

Tall Ships 2025

Sophie Johnston

Largs - Bangor - Falmouth - Alderney - Le Havre - Dunkirk - Aberdeen

Distance 1390 nm



I was so excited when the opportunity to do a delivery and 2 legs of the Tall Ships Races 2025 was announced in school. The Tall Ships Races are something I had always wanted to do since hearing about it from my mum who also took part in it when she was my age. I signed up as soon as I could and was delighted when I was given a place, thank you so much to the RCC for the Marshall award which made this possible.

We left school at the end of term and drove down to Largs where the boat, *Ocean Spirit of Moray*, Gordonstoun's Oyster 80, was waiting for us. There was a lot of kit and food to unload (enough provisions for 14 people for almost a month looks like a lot of food!) but once this was done and we'd been shown round and given a briefing we headed for bed. We set off the next morning after lunch.

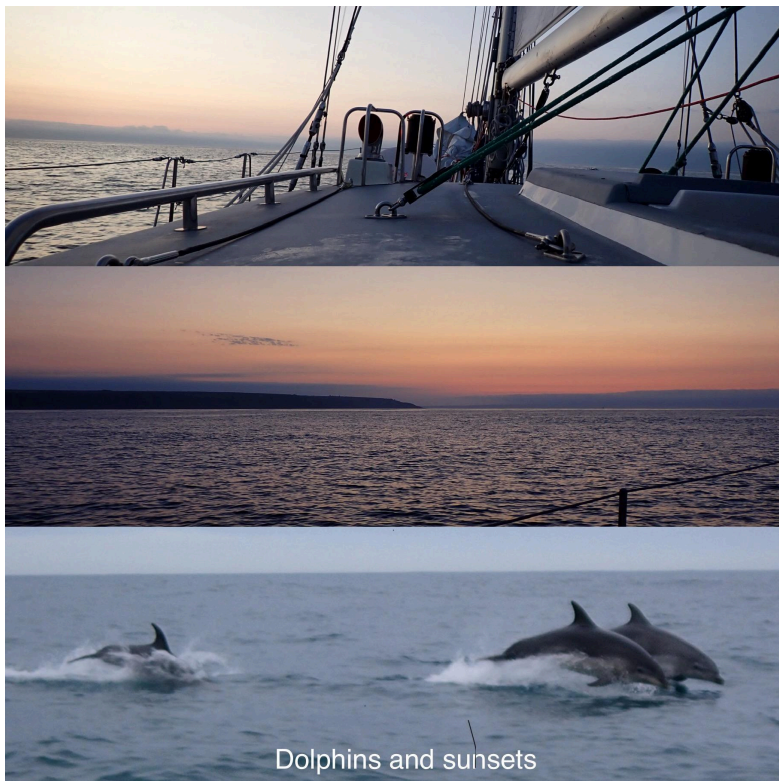
We'd been split into 2 watches of five trainees and a watch leader in each, as well as the skipper and first mate. We did 4 hour watches all through the day and night with two dog watches of 2 hours each. The first leg we did was a delivery leg, we had 8 days to get from Largs on the West Coast of Scotland to Le Havre in time for the beginning of the Tall Ships on the 4th July. When we set off there was a good amount of wind, about F4 but as this picked up a bit we put a reef in. There was a lot to learn for all the trainees, even though I had sailed a bit before and so had many of the others, particularly the things that were new for racing and also making everything faster so that we would be able to put a reef in or shake it out in under 3 minutes for example. We were lucky to have a good long delivery leg to practise all of this before the race. We had good wind to start with but it later died meaning we had to shake the reef out, take down the head sails and motor sail into Bangor in

Northern Ireland where we arrived in the early hours of the 27th and sheltered in until the morning of the 28th whilst we waited for the stronger winds to pass.

We went ashore in Bangor for some showers, a round of ice cream, and a visit to the chandlery. While there, we picked up a present for our skipper - a new cap emblazoned with the words "WARNING: OLD AND GRUMPY." He'd mentioned needing a replacement, and we assured him the message was a fitting summary of his character. Fortunately, he took it in good humour. Later we played many rounds of poker before going for an early night as we had to set off again the next morning and were not yet quite used to this new idea of only sleeping for 4 hours at a time.

