

How a Gig brought a community together

By SAM WESTMACOTT

"IT'S traditional, it's Cornish and it's brought the community together," said fisherman John Brown, as he watched a crew of boys row "Corsair" out of the harbour.

Narrowing his eyes against the sharp sun, his newly cropped hair bristling, he smiled slowly. "Trevor Beare and I didn't rightly know what we were starting two years ago. We just thought it would be good to revive the gig."

It's more than 100 years since the last pilot gigs raced out of Port Isaac to guide visiting shipping safely into harbour. Most coastal Cornish towns and gigs. Mainly used for piloting, these open six-oared craft doubled as life-boats.

The gigs almost died out in the 1930's overtaken by engined boats. Their hulls were left to rot where they lay - excepting in the Isles of Scilly where gig-racing was an restored a gig originally built in 1812, and gradually the sport began on the mainland. Now 20 Cornish villages have gigs. It is an entirely Cornish sport.

When John and Trevor proposed at a public meeting in August 1990 that Port Isaac buy a gig, they were overwhelmed by the response. The idea of re-creating history and pitting their strength against Cadgwith, Mevagissey and other Cornish ports was an irresistible challenge.

At £11,500 gigs are not cheap, with only 1000 residents Port Isaac is a small town and that kind of money is not easy to find. But fired up with enthusiasm, they began fundraising. The Sports Council granted £1,000. They raised a loan of £3,000.

"Dasher" Revelley's family has built boats in Padstow for as long as memory exists. He knows that the art of making gigs from Cornish elm using traditional techniques. He began to build the gig.

To pay for it (in less than six months) the women began a marathon of coffee mornings, raffles, cake sales, jumble sales, dinners and dances. Before long the children were on sponsored walks and the men found a lucrative hobby - pub singing evenings.

Everyone became involved. Until then Jill Gadman considered herself an outsider, even though she'd owned her Port Isaac guest house for year. Non-Cornish and a non-rower when found herself caught up in gig excitement. With one dinner she raised £750. "Suddenly I was making new friends, meeting different people. The gig was knitting us all together."



Non-residents like the Leighton Divers, who visit Port Isaac each summer bought non-redeemable shares for £200 each, one of each is illustrated. Absentee landlords wanting to be involved, sent money.

Recently retired Muriel Spry, then the landlady of the Golden Lion was right in the thick of it: "We were all caught up in some kind of magic. It intrigued us, having a gig. We even voted for the name."

The village post master, Johnny Cleave, discovered there had been three famous Port Isaac gigs, the Jane, Thomas Sawyer and Corsair. He set up a ballot box, and put another in the school. Over half the village voted for "Corsair".

On Easter Sunday 1991, the beach and the Platt were thickly crowded as she was launched. Trevor Beare, the cox and his crew drop their thirteen foot long oars into the wooden tholepins and the gig made way cheered on by several hundred excited people. She was ready to compete.

"Immediately the girls were better than us," John Brown admitted. "We men had been rowing since childhood and thought we knew it all. The girls starting from scratch looked for a trainer. They went to Newquay and learned from the experts."

It paid off. Last year the Ladies 'A' was well up in the running and this year was 7th out of 27 gigs in the World Championships in the Scillies. The Men's 'A' were 21st.

Smelling success the teams practise three nights a week. Up to thirty people wait of the beach wanting to row. Competition to be in a team, or just in the boat, is fierce.

Mark Provis, the village butcher is more used to slicing up steak and stuffing sausages

than calling a stroke. But he coxes the Ladies 'B', is Chairman of the Gig Club and rows in the men's 'A'. He believes the attraction of the gig lies in tradition. "It's living history. Everyone loves watching us, older people especially. There's no noise, no pollution, nothing to complain about." He is hooked by the hard physical challenge of the sport. "I reckon twenty minutes racing over a two and a half mile course is harder than a game of Rugby."

Every Saturday when the gig races at venues all over Cornwall, the teams take their children and are followed by at least 50 non-rowing supporters.

Why has the village become from fiercely competitive? The gig has a following most cricket or football teams would envy. John Cleave's answer is: "We're all involved. I row, my wife rows. There's a junior and a senior citizens team as well. It is exciting and tough! But apart from a slight risk of drowning, there is little danger of injury."

The club welcomes everybody and gives everyone the opportunity to be involved. Last week rowing to Rock for the Padstow gig-races three of the men had never handled an oar before.

Corsair costs £1,000 a year to maintain, approximately £1 a head. Not a lot for passion. The gig's providing fun for the village, a rallying point for local competitiveness and a darned good excuse for gig days, parties, and pulls up the coast.

And John Brown's reward for suggesting such a popular sport? "Well, I've learned to sing," he said.

● Pictured is the gig Corsair, which drew the community of Port Isaac closer together



A superb model of Corsair, made by Richard Jarrett, raised almost £1000 when raffled for the Gig Club. The winner subsequently put it in a second draw and £400 was split between the Club and the RNLI.



Tamsin Thomas, George Tutt, Trevor Beare, Bob Bulgin and Vic Hingley at the RNLI Annual Dinner Dance in 1992. George and Bob presented a magnificent banner to the RNLI and the Gig Crew on behalf of The Company of Watermen and Lightermen of the River Thames.

The 1992 Port Isaac Rowing Club Committee

Chairman - Mark Provis
 Vice Chairman - Trevor Beare
 Secretary - Chrissy Coshall
 Treasurer - Jon Cleave
 Press Officer - Jan Rowe
 Junior rep - Rob Andrews

Committee members:

Sherry Aldridge
 A Beare
 Jeremy Brown
 John Brown
 Julian Brown
 Jill Gadman
 Trevor Grills
 Jill McDonnell
 Jon Rowe
 R Sheppard
 Juliet Tom

Youngsters wanting to learn to row were invited to training sessions on Monday and Wednesday evenings throughout the summer. The criteria being that you had to be under sixteen, be big enough to pick up and carry an oar and tall enough to sit on the seat and reach the foot bar ... and you had to be prepared to get your feet wet!

Anyone was welcome to row after these sessions and the Mens and Ladies team practices were on Tuesday and Thursday evenings.

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