

A Way of Life

Small boats have always been part of this area with a variety of punts, currachs, cots, clinkers, venetians, ferries, schooners and of course, today, yachts and dinghies.

The first people arrived here by sea some 9,000 years ago and a wooden Neolithic dugout canoe still lies preserved in the sediment of Greyabbey Bay. St Patrick is said to have come by boat through the Narrows and landed at Saul, bringing Christianity to the land.

In the 9th and 10th Centuries Vikings made short blitzkriegs into Strangford Lough. Their clinker built longboats, powered by sail and oar, have influenced boat design here to the present day.”

In the 1600s non-conformist Presbyterian communities on the Ards Peninsula would, weather permitting, row or sail across to Portpatrick, Scotland for Sunday worship.

Traditionally small, wooden boats that could be rowed and sailed by a single person were used to creel for lobsters and cribben and to collect dulse seaweed. Island farmers would have depended upon small craft for daily transport and work. Early ferry boats would have used sail and oars as they transported people and livestock between Strangford and Portaferry.

Smuggling was rampant in the 1700s and small boats full of contraband were rowed into secluded bays under cover of darkness.

In the 19th century Portaferry, Strangford and Killyleagh were established trading ports and some huge ships were built in Portaferry. Small boats were also crucial and local boats may have raced each other to the Bar mouth of Strangford Lough to win the chance to pilot large vessels through the channel.

After the war and through the 1950s, 14-16ft boats, that could be rowed by just two people, were raced across the Narrows, as a Saturday night pastime for people in Strangford and Portaferry.

More recently, rowing races were held at the end of sailing regattas. One colourful event was the Shovel Race where the square shovels used by local coal merchants became oars for a day! Paddling is increasingly popular and the Lough has its own Canoe Trail.

Strangford Lough and Lecale Partnership (SLLP)

The development of coastal rowing and the Narrows Challenges are part of the Strangford Lough and Lecale Heritage Management Strategy to developing heritage tourism and community well-being and prosperity.

“For heritage and for people”

Down Coastal Rowing Club

www.downcoastalrowing.org www.strangfordlough.org

Strangford Lough and Lecale Partnership, No 1 The Square, Portaferry, BT22 1LA



The Royal Oak

It is really fitting that rowing boats are now being built here as the world's oldest racing, rowing boat still in existence, the “Royal Oak” was built here just over 200 years ago for the Bailie family (in 1812) at the Ringdufferin Estate. She was designed as a light, fast, sea-going boat for leisure and racing. Local man John McGiffert purchased and preserved her for posterity. She now takes pride of place at the River and Rowing Museum, Henley.

The Royal Oak is a four oared, clinker built gig with square rivets and the main timbers are oak over elm ribs. She was also, famously, crewed by a ladies’ team, three of them sisters, fisherwomen from Ardmillan and Ballydorn.

She won every race in which she competed. She did the Great River Race in the 1990s, having been in a barn for 100 years and they only had to replace one plank to make her seaworthy.

Routen Wheel Races (1983-2001)

These races began when a Mr McCullough from Kircubbin presented a ship’s wheel to Portaferry Lifeboat Station following a sea rescue. He asked that the trophy be used in rowing races to raise monies for the RNLI and that the event should be called the ‘Routen Wheel Race’.

The first race took place over six miles in the Strangford Lough Narrows, using traditional rowing boats, from Whitereock to Portaferry via Killyleagh and was won by Killyleagh Yacht Club. Previously, the RNLI had held a sponsored “Around the Lough” row.

The Routen Wheel is a powerful whirlpool in the Strangford Lough Narrows.

The Narrows Challenges (2014-?)

The fast flowing waters of the Narrows, offer a unique challenge for experienced rowers and paddlers, made all the more attractive by the area’s renowned hospitality, lovely heritage villages and fabulous scenery. These attractions combined with sheltered bays where even novices can have a go are great for local people and for visitors.

