

Of crabs and feathers

[Times](#)

Learning to row a St. Ayle's skiff

It's a rugged craft, but the folks who spent their winter building the Sea Shadow were gentle and careful as they eased it into the harbour in Wellington. The St. Ayles skiff—a four-man rowing boat modelled after the vessels that once plied the waters around the Shetland and Orkney Islands in Scotland—was about to make its first voyage around West Lake. The unusually warm and sunny October afternoon offered the perfect setting to learn the non-intuitive skill of rowing in unison. First, there are the unfamiliar terms. Oar lock. Feather. And God help the beginner if they don't know their bow from stern.

Every instinct suggests to the freshman rower that they must pull mightily through the stroke. But the moment one falls out of sync and leaves the oar in the water a split second too long—they are rudely propelled onto the lap of the rower behind them in a humiliation the brethren refer to as the crab.

There is no hiding or minimizing the crab. All rowers must stop. The wayward puller must regain his or her seat, gather him or herself and signal a readiness to continue. Then it happens again. Suddenly swimming to shore looks like a more reasonable option. But soon the rower settles in. Never quite comfortable—still wary of the looming crab—but at last able to cast an eye about—to soak in the glorious afternoon.

St-Ayles



Bob McKittrick (foreground) and Chris Ireland expertly feather the oar in preparation for the next stroke. Lillian Conroy offers encouraging words to the rowers.

The swans gathering nearby. Three dozen or more. A canoe silently paddles past. The hum of the village is barely audible.

The Sea Shadow was built this past winter by a group of men, mostly from the County, looking to build something with their hands. They are mostly retired. Many come from jobs and careers that demanded their minds rather than their backs. Yet this is how they choose to spend their time, now that it is theirs to spend as they like.

This past June the group sent a delegation of its members to Mystic Seaport, Connecticut to participate in the annual Wooden Boat Festival.



Chris Ireland (in the skiff) and Sandy Pratt guide the Sea Shadow to the dock in Wellington Harbour.

In historic Mystic Seaport, the Ayle of Quinte Club competed in racing events against other St. Ayle's Skiffs. The County crew reported having a great time and an enjoyable experience—which is the polite way of saying they had their butts handed to them.

The Ayle of Quinte club would dearly love to see another boat built here—another group to train with, compete and improve. They truly love being on the water and propelling the craft they built with their own hands. On this beautiful late fall afternoon on West Lake it is easy to understand why.