

CRUINNIÚ NA MBÁD

by Alan Lindley



Cruinniú Na mBád (the Gathering of the Boats) is an annual event held in August in Kinvarra, Co. Galway. The festival can gather over 100 boats. I was invited over a year ago by Donncha Ó hÉallaithe, who both crews and owns a Galway Hooker called *Bhrantri*. There are four types of hooker – *Bhrantri* is a gleoiteog, has three sails, is 26.5 feet long (8.77 metres) and is ten years old. Donncha commissioned her himself and crews her along with his brother Rory and their respective sons.

From being asked I subsequently spent the intervening months both promising and making excuses until last July when Donncha finally cajoled me and acquiesced. On reflection, and after my experience, I shouldn't have put off going at all.

I was up at 5 am the day of the race, mindful of the tides. The forecast was heavy showers and strong gusty winds. The weather was excellent, though, with a brisk westerly wind and no showers. I could taste the trepidation in my mouth – this was a trip into the unknown.

Kinvarra is as picturesque as you get. I had to locate the rest of the crew, was aware that a gleoiteog has a crew of six but that was about it. It wasn't long,



though, before I found Donncha and was introduced to all the crew. They were clearly experienced boat men and keen Irish speakers which certainly put me at a disadvantage on both counts.

My nerves had to hold for an hour while we waited for the tide to return so we could row out to the Hooker in the Bay. I thought I was fit until I started rowing against the tide to *Bhrantri* but by the time we boarded my adrenalin was flowing and I was sweaty and eager to get to sail, which we duly did.

I was astonished to find that when the sails went up we almost immediately started to move at quite a pace. And remember, there are no engines inboard or outboard. Home comforts were non-existent – no toilet, no kettle, no cooker, no shower. This certainly was not cruising as I know it. It was open deck with effectively what I could only describe as scaffolding planks beneath my feet.

I was glad I brought my steel-capped, non-slip shoes from Waterways Ireland issue – it wasn't long before, being the novice, I was given the job of shifting weights from port to starboard when tacking. This entails lifting a cast iron weight of over a hundredweight which has a rope with a loop attached. You place the loop on a pin on either the port or starboard side depending on which way you are tacking. Bear in mind you have the added problem that the boat is at a 45 degree angle or more, and trying to clamber back and forth is not an easy task when the planks beneath your feet are wet.

The Galway Hooker when on open water was at a 45 degree angle all the time, and often more than 45 degrees, so you can imagine trying to move with a huge beam (boom) not more than six inches from your head. And the awesome power of the wind is magnified on a Hooker so you are up to 6-7 knots at the drop of a hat. This sensation is just exhilarating, and remember no engine, no noise, only the wind flapping the sails as we headed out to the Atlantic.

I was given the helm and what an experience – the workhorse of the West with its long traditions put together with a land-loving lock keeper used to cruising with comforts. It was both thrilling and magical all rolled into one memorable moment of time that will be forever etched into me.

After sailing out to sea from Kinvarra, we had to pull into a little fishing harbour for instructions on the race ahead. This turned out to be another rush of adrenalin for me as Donncha said, 'You have the helm. Bring her in port side to the Hooker moored ahead.' Panic struck me. No Reverse! No Engine!

At this stage we were travelling at a good 6-7 knots. 'How do I stop her?' To which the reply was 'Lash her to the stern of the other Hooker.' Panic does not convey the trauma that befell me, but with zest and fear I managed to lash the rope onto the stern of the moored Hooker, and to my absolute relief and exhilaration she stopped dead. The greenhorn passed the test! One I will never forget.

We disembarked for a barbecue organised by the Kinvarra Visiting Committee. Only Irish was spoken throughout the day. It was a privilege to be a party to the Regatta and the welcoming atmosphere and

camaraderie. A whole sheep was placed on a spit and cooked over turf sods which gave a peaty taste to the lamb (not unlike peaty distilled whiskey). A first for me.

The Guinness was free and flowing, and I can tell you in the wilds of Co. Galway after racing in the Atlantic that was the best pint of Guinness I ever drank.

Then back to the business of racing and a debrief of the course. There were to be three races; two around buoys and a tacking race. We gathered at the quay wall where crowds had congregated to view these splendid and majestic Hookers, some of which were laden with turf.

The race was on and we set off one by one out into the Atlantic breeze. When a horn blew we were off, the intensity of the crew was palpable and no mistakes could be tolerated now. We rounded our buoys at speed, the only one speaking the skipper, with instructions we duly carried out. The competitive atmosphere was invigorating and the adrenaline was inescapable.

We completed our first round. It was tight. The second race was hard to call, but by the time we tacked we knew we had it in the bag, although partly due to a mistake by another crew.

We won! The first race Donncha and crew won this year. Perhaps the greenhorn brought them luck after all!

Photos: Alan Lindley

Alan is a member of Offaly IWAI and when he isn't messing about in boats he minds locks on the Grand Canal near Rahan.