The next leg of the voyage was really lumpy, with wind against tide and a heavy swell that left six out of ten of us seasick. Fortunately, there's a bucket per crew member (just in case) but not all had to be used. Waves crashing over the foredeck revealed a few leaky hatches, leaving some oilskins soaked. One particularly big wave hit as we were stowing the No.2 jib, completely flooding my boots and oily bottoms. Being off watch wasn't much better as cooking in that swell was a challenge, even for something as simple as fish fingers. This was when all the singing started, it began with the other watch serenading us with California Girls and was continued with an odd mix of songs: Piano Man, 6 verses of Drunken Sailor with harmonies and Party in the USA. This kept morale up through the swell and constant drizzle, although we were glad when we eventually rounded the Lizard and came into Falmouth.

I had never been to Falmouth before but it was really nice; we did some shopping, tried a cornish pasty and then went back onboard to play cards on deck. After many rounds of Cheat, Sh*t Head, Poker and Happy Families we made toasties for lunch which turned into being lightly warmed sandwiches due to an impatient skipper eager to get going again.



Dolphins and sunsets

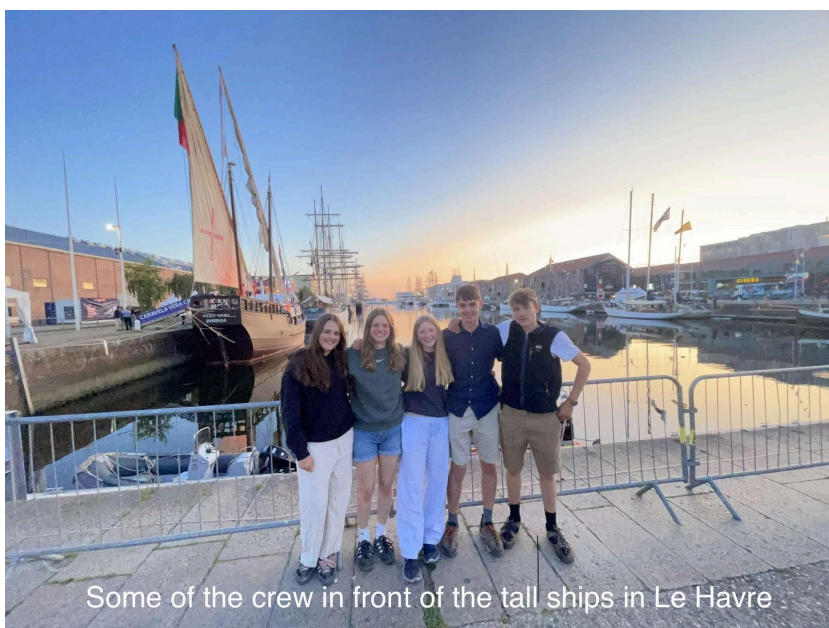
We still had 2-3 days to get to Le Havre and didn't want to be too early so we made a stop in the channel islands at Alderney. On the way there we did a lot of practising reefing and hanking on the No.1 underneath the No. 2 to practise racing changes. The No.1 is a massive, very heavy and difficult to deal with sail which takes at least 6 to carry it meaning that to get it up it requires more than one watch to carry it forward - this meant it very quickly became something we dreaded doing. We had one amazing evening where there was a beautiful sunset and dolphins at the same time which were leaping right out of the water. Keeping watch became

very important later on when we entered the Traffic Separation Scheme and we were glad when we got out of it and arrived at Alderney. We spent the morning there ashore and then got going again for Le Havre.

The route we took to Le Havre went through a minefield of lobster pots including 'stealth lobster pots' which are dark blue to ensure you don't see them until they are wrapped around your propeller. Thankfully we just avoided these by luck as it was impossible to see them in the dark. We came into Le Havre at 0300 in the morning and went through the lock gates to get to our basin. There weren't many other boats in ours as it was not the main one but we did have *Prolific*, the Ocean Youth Trust South's boat next to us as well as a few others. The first job in the morning was cleaning the boat and dressing her with all her flags and after that we were free to go for showers and do laundry and things. Not all the boats were in until the next day which was when it all officially started.

During our time in Le Havre, we joined the crew sports on the beach which were volleyball and football. One crew member took the football a bit too seriously and broke his toe, ending up in an ambulance the next morning as the only way to get to the hospital. Thankfully, it was the trip's only major injury if we're not counting the bruises left after endless games of Yellow Car. There were lots of other things going on too, we visited lots of boats and met the crews which was really nice. On Saturday there was a crew parade where all the crews from all the boats paraded through the streets and around the main basin. We realised we really needed to upgrade our costumes as all the costumes from the other crews were amazing. After the parade there was a prize giving ceremony however there weren't many prizes as there hadn't been a race yet. That evening there was a crew party which was basically a disco and then fireworks which was really fun. The next morning was far less enjoyable - a terrible smell in the galley led us to discover that a carton of UHT milk had exploded in the bilges... several days earlier. Another girl and I stupidly volunteered to clean it, hoping it might earn us a spot at the breakfast on *Shabab Oman*. The milk had curdled into what became known as "bilge cheese." Armed with a cut-up ketchup bottle, sponges, and strong

cleaner, we climbed into the bilges and scraped it all out after lifting floorboards and moving stores. Unfortunately, no breakfast reward, just brownie points.



