

THE LAUNCHING OF A 32-FOOT CORNISH PILOT GIG ROCKLAND, MAINE

Pilot gigs: a brief history

How often do you get invited to attend the launching of a 32-foot rowboat, a Cornish Pilot Gig, to be exact. If you are used to rowing out to your sailboat in an 8' dink (officially known as a dinghy), 32' looks like a typo in that invitation. Fortunately, I had seen large rowing gigs in the annual Blackburn Challenge race around Cape Ann in Gloucester, Massachusetts, with multiple rowers (mostly 6) in them and a coxswain. But a specific "Cornish Pilot Gig"?

Thanks to Google I quickly got informed. They were talking about a 32' rowboat used in the county of Cornwall (southwest corner of the British Isles), the Isles of Scilly to be even more exact. They were rowed by six oarsmen, each sitting slightly off center, jerking massive oars through the water, while a coxswain steered the boat out towards big incoming windjammers or freighters in need of a pilot, who was sitting in the very bow of the gig. Bishop Rock Light in the Isles of Scilly has been the landfall for almost all overseas shipping entering the English Channel. That was exactly what we did on the 45' schooner Fiddler's Green from Camden, Maine to St. Malo, France in 1977, and in 2011 on the classic 60' yawl Peter von Seestermühe (formerly known as Peter von Danzig) from the Caribbean island of Antigua to Hamburg, Germany.

The entrance is a very tricky, rocky place, further complicated by wicked tidal currents and legendary fog. Many ships ended up on the rocks. Even the mighty 7-masted schooner, the Thomas W. Lawson out of Boston, foundered here, losing all but two of her crew of eighteen. But more boats were safely guided in by competent pilots who were rowed out in very sturdy, seaworthy pilot gigs, nowadays of course replaced by powerful pilot boats.

And those old pilot gigs were fast, and often raced each other, in order to be the first to deliver their pilot to the incoming big boat, which meant money. And I read those boats were also used as life-saving boats, picking stranded sailors off the many rocks around the Scilly Isles.

A few of the old gigs survived, as did the plans and molds for building them. When ocean rowing turned into a sport in England, more and more pilot gigs were built, and competitive races were held annually. The Cornish Pilot Gig was the standard. In 2012, for instance, about 2000 rowers in over 120 pilot boats participated in the Pilot Gig World Championship races in the Isles of Scilly. I have a hard time picturing that many people, plus many more onlookers, on those tiny isolated islands jutting out into the open Atlantic. They look like a "god-forsaken place" from out at sea. A Jacques Cartier quote about the western shore of Newfoundland comes to mind: This shore is "composed of stones and horrible rugged rocks...this is the land God gave to Cain."

Rowing clubs along our Atlantic shores have picked up on that sport, I noticed. The latest entry in that ever-growing fleet of ocean racers is Spirit, built by members of the

Apprenticeshop, a marine boat building school in Rockland, Maine...which finally brings me back to my topic, the September launching of yet another awesome rowing machine.

The Rockland gig Spirit ("The Spirit of Rockland", in my lingo)

I had to see it, and if possible try my luck at the oars. And there she was, resting comfortably on the lawn in front of the workshop, gleaming and reflecting the rich woodgrain of the insides as well as the dark green and lower white paint of the outside lapstrake boards. I was duly impressed with the workmanship of the many joints, the jaunty bow, as well as the classic wine-glass transom. I saw a lot of quarter-sawn oak and flawless cedar planking. I could hardly wait to see her in the water.

But no, not yet. There were three other rowing dinghies ready to be christened and launched before the big gig. The ceremony had started at 10 a.m., 2 hours after high tide. There were so many long speeches by the directors and each boat builder involved, that I began to get antsy. The water will be gone out of this little bight. Hurry up! We've got to launch the big one! But no, first the three dinghies were properly champagne-christened (first swig for Neptune, then for the boat, and the rest for the builder). Boats were carried to deeper water, launched and rowed off on their maiden voyage: first a 9' Lawley tender, then a 11'3" Susan skiff, and finally an Auk. Then more speeches for the Cornish Pilot Gig, including one from the sponsor woman.

