

Update on Southampton Sea Cadets' Expansion Project

Over the last few years, Southampton Sea Cadets has benefitted enormously from funds raised by the Southampton Master Mariners and, as our current expansion project draws to a close, it has been (politely) suggested that I write a piece for the newsletter to tell fellow Cachalots what has been going on. In the following article I have tried to tell the story and have mentioned many of the organisations who helped us to give some sense of the immense levels of support we have received. Without them, this project would have been impossible.

As a quick primer on the background, Southampton Sea Cadets moved to its current location on Vespasian Road in 1996 when the Unit was displaced from Southampton docks following the closure of the Royal Naval Reserve unit HMS WESSEX. After much searching, the cadets took over a derelict boathouse, which was then refurbished for their use. In many ways the new building was ideal as it fronted the River Itchen and had a slipway suitable for launching dinghies and canoes. There were, however, some downsides. The larger boats had to be kept at a nearby marina, so the cadets had to hike down the road with anchors and oars every time they wanted to get afloat. More importantly, the boathouse was quite small, which limited the Unit to a maximum capacity of 40 cadets.

The immediate objective was to make boating easier by installing pontoons. This was achieved early in 2014, and Cllr Ivan White, the then Mayor of Southampton, cut the ribbon to officially open the facility on 12 April that year (*right*). With the Unit's power boats now immediately accessible, the next obvious step was to seek Royal Yachting Association (RYA) accreditation as a Recognised Training Centre (RTC). The Unit became an RTC in 2015, which allowed it to award cadets with RYA recognised powerboat qualifications, and accreditation has been renewed each year.

It was at this point that we realised there was a great deal of support and affection for the Sea Cadets in Southampton; and with this support through donations, grants and discounted or pro bono work even expensive projects were within the reach of a small charity such as ours. Buoyed up with success, we decided to tackle the expansion project.



While in the docks, in its heyday, the Unit's strength was somewhere north of 150, so it was a reasonable assumption that if the Unit were bigger there would be local youngsters keen to join. A suitable plot of land on which to expand was adjacent to the Unit, and it was, effectively, derelict (*left*). However, the plot had been earmarked for housing and was subject to a planning restriction that prevented its use for other purposes. Knowing that the plot was liable to flood if a storm surge coincided with a Spring Tide high water, it seemed unlikely that anyone would be building houses there anytime soon, so we decided to try and secure it for the Sea Cadets. We approached our local Councillors and explained our aspirations, and their view was that, provided we could secure the plot, the planning restriction could be lifted.

It took two years of hard bargaining to secure a lease on the plot for use by Southampton Sea Cadets. Much credit is due to Gibson, Dunn & Crutcher LLP who, through the LawWorks scheme that provides pro bono legal advice for small charities, helped steer us through the process of leasing the land from The Swathling Housing Society and having the planning restriction lifted. Our only costs were for searches and registration charges, and Swathling's legal costs, though the peppercorn rent we secured for a 10-year lease made this latter expense a reasonable bargain.

We signed the lease on 43-45 Vespasian Road in May 2017, and the hard work of fund-raising began in earnest. We were very grateful when Cllr Les Harris chose Southampton Sea Cadets as one of his charities for his year in office as Mayor of Southampton. This act of faith provided a much-needed profile for the expansion project, and during Cllr Harris's term as Mayor our war chest started to grow, and local organisations and companies began to take an interest in our project.

We knew we wanted to increase the Unit's capacity from 40 to roughly 80 cadets, and the most important element of the project was more teaching space so we could ease the pressure on the boathouse. We would not be building permanent structures as our lease was just 10 years, so we were looking for temporary office / classroom options that would provide three to four teaching spaces, each for groups of 10-12 cadets. To complicate matters, the new buildings needed to be raised one metre above ground level to keep them above any flood water.

So began a torturous 12 months, as each possible solution required its own foundation design, and separate planning approval. Further, we were caught in loop as we were reliant on second-hand buildings coming on the market but could not purchase anything until we were able to install it. With even basic planning approval taking 8 weeks, anything of interest was being snapped up before we could move, and so our only option appeared to be to purchase new. At this stage, self-build log cabins nearly became the solution of choice.

Again, fortune smiled on us, and the project was able to move forward. Elliot's, a Midlands company that supplies site buildings was turning over its stock, and offered us a 17m x 8m temporary office block for just a few thousand pounds (if new £90,000); ABP agreed to store it in the docks for a few weeks while we secured final planning approval; and one of Keir Construction's site foremen came up with a simple foundation solution.

