

## Steering a New Course.

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At the end of August I spotted an advert online looking for Deckhands to finish off *Bessie Ellen's* sailing season and to help with maintenance. "That's a coincidence" I thought, having only just met the ship and her owner/Captain Nikki a couple of weeks prior in Fowey while out on *Pellew*. I didn't take too much notice but the topic was brought up again at Working Sail during morning tea break. Jo and Luke both thought it would actually be a great opportunity for me; getting some much needed sailing time and putting some of the skills I'd learned throughout the year into practice, all while gaining new skills and knowledge from Nikki.

By afternoon tea break, the idea had been discussed with the team at National Historic Ships UK, I had applied for the position and a few days later I was aboard *Bessie* and ready to start what was to be an incredible month of adventures and learning.

After meeting the crew I spent some time getting to know the ship. I was sent up the mast to assess if I could work aloft safely and later we did some team building in the form of rigging and sailing Nikki's little Mirror Dinghy. Great fun until we dismasted the poor thing in the middle of the river! Next morning we welcomed the first of September's guests onboard and enjoyed a great day sail. It was lovely to meet and instruct charter guests again, albeit in a socially distant way. I love meeting new people and seeing them gain confidence throughout the day both at the helm and manning the sails.





In between day sails we ticked items off the maintenance To Do list. I climbed up the main mast to varnish the 'doubling' and 'spreaders' and applied bitumen paint to the newly serviced manual bilge pump - messy jobs, which of course are my favourite kind!

Another interesting job involved taking up the floorboards in the saloon (revealing the cleanest bilge I've ever seen) to try and find a leak. All wooden boats leak a little bit, this isn't a cause for concern if you have well maintained bilge pumps, however it's best to identify the source. Nikki and I sat watching the water in the bilge for a few minutes and she pointed out the area in which the water moved and swirled in a different way, indicating the location of the leak. After marking the area, we replaced the floor and the leak will be dealt with later in the winter.



In the middle of the month, we had two back-to-back 4 day trips, the first of which with a fantastic family of 5.



Looking at the wind and weather for the trip, it was decided we'd motor all the way to the beautiful Helford River on the first day to gradually sail back, anchoring in Carrick Roads and Charlestown bay along the way. The final night was a blast, with a sing-along on deck! The next morning we made our way back up the river Fowey and bid farewell to our new friends, spending the rest of the day cleaning the boat ready for the next guests - a lovely couple and also our relief crew, consisting of 2 captains in their own right, Dave and Eric.



We had another great trip, blessed with scorching sunshine and numerous sightings of minke whales, porpoises and dolphins. We anchored in St Maws and had ice cream. We moored alongside *Spirit of Falmouth* while we filled up *Bessie's* water tank in Pendennis. We stopped in Coverack, where Eric and I jumped in for a swim around the ship to escape the heat for a while. On the way back, we passed Charlestown's beautiful Topsail Schooner *Anny*.



It was a real pleasure to have two additional experienced captains on board, the sailing was very easy and laid back because everyone knew what they were doing and could apprehend changes to course or adjustments to sails ahead of time. I learned a lot from them, from knotwork to chartwork to helmsmanship. I was also able to spend a great deal of time driving the ship's tender, picking up supplies, taking guests ashore and getting to the jetty ahead of *Bessie* in order to grab morning lines. This was the first time I was able to put my RYA Powerboat certificate to good use since I acquired it nearly a year ago at Falmouth Training Solutions!



Once the final trip of the year was complete we wasted no time in getting *Bessie Ellen* ready for winter maintenance, starting with the removal of her sails and much of her running rigging. All of which was carefully labeled, neatly folded or coiled and stowed below. The head sails were first, followed by the much heavier mizen and then the final boss - the massive mainsail, which took 4 of us to fold onto the jetty and then haul back aboard and into the saloon.







Other jobs included sanding and varnishing the top of the companionway, capping rails and coach roof, we achieved a really lovely finish by sanding with 120 grit, cleaning with spirits and then applying the varnish with a good quality brush. Small areas at a time were covered in a crosshatch pattern before brushing in the direction of the grain. We also oiled all of the deadeyes with linseed oil, being sure to get into all of the nooks and crannies and wiping any drips off the paintwork below.

One of the headsail pennants needed a little TLC. Nikki showed me how to rig the pennant tightly between the mast and a shroud using strops and the 'handy billy' and how to serve/seize with a heaving mallet. There is a real knack to this, keeping it tight and straight while wrapping the tarred marlin twine around the piece but despite having not done any rigging work since January at IBTC I was quite happy with the end result.

We also replaced the rope on the four life rings, connecting the two ends with a tapered short splice before finally trimming the tails with a hotknife.







During my final week with the ship, Nikki showed me how to “harden up” the caulking seams in the deck ahead of the application of new pitch. I started by raking out the seam a little, then used caulking irons and a mallet to carefully compact what remained. Meanwhile the new resin was heated and once runny enough it was poured into the seams - the smell of hot pitch tar was incredible! The next day the excess was scraped off the deck, leaving neat, shiny black seams.

Finally it was time to headover to Toms Boatyard across the river in Poluan to have *Bessie* winched up the slipway for winter maintenance. I visited the yard earlier in the year to see *Pilgrim of Brixham* and the team while she was out of the water there.

*Bessie Ellen* was positioned into the cradle and slowly pulled out of the water. I was on board during the process, which went without a hitch and was a lot of fun. Once out I was amazed at just how big she is. And what a beautiful shape too! It was funny to see any part of her hull under the water line that wasn't antifouled had become home to colonies of muscles and other sea life. But otherwise, to my untrained eye, she looks in great shape considering her age (116!).

My last day was bittersweet, I had such a great month and learned so much. I was sad to say goodbye but excited to see what the next chapter has in store - the end of the SHTP2 traineeship...

...or is it?



Pupdate - Shipshape dogs, September.



**Bracken - Bessie Ellen**

Will defend the ship from enemy seagulls and passing motorboats.

Loves/Hates buckets - we're not quite sure but my goddess, what a performance when someone fills a bucket with water on deck...

Smart boy. Has learned to roll the ball for himself down the sloped deck!

Will happily share your pasty crust.

Will let you know if you're not hauling a halyard fast enough.

Very good boy