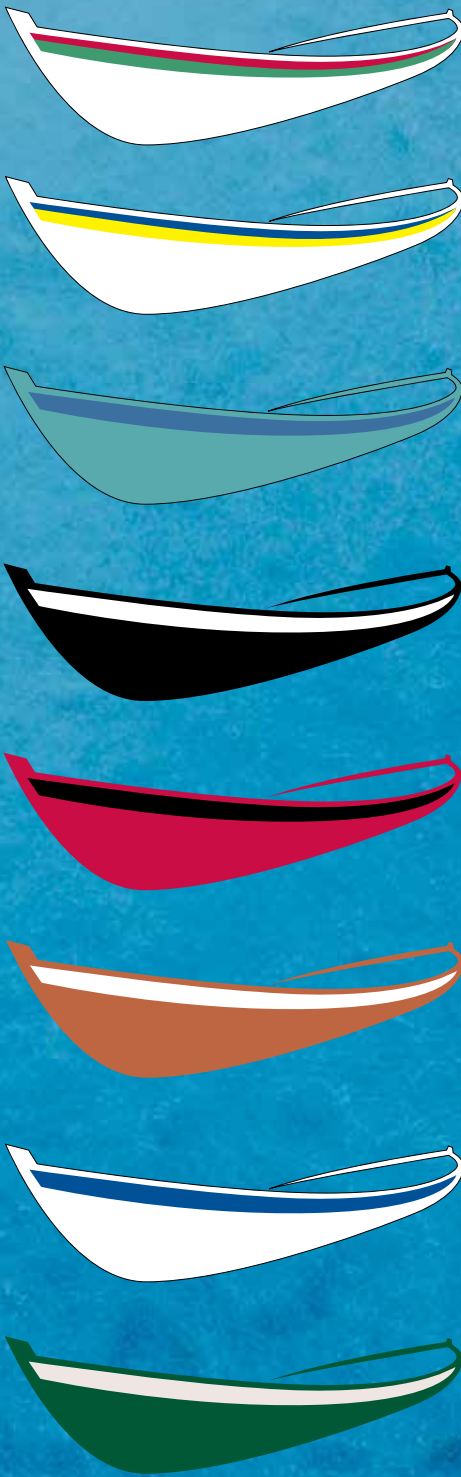
The first Narrows Challenges take place in October 2014 and will be the first of many local and international rowing races to come. Our boats may soon be entering competitions elsewhere and Strangford Lough may even host a future St Ayles’ Skiff World Championship!

Down Coastal Rowing Club has been established to develop the Challenges.



Coastal Rowing

The Narrows Challenges



“From Donaghadee to Dundrum...”

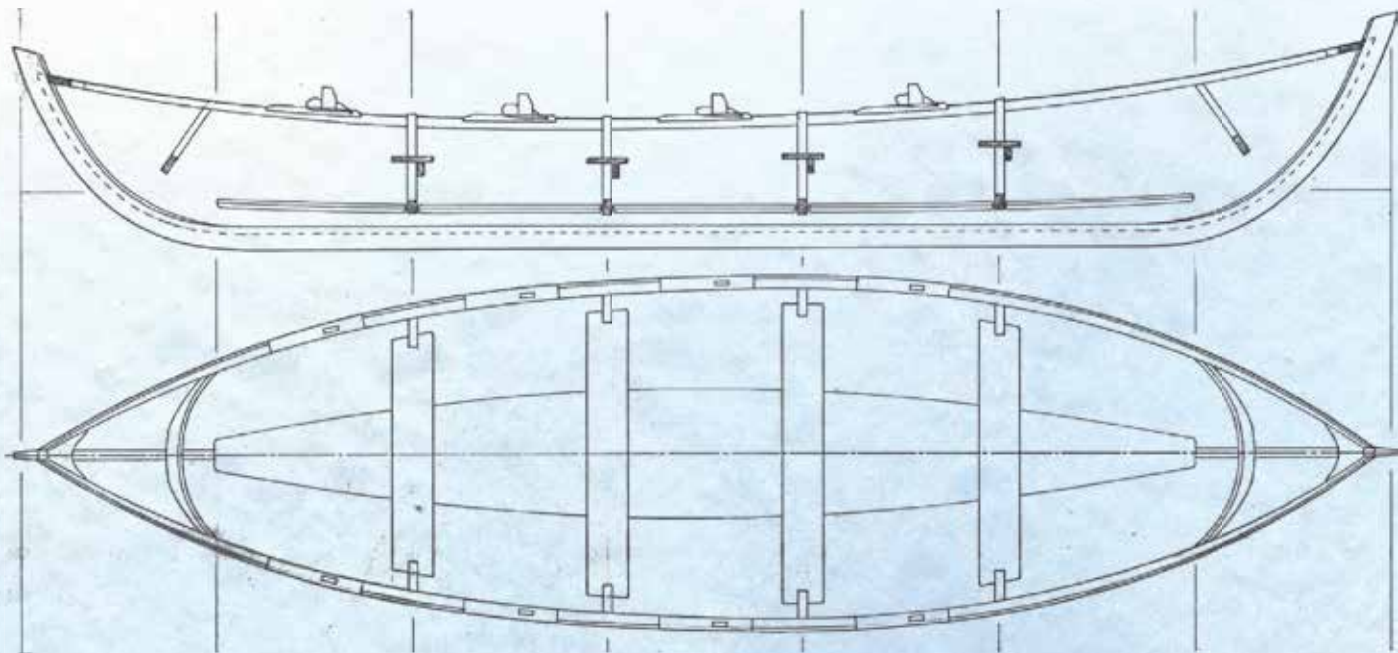
In 2014, people living along the County Down coast, from Donaghadee to Dundrum, built nine coastal rowing boats (St. Ayles’ skiffs) as part of a revival of interest in our maritime and boatbuilding heritage and the development of maritime tourism. Strangers soon became friends and part of a team, pooling their expertise and gaining new skills.