So, all good? No quite, although some good progress had been made. By now, Keir Construction and CEMEX had cleared the undergrowth, trees and rubbish from the site, and Haywards Fencing had erected palisade security fencing along two boundaries. To obtain planning approval, we agreed to split the application process in two, with Phase One being the installation of the concrete pads that would support the building; and Phase Two the installation of the temporary building itself. Weeks passed as we worked to meet the Council Planning department's conditions, during which our contractors did their best to remain flexible.

Eventually we had Phase One planning approval in hand, and on 8 April, with Council archaeologists in attendance,

PT Contractors started digging the first holes for the foundation pads (*right*). Our friends CEMEX gave us ‘mate’s rates’ on the concrete, and 10 days later the pads were ready to receive the building.

By May, the pressure was on us to complete. We had already used up 2 of our 10 years of lease, and our temporary building was becoming a problem for the port. We bombarded the Council Planners with e-mails and telephone calls, Councillors waded in on our behalf, and we moved to Phase 2. With ABP craneage in the port and William’s Shipping providing the transport, the six separate sections of our temporary building were moved to Vespasian Road where they were craned into positions and assembled by ANR Site Services (*below left*).



As I write this, we have scheduled the official opening for Saturday 28 September, when the First Sea Lord, Admiral Tony Radakin, will declare the building open and the project complete. Ahead of the opening, there are still a few finishing touches needed. Courtesy, again, of CEMEX, the surface of the new site will be dressed with limestone chippings, the entrance will be finished off, and the new building will have been given a thorough clean and a lick of paint.

So, what next? Obviously, we need to recruit more cadets to make use of the new spaces, and we will need some more staff to help train them. That will be an ongoing project this autumn. For next year, the focus will return to providing the best equipment for the cadets. Aspirations include installing a low pontoon or a versa-dock type arrangement to make it easier to launch and recover our sailing dinghies, and to extend our RTC accreditation to allow us to award RYA sailing qualifications. Our canoe instructor has already tabled ambitious plans that will enable the Unit to both improve its canoe instruction and enable Duke of

Edinburgh award scheme expeditions to be undertaken afloat. After all – this is the Sea Cadets!

Throughout this article, I have attempted to name the local firms that have provided practical assistance, often for little or no money. Nonetheless, money was required, and our sincere thanks also go to the Cachalots, Southampton Shipowners Association; the Connaught Trust, the Marine Society and Sea Cadets, Williams Shipping, and a host of private donors for their gifts and grants that enabled to make this project a reality. (above *right*) Thank you.

Andrew Moll, Chairman of Trustees, Southampton Sea Cadets.



The Sea Cadet Experience

The value of youth organisations working with young people is much documented and the expansion project, aimed at doubling the capacity of the Southampton Sea Cadet Unit, helps fulfil this need in the local area.

Present and prior cadets have demonstrated and advised that they have become happier and more confident, and better behaved as a result of being a sea cadet. The values of loyalty, honesty, integrity, respect, commitment and self-discipline are instilled into the cadets. This helps reduce social problems in the neighbourhood and enables them to achieve more in the future. Research by the Marine Society and Sea Cadets (MSSC), the umbrella organisation for all sea cadet units, indicates that:

94% of sea cadets value the skills they acquire while part of the organisation;

66% of cadets have improved school attendance and grades; and,

88% of cadets confirm that it helps them secure employment on leaving school.

Parents have stated that the Southampton Sea Cadet Unit has given their son/daughter a purpose and focus and has helped them stay out of trouble. The MSSC is positive and supportive of Southampton’s expansion project as it meets their aims.

Following its expansion, the Unit will continue to deliver the current range of activities, but the new facilities will allow for improvements that create more interaction and participation. Specifically, the new facilities, with more teaching, storage and display space available, will allow the cadets to participate in more projects, such as protecting the marine environment (e.g. March on plastic in the seas) and other relevant topics.

The increased boat storage area will make it possible for the Unit to acquire more rowing, sailing and power boats, and kayaks & canoes to ensure cadets gain as much ‘on water’ time as possible to enhance their proficiency and acquire recognised national governing body¹ qualifications.

With more drill space, the Unit’s marching band (which appears at local events and charity fundraising concerts) can expand and offer more opportunity for local young musicians.

The improved kitchen will enhance the cooking, food handling and catering safety tuition and practice the Cadets can receive, but it will also allow for sociable meal eating together during training or weekend activities.

All courses, including participation in the Duke of Edinburgh’s Award Scheme, are heavily subsidised, ensuring that the Sea Cadet experience is accessible to all.

¹ Royal Yachting Association (RYA), British Rowing, and British Canoeing