

# Whitby School steering the right course



Whitby.

The North Yorkshire port of Whitby has long since epitomised the fisheries of the North Sea, with a long succession of locally-built vessels landing everything from herring and white fish, to the crabs and lobsters that make up much of the catch from its still very important, but sadly depleted, fleet of dayboats. Whaling too, played a vital part in the town's maritime history throughout the 1700's and 1800's with vessels steaming to the inhospitable Northern waters of Greenland and beyond in pursuit of oil.

A proud tradition then, of fishing and seafaring, that has continually relied on the local population for centuries, to supply deckhands, skippers, engineers and all manner of craftsmen to man the vessels steaming to and from the grounds, both inshore and offshore.

In the 1980's and 90's the burgeoning oil and gas sector created an exodus of crew to work offshore, with the promise of good money, depleting and depriving the local fishing fleet further of young men who would otherwise

make their careers abroad trawlers, potters and liners. Local trawlerman and fishing entrepreneur, Arnold Locker, was quick to recognise the dearth of skilled labour that had arisen and in 2002, as a result of his concerns for continuity in supplying



Whitby.

good well-trained crew, he formed a working group, comprising 20 local business leaders, whose combined skill sets were utilised to create the foundations of what would become the Whitby Fishing School.

The underlying doctrine behind the school is very much focussed on quality and its aims and objectives succinctly state that training and education, in fishing industry methods, should be provided at Class Levels 1-2 and beyond, in order to facilitate the adoption of skills, catch methods, navigation, seamanship and health and safety, whilst at the same time promoting and marketing the fishing industry and its wider community.

It was obvious to those involved, that the training should be apprenticeship-based and that the school should act very much as a flagship for training across all sectors of the entire UK fishing industry. A Board of Directors was duly convened with the remit of monitoring and developing the school, which since its inception, has flourished into the one of the UK's leading centres of excellence, for those wishing to work aboard fishing vessels.

The apprenticeships themselves are designed to not only foster achievement, but screen candidates initially, so only right-minded individuals are recruited who possess the passion, desire and capability for a life afloat. Although new entrants are the

prime source of recruits, it's not exclusive and young men and women who perhaps already have experience of commercial fishing are encouraged to apply, in order to undertake the mandatory modules required to further their progression through the ranks.

The apprentices are drawn mainly from the surrounding area but also further afield. The course is residential, although local recruits are afforded a training allowance and expenses for travel and subsistence, if for example, living at home is an option.

Initial paper-sifting of applications is followed by a rigorous interview process and medical screening for health and fitness, following acceptance, is carried out by a registered Merchant Navy doctor.

The school's newly-appointed Director, Andy Hodgson, is keen to point out that the course, of which there are four intakes per year of 30 students, is very much incentive-based with a scheme in place to reward apprentices for achievement and progression towards completion of the course, during the practical part of their training.

"The first step in their career path is towards becoming a competent deckhand," he explains. "This involves full-time attendance at the school for 30 hours per week from 0900-16-00. Here they will learn the basic principles of seamanship and best practice through a series



The Whitby school.

of modules, including some mandatory units, that will assess them for competence."

On-board training forms the lion's share of the apprentices' year (9 months) and the school works closely with a hand picked group of local Under 10m skippers, to ensure that the experience they gain is not only professionally delivered, but monitored and assessed, so that skills learned are transferrable, once their time is done and they seek employment aboard a variety of vessels within the industry. The work is invariably suited to day boats, with potters, netters and inshore trawlers, providing the bulk of experience needed.

Skippers plays a pivotal role in overseeing the progression of the apprentice at sea and also their welfare. Although the students are unable to receive a wage, as part of the incentive scheme, they may be paid a sum, by the skipper, into an account, which they can then use and benefit from, for personal advancement.

"We find that having a reward-based system works well" says Andy. "Skippers will be quick to flag up any individuals who aren't pulling their weight or who they deem unsuitable. By the same token, they are keen to recognise dedication to task and commitment, if they feel a student deserves it."

By the time the apprentices have finished their offshore training and have completed their tasks, in coordination with the School, they are ready to undertake their final exams - a series of multiple choice questions and submission of their

functional skills certificates which along with the skippers' review and sign-off, will determine whether they have qualified for a pass.

Once qualified and in possession of their Intermediate Apprenticeship certificate, the newly appointed deck hands are able to gain employment in their chosen sector and progress through further experience and advanced training (including the 5 day bridge watch keeping course), which will propel

for crab and lobster, since a young age, literally sailed through the course and having admitted that fishing is well and truly in her blood, tells me that the scheme has provided her with necessary qualifications to be able to work in her family business, providing important planning for succession

"The apprenticeship gives young people the confidence, skills and qualifications to work in the industry," she tells me. "A lot of

the school and an accurate reflection of all that the apprenticeship entails and represents.

Arnold Locker, although having stepped down as Chairman, believes that it's more important than ever than the school continues to thrive and expand on the progress made over the last 14 years.

"With the opportunities that Brexit could bring to our industry, there has never been a more important time to



Harbour scene.

them towards positions aboard such as Class 1 Deck Officer (fishing vessels), Under 16.5m skipper, or as several of the modules are the linked to MCA statutory certification, they may wish to diversify into other sectors such as workboats or guard vessels.

One student who has recently come through the system with flying colours, is local fisherman's daughter, 20 year old, Charlotte Boddy, who having been accompanying her father fishing

people can't understand why I do it, but it's my life. Quite honestly I wouldn't want to do anything else. The training has allowed me to progress further and build on the experience I already had."

I ask what the next step might be for her and instantly she replies that a newer and bigger boat is her dream and I get the feeling that the realisation of that might not be far off the horizon, for someone who is evidently so passionate about what she does. A great endorsement for

secure a supply of well trained and experienced young people to work aboard the vessels of the UK fleet." he asserts. "Education is paramount for a responsible and sustainable industry. Our fishermen deserve to employ quality crew and new entrants need to know that there is positive and successful career path ahead of them and of course, with the school now well-established, it's ideally placed to embrace future expansion and development, in what could prove to be a most exciting time for commercial fishing."