The challenge reignited a deep seated love of wooden boats amongst many who still had traditional boat building skills. Some had childhood memories of learning their craft alongside their parents and were stirred to pass

their experience on to the next generation. However, for most people it was their first chance to do anything like this and they pitched in with skills learned in other trades or picked it up as they went along.

Everyone could get involved. Within each community boat building sheds were offered, free of charge, from people with suitable premises. People provided tools, volunteered their time and raised extra funds. Each boat took approximately 800 hours to build.

At the time of writing most of the boats were completed and some launched. Many thanks to sailing clubs for making their facilities and safety boats available and to the Sea Cadets who provided training and safety boat cover.



The St Ayles’ Skiff

St Ayles’ Skiffs are 22 foot traditionally styled, clinker built wooden rowing boats, crewed by 4 oarsmen and a coxswain. Designed by Iain Oughtred and produced by Jordan Boats in Fife, they enable communities to build their own quality boats to racing specification. They come as flat

packed, marine plywood sheets and are finished with larch or other wood, epoxy resin and high quality paintwork. Boatbuilding and rowing has already caught like wildfire amongst Scottish coastal communities.

The “Narrows Challenges” project aims to replicate that success here and to develop annual international coastal rowing races in Strangford Lough. The project has been developed and led by the Strangford Lough and Lecale Partnership with the Police Service for Northern Ireland and is supported by the Down Rural

Area Partnership as part of the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development: Europe investing in rural areas and the Heritage Lottery Fund. Advice has also been provided by the Irish Coastal Rowing Federation. Special thanks to the police officers who initiated the project and helped throughout.

Meet the Teams



Ramharry Donaghadee

“Ramharry” is the Viking term for “rough and strong”, a good name for this fast but sturdy boat. It’s also the name of a rock attached to Mew Island (one of the three islands off the coast of Donaghadee). The Ramharry tidal race is formed by the strong tides of the North Channel coming into conflict with those swirling around the entrance to Belfast Lough.

Donaghadee were the last team to commence the boat build but they soon caught up with helpers pitching in and reinforcing the community spirit on which this project is based. The boatbuilding shed was provided by Shields’, just off High St.

Donaghadee was once a centre of trade and operated a ferry across the North Channel. Today the harbour shelters recreational sailing boats and there are boat trips out to the Copeland Islands.



Wave of Friendship Ballywalter

Ballywalter Primary School children chose the name Wave of Friendship and the boat colours. She was built in premises provided by the Forum for Action on Substance Abuse (FASA) in the centre of the village.

From the 1700s people travelled regularly back and forth from Ballywalter to Scotland.

In the 1850s boats would transport lime into Ballywalter to be burned and used as fertilizer and for buildings. In 1866 Ballywalter was given a lifeboat, the Admiral Henry Meynell, a sailing ship with oars.



Portavogie

The Portavogie team were delayed in starting their build but at the time of going to print the work was underway at their boat building premises provided by Park Gate Foods on Princess Anne Road, near the harbour.

The sea runs in the blood of people in this fishing village and their knowledge of boats and boating is second to none, so no doubt their skiff will be splendid.