By then the tide was out for good. Seaweed-covered rocks filled the little launching bight. There was no way to heave a heavy 32-footer to its element. So it was decided to carry the boat to the paved boat ramp. Everybody in attendance was called upon to lend a hand, including me. We were at least 10 people on each side. The boat at first seemed to float in the air, eager to get to the water. But it got heavier by the minute. Were people dropping out or were they just holding on to the gunwales instead of actively carrying? Everybody was also stepping on each other's heels. I was huffing and puffing, but held on and initiated the 180° turn at the top of the boat ramp, so that the gig could be properly launched stern first. More champagne for Neptune, then over the bow, and the rest for the builders. I could have used a swig also, but instead had to listen to yet another speech. Finally the boat made it into the water. She looked great! Bravo! Mission accomplished.

At the floating dock, the rudder was hung, thole pins were inserted into the gunwales, six oars were brought down from the shed, and six oarsmen, all boat builders or instructors, stepped in. The sponsor woman got the honor of steering, but almost sent the boat through the underpinnings of the pier. I saw it coming, watching the angle of the rudder, cringed and made some audible remarks. The boat stopped and then tried some more open water.

The row

After a while, the boat came back to the dock, with everybody smiling from ear to ear. They seemed very happy with the new 32' beast. "So, who is next? Anybody want to try her out?" "YES! ME HERE!" And the boat filled up in no time. I got to row on position two (counted from the bow). I was elated. This was exactly what I had hoped for. I had rowed in college, and rowed my own dinghy forever, and considered myself a pretty good oarsman. So were the other five rowers. Even the coxswain knew what he was doing. This was fun, but oh so different from rowing a solo shell on sheltered waters. First, the oar weighed a ton, so it seemed. There were tholepins instead of oarlocks - no problem. But all of us left feathering the oars for later. We had to get the feel for the boat first. I missed a foot brace right from the beginning. So I wedged my feet against an upright under the seat in front of me. But my, were those seats, the six planks the six rowers sit on, slippery and hard. I would need to tie in my canoe pad in order to stay in place, wear rubberized pants or wear a seat belt. (Just kidding!)

"You are all doing very well," I then heard the coxswain say. "How about ten big ones. Let's get her up to speed!" He did not have to say that twice. We put our backs into each stroke, and the boat came to life with a splashy, sporty bow wave. It felt fast, and I think we were fast, but also getting tired fast. But like the first crew, we smiled from ear to ear when we finally landed at the floating dock, after a sizable loop through the harbor.

It is a real fun boat, I surmised, a real team boat, which needs lots of training and crew conditioning to finish the 20-mile Blackburn Challenge in good standing, if that is the goal. I have done the race in my light-weight Hawaiian solo outrigger canoe for the past 16 years, and know how long it is, and how rough it can be. But this new gig is fun, fast and a feast for the eyes. Congratulations to the builders, the instructors, as well as the school, to have undertaken such a big project – and succeeded on all accounts. Well done! Everybody seemed pleased, impressed and gratified.

The crowd then drifted back to the boathouse, talking shop and about their own rowing experiences, while nibbling on bacon sticks, various veggies and yummy deviled eggs. The champagne had been used up for the four christening events. So orange juice and bottled water had to do as fluid replenishment. A good idea, since most of us were from away and had to drive home.

Thanks, Nancy, for coming along. I would not have missed this moment for anything. How often do you get to see the launching of a 32-foot rowboat and even get the chance to try it out. The day turned into a real event. Awesome! Nancy and I talked about it all the way home to Orono, and we thought you MAIB readers might like to hear about it also.

Enjoy!
Reinhard

PS:

For more info and videos of those pilot gigs in action, google "Cornish Pilot Gig". For the Apprenticeshop try: info@apprenticeshop.com

Photos by Nancy Zollitsch

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