Some of the crew in front of the tall ships in Le Havre

We were up at 0500 to go through the lock gates, but when we realised we wouldn't be out until at least 0800, we had breakfast and went back to bed. Later, we made our way to the start line in windy conditions with a fair bit of swell, triggering another round of

seasickness. The forecast for the race was vague—anything from F4 to F8, and very variable. The start window was between 1200 and 1400, and we crossed at 1204. After rounding the first two marks, 2nd in fleet at the first and then up to 1st in fleet at the second, we headed for Dunkirk doing around 10 knots with minimal tide, and an amazing view of the tall ships behind us.

Later, on watch, the wind had dropped to a F4, just on the edge of light enough for the no.1. We discussed putting it up in the hope it might tempt the wind to pick up, unfortunately however it was not fooled. Up we went and wrestled the No.1 onto the forestay. I somehow ended up in charge of the hanks—never again. They caught every one of my fingers like tiny mousetraps. Just as we got back to the cockpit, a new forecast came in predicting squalls, so back up we went to flake it away again.



We were close to *Corsaro II*, the Italian Navy's training vessel, and neck and neck until she tacked onto starboard and forced us to gybe clear. Nearing the finish, we were 3rd in fleet, with the first two boats just ahead. As we crossed at 0225, a sudden squall hit; massive wind, rain, and darkness - forcing us to drop the main very quickly. Although the skipper had seen it coming he was reluctant to take down the main until we had crossed the line. Our elapsed time was 14h 21m 12s. We thought we'd placed well, but our handicap (2nd highest in the fleet at 0.889) pushed us down to 24th out of 32 boats and 5th out of 8 in Class C. To win, we calculated we'd have needed to average 18 knots - impossible!

Our first day in Dunkirk we did a big clean and then put all the flags up before we were allowed to go ashore. When we did there was a disagreement on how far we could walk in 28°C as we tried to persuade everyone to walk 2 miles to the really good bakery and ice cream shop but sadly there was a rebellion and refusal to walk so we went to the nearest supermarket and bought ice creams and pineapple and took it back to the boat to eat whilst we played cards on deck. We met another crew who gave us a tour of their boat, *Swan*, from Shetland.

In the afternoon we went back into town, this time for costume shopping. The plan was to be Celtic warriors. Our first stop was the charity shop where some very nice ladies who didn't speak any English sold us white bedsheets for €1 each and then gave us two bags of chocolate for free. We also bought a skirt and cloak for our watch leader who was going to be our 'God'. Then we found a supermarket which sold us some spray on hair dye to use as paint (it turns out you have to be 18 to buy spraypaint) and lastly a costume shop where we



The crew of 'Celtic spirit' dressed in their kilts and sashes marching in the crew parade

got face paint and a crown. After spraying on our tartan and cutting it into kilt shapes and sashes, the costumes were ready to go. That evening there was ice skating with all the crews which was really fun.

The next morning there was crew sports which I think were the best of all the crew activities in the ports, with things like memory games and team building challenges, as well as an obstacle course and archery. We won all of them apart from the archery, but the final came down to which team had a person who could balance on a pole for the longest. Sadly we didn't win but we got a totem thing anyway. That afternoon we had the crew parade in our new and improved costumes with a new chant too: 'Does the

Chunder Bring the Thunder?' - 3 verses and a chorus to the tune of the Battle Hymn of the Republic. After the parade there was a prize giving where the prize for first team into the showers was surprisingly given to the crew who had been waiting outside the showers for us to finish... We never stopped talking about this injustice and it became a banned subject later on. That evening (in between laundry runs) we went to the crew party where there was a disco and (perhaps the best part) some delicious food.