Portaferry

At the time of going to print Portaferry had not named their boat. John Smith Funeral Directors kindly provided the Portaferry boat-building shed at their premises off High Street.

Portaferry was once a ship building town and was a centre for commerce and trade. Local punts would have piloted large vessels through the narrow navigation channel of the Narrows.

Local family names such as Curran, Murray, Tweedie and Brown are all associated with building smaller craft for creel fishing, to collect dulse, for leisure and for racing. “The St. Brendan,” built by John Murray, is well known as a heritage tour boat on Strangford Lough.

“I hope that this project will help to retain the craft of boat-building”



Black Neb Vixen Kircubbin

Black Neb Vixen was named after a dark, nose (neb) shaped rock that mariners use to navigate into Kircubbin Bay. She was built behind The Village Inn in a shed which, in years gone by, was used to build “Heron’s” and “Scorpions”.

Sailing Regattas were held at Kircubbin from the 1890s. Kircubbin Sailing Club continues the town’s association with boats and boating to the present day. “Heron” class boats were built by Kircubbin Scout Troop in 1962. In the 1950s, “Flying 15s” were built by local men in Gilmore’s loft at Harbour View.

In the 1930s, fishermen drift-netting for herring in Greyabbey Bay would race their yawls against each other to see who could be first back to Kircubbin – perhaps to secure the best price for their catch! In the 1700s smugglers landed contraband in the quiet inlet of Doctor’s Bay.



Skart Killyleagh

The word used in Killyleagh for a cormorant is a “Skart” (probably from the Viking “Skary”). It’s a fast bird, which skims straight and true over the waves, so a perfect name for this skiff. The Smugglers’ Table provided the boat build shed.

Killyleagh organised the first Regatta on Strangford Lough, in 1853, with rowing and sailing races.

Killyleagh won the first Routen Wheel rowing race and are the current trophy holders.

Killyleagh quay, built by Lord Dufferin, dates from 1763. As well as boats fishing for herring, cod, haddock, blocken, and lythe, trade was carried out with larger vessels bringing coal and limestone from England and returning with butter, corn and potatoes. Line fishing for mackerel is still popular in late summer.



Strangfjorðr Strangford

Strangfjorðr was built at Laverty’s of Ballyculter and was named by children from St. Joseph’s Primary School. “Strangfjorðr” refers to the strong currents in the fjord like Narrows of Strangford, which the Vikings would have encountered when they arrived in the 9th Century.

Many local families are associated with building smaller boats. Murnins of Kilclief built punts for small farmers and fishermen. Pat Swail was another boat builder and owner.

Historically, small boats would race out to the Bar at the mouth of Strangford Lough to put local punts on board and escort ships coming in to the Lough. Early ferry boats were also small, local, wooden craft.



Ardglass Lass Ardglass

Ardglass Lass was the first St Ayle’s Skiff to be built and launched on the island of Ireland. She is named after her town of origin, which derives its name from the Gaelic for “Green Height”.

The boat building premises in the harbour, provided by Henderson Group, was opened to the public so that people could see every stage of the build. It was formerly used to sell fresh fish and other provisions and the town welcomed its reopening and re-use. Ardglass Lass will continue to be housed there as a focal point for maritime activities and events.

Young and old were involved in the team and they also put on an extensive display of the area’s great maritime traditions.

Ardglass is a major fishing port and there is now an 80 berth marina. Boats can use Ardglass at all states of the tide, making it popular with yachts as well as fishing vessels.

“The whole town was talking about it, I was proud to be involved and to show my grand-children what it is to build a boat”



Danny Buoy Dundrum

The Danny Buoy was built in Flynn’s Yard beside Rooney’s Garage in Dundrum. The team are very proud of how they learned the craft of boat building as they went along, some transferring skills picked up from O-level woodwork and from making specialist guitars.

Henry Hanvey continues to build beautiful wooden boats at nearby St John’s Point Lighthouse where he lives. His interest was fuelled by German WWII prisoners-of-war in the nearby military camps who showed him how to build model boats.

The Downshire Steamship Company used to be based in Dundrum and major imports were coal from England and timber from the Baltic. Dundrum was a commercial port up until 1984. Local man Teddy Connor was noted for piloting hundreds of ships through the narrow channel into Dundrum Bay.