



MY SCHOOL TRIP • ANDREW WATTS

Learning the ropes

My school owned a boat. And not some dinghy or fibreglass pleasure craft either: *Jolie Brise* — the name was always, of course, pronounced 'Jolly Breeze' — is one of the best-known tall ships in the world, three times winner of the Fastnet race, a pilot cutter so famous that she has a pub named after her. (A Wetherspoons, admittedly, but that counts.) It was only after I left that I realised that this was unusual: especially for a former direct grant grammar school in Wiltshire, about as far away from the sea as you can get in England.

There were two sorts of master at Dauntsey's in the 1980s: the younger ones, who had postgraduate diplomas and pedagogical theories and career paths, who might actually describe themselves as teachers; and proper schoolmasters, men who had fallen into teaching at some point in the 1950s or 1960s (as in the Molesworth cartoon of Mr Gabbitas and Mr Thring trapping a young graduate and leading him into captivity) and were still there 30 years later. Mr Parish was one such teacher. He had originally intended to join the Royal Navy but, after being invalidated out of the service, ended up as my school's head of maths.

Some of the more insightful pupils perceived that he still felt the call of the ocean — perhaps because trigonometry lessons were almost entirely devoted to navigation on the high seas — and argued, rightly, that it was deeply unfair to do navigation exercises but never actually go to sea. Whether this was a genuine grievance or a ruse to avoid trig (most probably both), Mr Parish

allowed (or encouraged) them to place an advert in the sailing press seeking the owner of an 'embarrassingly large yacht' who might be prepared to let a bunch of schoolchildren sail her in return for working on the boat over the winter.

A retired naval officer answered, seeing the advantages of a stream of young people prepared both to maintain and to crew his boat, all the while believing that he was doing them a favour. And that was the beginning of the school sailing club.

By the time I arrived, the sailing club had grown, with sponsorship and charter-

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ings and sailings to Spain to pick up cheap rioja which was sold at a premium back in England. They had also bought *Jolie Brise* in partnership with Exeter Maritime Museum. (The museum has since gone bankrupt, at which point the school's sailing club bought her outright.) But the basic deal was the same: if you wanted to sail, you had to help maintain her.

At weekends during the winter term, a master would take a minibus to the dry dock in Gloucester. We would work on her all day, sanding and painting and varnishing, and collapse into sleeping bags on the floor at night. I never feel so much of a curmudgeon as when I hear a teacher saying, of a school trip to Machu Picchu: 'Of course,

the kids raised all the money themselves through sponsorship.' You mean: they emotionally blackmailed friends and relations into giving them money for doing things they already enjoyed doing. But I think you have earned your curmudgeon rights if you have had to refit a ship by removing every piece of ballast in the hull, slimy and covered in evil-smelling bilge water, and replacing it before you're allowed to sail to Saint-Malo.

Saint-Malo was the destination of my final school trip, departing a couple of days before my 18th birthday. We did learn a little about sailing as we crossed the Channel, but I've forgotten most of it now: all that remains is enough to read *Hornblower* novels with some measure of comprehension, and to sneer at any yacht in open water with her fenders unstowed. (Mr Parish had very firm views on that.)

But I did learn something. And that is that the best fish you will ever eat — better even than the *moules marinière* I ordered, feeling myself the most sophisticated I have ever been, in Saint-Malo — is a fish that you have caught yourself and cooked yourself from a boat you have sailed yourself and rebuilt yourself. If you are moored off the island of Sark, in the beautiful haven of Derrible Bay, and a schoolmaster is dropping hints about the pub that is only a short climb up that ridge, so much the better. That is how I spent my 18th birthday.

My parents picked me up from Beaulieu and my mother said I had never looked so healthy. *Mens sana*, as a proper schoolmaster would say, *in corpore sano*.