It was after the prize-giving that we began the laundry mission. Using the crew facilities in Dunkirk, we loaded everything into the washing machine—not entirely sure which cycle we'd chosen, but it came out clean and absolutely dripping. So far, so good. We moved it to the tumble dryer, which was entirely in French. Google Translate wasn't much help, and whatever setting we chose definitely wasn't "dry." Six cycles later—plus one incident where the machine had to be wheeled outside and manually drained because our laundry was locked inside—it was still soaked. After 26 and a half hours of effort, we admitted defeat and

lugged it back to the boat. The only noticeable difference from when we'd started was that everything now smelled faintly of cheese, having marinated in the machine for over a day, and it dripped all the way back. Despite our best pleading, we weren't allowed to hang it on deck ("terribly scruffy"), so we strung it along our bunks' leecloths, where it finally, mercifully, dried.

On our final night in Dunkirk we watched Monty Python's Holy Grail in the saloon and then went out to see the drone display, it was amazing! The next morning we had the same early start as in Le Havre in order to lock out. We then lined up for a parade of



The drone display in Dunkirk

sail along the coast before heading for the start line which was on the other side of the channel.

At 0000 that night we were woken for the graveyard watch - we were told to bring everything with us that we might need for that and our off watch as we would not be allowed back to the cabin. As we climbed on deck, we saw why: the boat had been completely shrouded in thick fog - we couldn't see the bow from the cockpit. Sailing in the fog required extra precautions such as nobody sleeping in the forward compartment in case of a collision. Instead we slept in the saloon in our sleeping bags, some on the tables, some wrapped around the benches. It was quite squished but actually surprisingly easy to sleep due to the very soporific engine.

Luckily the fog cleared in time for the start which was between 1100 and 1300 UTC, we had the No. 1 up and then turned off the engine, let out all the sails which were pinned in to slow us down and sped up to cross the startline at 11:36, quite late because we wanted to catch the right tides. We were going pretty quickly by this point, around 12kts and we had another German boat in our class called *Esprit* on our beam which we made it our aim to beat and we were trimming a lot to stay ahead of her. When we came back on watch again in the evening the wind had died off completely, we were drifting around in what must have been a F1 and we were still neck and neck with *Esprit*. The watch after that was very exciting. For the entire voyage from Largs everyone had been talking about the mizzen staysail - we had by this point decided it was a legend and didn't actually exist because every time we thought we might get it out something was slightly wrong, maybe the wind wasn't quite on the beam or maybe slightly too strong - there was always an excuse. Anyway this time it was actually up which was great... until we had to take it down 20 minutes later as we had to gybe to avoid going near a north sea oil rig, it was such a faff as well because it is HUGE. At this point we were fourth in fleet (without handicaps), eighth in class and 34th overall. We still needed to gain a lot on everyone else to overcome our handicap. The wind picked up and that was when we got our high speed for the entire voyage - 15kts over ground. It was much debated whether this was achieved on port watch or starboard watch, starboard watch was helming but it was during port watch time.



As we were nearing the finish the wind was beginning to drop off, it was forecasted to drop off to nothing very soon so it became even more important to cross the line before it did. We were in third position and ahead of *Esprit*, behind the exact same boats as we had been in race one and again in third. There was meant to be a position report over the radio but because we were so far away from race control we had to wait for it to be relayed back to us and when it did we were in 4th in class! With this as our motivation we trimmed like never before, I was in charge of calling the trim for our watch and I felt like just staying on the foredeck because it was so constant. We wanted to make sure we never went even a few degrees off course so we were swapping out helming every 15 minutes, it was all getting very tense. We crossed the finish line 11:15 UTC just under 48 hours after we started. It was very exciting and we made a celebratory pineapple upside down cake on our way into Aberdeen. We stowed the sails and completely collapsed onto the sail bags, dead from the heat and exhausted from all the racing and flaking the heavy sails.

The forecast for the wind to drop off had been exactly right, once in Aberdeen we were still watching the race on the app, although we were in fourth in class when we finished we were rapidly moving up, there were only about five boats that got in before it dropped so all the other boats were still out there drifting about and we were overtaking them all in the race, even with our handicap. There was talk of it being cut short which would have been bad news for us but thankfully it was not and the last boat got into harbour on the 18th at 2200 in four days and 10 hours, two and a half days after the first boat crossed the line!



When we looked at our result after it was over we were delighted to see we were now in second place! It was better than we could ever have hoped for with our handicap and there was lots of celebrating, especially at the prize giving when we were called onto the stage to receive our prize.

The sad thing was that it meant we were almost at the end, after more parties, parades and concerts it was time to get off. As we packed up our stuff and did a final big clean of Ocean Spirit I realised what I really wanted to do was stay on and do the other two races too, I couldn't believe we had been on board for a month, it was so much fun and I'd happily do it all over again if I could!