

Easy oars

THE GIG-RACING SERIES KICKS OFF
ON THE SCILLIES IN MAY

Words by **Sue Handford** and **Cornwall Today**



Back in the cold days of December, at 7am – when others might still be in bed, or at least having breakfast in the warm – I was on the banks of the River Camel near Wadebridge, wearing as many layers as possible, coaching the Port Isaac gig-racing team. I knew the weeks would fly by, until the time came to compete in the World Championships on the Isles of Scilly in May.

Clubs have been out since November starting their training for this event, and with just a few weeks to go as I write this, everyone will be working hard to prepare; excitement is building because, as we all know, the competition will be fierce.

In mid-March, the first of 130 gigs – a record number, including six from the Netherlands – were loaded onto the passenger ferry Scillonian III and freight vessel, the Gry Maritha, for the journey from Penzance to St Mary's.

Debbie Hunt, from the Isles of Scilly Steamship Company, has managed the operation for the past 25 years. "It's a massive annual event which takes months of organisation and careful planning of every last detail, but we've got it off to a

tee now," she said. "When I first started in 1990, there were just 12 gigs. Gry Maritha can take eight gigs at once, and the Scillonian III can take two or three, so between now and May there will be gigs on near enough every sailing. It's the same on the return journey." Meanwhile, tickets to travel to the islands sold out weeks in advance for what is the Steamship Company's busiest weekend of the year.

There are 37 gig clubs in Cornwall, featuring a mix of rowers of all ages and levels. The World Championships allow everyone selected to get a taste. After one main seeding race from St Agnes to St Mary's, gigs are placed in leagues and compete in three shorter races from Nut Rock to St Mary's, followed by large numbers of spectator boats with everyone shouting support for their clubs.

River clubs like Falmouth and Caradon row and train most days, and as such have such a fantastic competitive record. Coastal clubs like Port Isaac, and Boscastle and Crackington, have to work harder to get out in their gigs; seas are often too rough in the winter months, so they have to travel. That's why you'll find the Port Isaac team on the River Camel, while



PHOTO: ROB COUMBE

gig rowing



ABOVE: ROWERS AND SPECTATORS GATHER ON THE BEACH IN HUGH TOWN, 2013. PHOTO BY ROB COUMBE

Boscastle and Crackington head for the Tamar Lakes. This year B&C are crowdfunding to raise money for their new racing oars.

One of the north coast's most historic clubs can be found at Newquay. With 600 members and a lovely clubhouse on the harbour, it's no exaggeration to say that Newquay is at the heart of gig rowing in Cornwall, hosting the Men's and Ladies' County Championships in September. Its gigs are stored in an old train tunnel and at RAF St Mawgan, and include three of the oldest gigs in the county. The oldest, The Newquay, was built by master boatbuilder William Peters of St Mawes in 1812, and is still rowing today. Two other Peters gigs are held in trust: The Dove (1820), and the Treffry (1838).

The Treffry holds a special place in the history of pilot gig rowing, as its vital statistics were adopted as the standard specification for all Cornish gigs built from 1986. That was the year the Cornish Pilot Gig Association (CPGA) was formed by boatbuilders Ralph Bird of Devoran, and George Northey of Newquay. The original committee of 14 men agreed the length, beam, elm and planking of gigs – and strictly NO fibreglass. Today's Cornish pilot gig is 32' long with a 4'10" beam - clinker built and inspected throughout its build to be passed as a CPGA-approved gig. To date there are 170 gigs registered with CPGA, with five new vessels being constructed in 2014.

The sport of pilot gig racing has evolved over a number of years from what was once a way of earning a living. It is recognised as one of the first shore-based lifeboats that went to vessels in distress, with rescues recorded as far back as the late 17th century. They have also been used for taking pilots out to incoming vessels off the Atlantic; the race would be on to be the first gig to reach a vessel and get the job, hence taking payment.

These days, gigs are raced for sport rather than for profit. The social scene is lively, with rowers travelling across the

county to be hosted by local clubs. Families, dogs and gazebos all turn out for a fantastic day's racing. Clubs put on barbecues and refreshments, including the finest Cornish tipples - breweries like Sharps and Skinner's help out, while St Austell Brewery sponsors the CPGA and lends its brand to the Tribute Series.

There is no doubt about it: gig rowing is a growing sport, and is even being exported across the Tamar. In East Anglia, you'll even find Cornish gigs - Sowenna (previously owned by Mevagissey), and Phantom (previously owned by Par Bay). Teams from Langstone Cutters at Hayling Island, Swanage, Weymouth and Lyme Regis will all travel to the races and regattas in Cornwall and beyond.

There is a lively calendar of sporting and social events, co-ordinated by the Cornish Pilot Gig Association, in particular its tireless and patient secretary Anne Curnow Care. "The Cornish pilot gig world is unique," she said. "Whole families have the privilege of rowing together in some of the most stunning places, in a boat that has so much tradition and history attached to it. The friendship bonds that have been built through the love of the sport have supported people through the thick and thin."

After all this, what better way to end the season than yet more rowing? Many clubs row the Great London River Race - a 21-mile river marathon - at the end of September, and the MPM Muilden race in Holland in November. Cornwall has its own endurance race, held in March – the Three Rivers Race, run by Caradon and taking in a six-mile tidal stretch of the Rivers Tamar, Tavy and Lynher.

John Bawden, 76, is the chairman of the trustees of Newquay's three classic gigs, and an active member of Newquay along with son Marcus, daughter-in-law Andrea and grandchildren Ryan and Serica. He says: "I've been gig rowing since I was 15. It's healthy, and while competitive there is never any animosity. It's a great sport."

