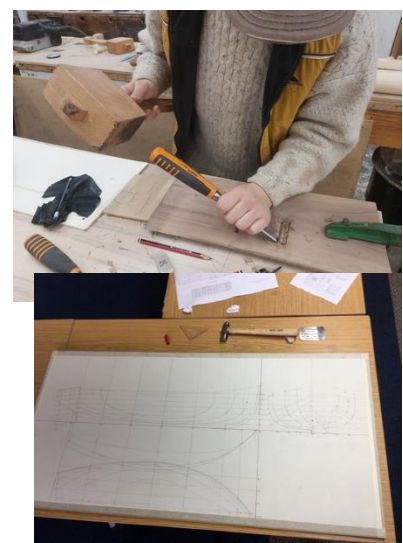
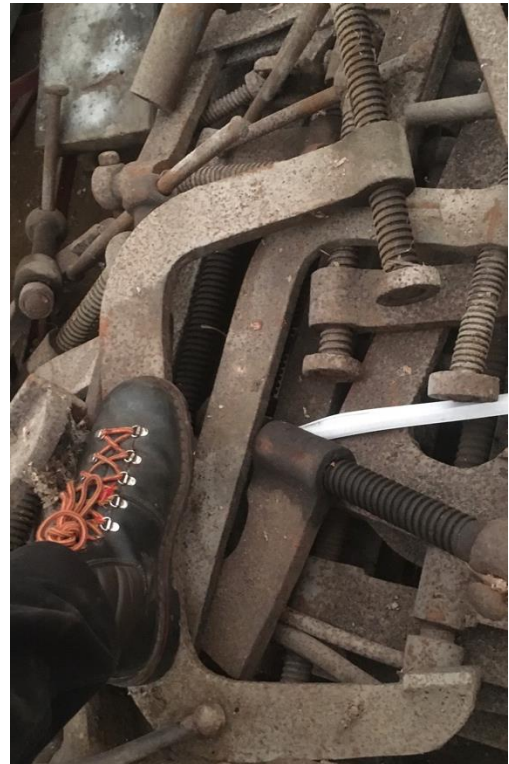
We spent the rest of our build-up to Christmas in the boatshed (the area of the college where all the shipwrighting and boatbuilding work is practised). On top of our lessons here, we were given advice and tips on what skippers, owners and bosses will be looking out for, plus methods for keeping volunteers' standards in check.

Lowestoft: January/February

Although we were two down in number after the museum trainees had gone to their placements, the five of us left were excited to power through the final term of our time at Lowestoft.

We were to learn essential rig and sail repair skills and also focus on some further crucial boatbuilding points.

Most of us seemed to thoroughly enjoy the sail repair module, partially because it's one of those areas that immediately makes sense: keeping the thickness of the sail as low as possible, imagining which direction chafe will be coming from, and why you would use cross stitches in some areas and straight stitches in others. All leaving with our own little bags that include all of the different types of stitches we had learned.



Our modules on lofting, pattern making and taking patterns from the vessels will probably not be skills that any of us will immediately use; however, they do provide a good insight into what happens when building and repairing vessels. Being explained the workings of vessels in this way has made a lot come clear when I now stand inside a vessel. Most of the time you accept what works within a hull and never really gain a full understanding of the mechanics of what is keeping everything afloat.



Halfway through January we took a trip to the ASTO conference. ASTO is the lead union of sail training organisations, so here we got to meet the people behind vessels which are often talked about, and gauge the outlook of the people who run them.

Our final half at Lowestoft flew by very fast. The college is run by people who really love teaching, and their enthusiasm seemed to rub off on us as a collective. I think this module has boosted our individual confidence exponentially; we all now have the tools to take on a wider range of jobs within the industry than ever before. In short – I don't think any of us would hesitate to spend more time at Lowestoft IBTC.

Start of FEBRUARY

Arriving in Essex for the first time since the interview, the Mate of *Blue Mermaid* met me in the street to help me with my bags and show me to my room. This only stands testament as a single example of the wonderful people I have had the pleasure of meeting so far. Maldon is a small town in Essex, which I am sure, aesthetically, all coastal towns of the county aspire to. With a thriving little boating community and a healthy scattering of old pubs, I'm sure I can look forward to my summer here.



My first allocations for work on *Blue Mermaid* have been brightwork based. My skipper was looking for someone with previous industry experience to hit the ground running, I hope I have so far been able to prove that, whilst working rather independently for the first week.