

# Onboard

CRUISING · SEAMANSHIP · EQUIPMENT



## IN SAFE HANDS

Building confidence, relationships and empowering independence are the cornerstones of Sea Sanctuary's mission. We step on board to find out more

STORY **NIGEL SHARP**

One in four people in the UK will suffer from poor mental health at some point in their lives. That was the frightening statistic shared by Joe Sabien, the founder of Sea Sanctuary – a Falmouth-based charity that organises voyages for people with mental health issues – when we met for an introductory sail.

Joe and Sea Sanctuary featured briefly in the pages of this magazine back in 2011 (CB281) when they owned *Leopard of Falmouth*, a 1959 43ft (13.1m) sloop designed by Morgan Giles. The piece explained that a fundamental part of Sea Sanctuary's ethos is to use classic wooden boats because "they don't resemble clinical environments such as psychiatric hospitals – where many of our clients have spent a lot of time".

The article included an appeal for donations, specifically for a bigger boat – preferably one between 60ft and 80ft (18m-24m). As a direct result, a generous reader who was trying to sell his 1954 43ft (13.1m) ketch *Teka* agreed to lend her to Sea Sanctuary until he found a buyer. Although she is nothing like as big as had been hoped, her extra beam provided a lot more space, and her ketch rig gave more flexibility.

*Teka* needed a number of modifications to qualify for a Maritime and Coastguard Agency (MCA) Code of Practice certificate for commercial use and she also needed a new stem and standing rigging. While that work was going on, Sea Sanctuary was lucky enough to have the use of another boat for the 2012 season: *Donna Capel*, a 52ft (15.8m) ketch built as a fishing boat in Ostend in 1943.

Sea Sanctuary's core voyages last four days and three nights, although up to now each evening the boat has come back to her base in Falmouth. Joe explained to me that this was to avoid the clients becoming over anxious about staying out at sea, and also to avoid the complications of having to use a different healthcare support network in the case of any incident in another port. The crew consists of a skipper, a facilitator and co-facilitator, both of whom are experienced sailors as well as mental health specialists, and four to five clients.

"The real beauty of sail training is that it boosts confidence, self-esteem and communication skills and, for many people who have been experiencing mental health problems, this can be of particular value," says Joe. During each voyage, clients are encouraged to get

involved as much as they want to, and everybody gets the opportunity to take the helm – a feature Joe describes as "a metaphor for taking control of life" – and also to help with the cooking. Both of these activities, in particular, put clients in a position of trust, which they may not have been used to for some time.

### BUILDING BLOCKS

Among other things, Sea Sanctuary puts people together in a friendly environment. "One of the root causes of mental health issues," explained Joe, "is a lack of social interaction. There are opportunities during voyages for one-to-one discussions between clients and facilitators, but more intensive therapy is generally left to the health service specialists ashore. The composition of the crew is considered very carefully before each voyage. "They are not just pulled out of a hat," said Joe. "We very carefully consider each person's personality and the nature of their illness or disorder, gender balance and so on."

I joined *Teka* on a typically cool day at Falmouth's Port Pendennis Marina for a day sail. The skipper, Paul Lawton, introduced me to the mate, Chris Bracewell, and three clients, Karen, Bob and Nick, all of whom had completed a four-day voyage on *Donna Capel* the previous year.

Of all the clients on board, Bob had sailed with Sea Sanctuary the most – twice each on *Leopard* and *Donna Capel* – and before we cast off we had a chance to chat. He told me that even the anticipation of each sailing trip helps to reduce the problems caused by his own mental health issues. He always feels comfortable when he is on board and he enjoys meeting new shipmates, and at the end of each voyage he doesn't want to leave. Since he started to sail with Sea Sanctuary he has felt he has more hope, and his support worker has told him that he seems to have become far more able to cope with life by himself. Bob also proudly told me about the certificate that he has been given at the end of each voyage. "Every client gets one," Joe explained to me, "and it recognises the courage it takes for them to attend in a [mostly] totally unfamiliar environment with people they don't know, and also the hard work they put in."

We cast off from our berth and headed out of Falmouth Harbour. We hoisted the main, staysail and jib and reached out across Falmouth Bay towards the Manacles in a northwesterly Force three. After a while



Left to right: *Teka* tackles the Channel; clients are encouraged to muck in as much as possible; one brave soul climbs the mast

NIGEL SHARP

C/O SEA SANCTUARY

## TEKA

LOA  
43ft  
(13.1m)

BEAM  
13ft 6in  
(4.1m)

DRAUGHT  
6ft 6in  
(2m)

we tacked and headed into St Mawes where we picked up a mooring and enjoyed lunch. There I talked to Karen and Nick – both of whom suffer from depression – about their experiences.

Having experienced depression since the birth of her daughter 20 years ago, Karen first became aware of Sea Sanctuary last year when she saw a poster in a hostel. For a while afterwards she wondered if she should follow it up, until her daughter said “you must go”.

As a result she completed a four-day voyage on *Donna Capel* in July 2012. “When I first sailed it made a huge difference,” she told me. “I was with people who understand what you’re going through because they are too.” The trip also gave her a new-found confidence that allows her to be more assertive.

Nick had been referred to Sea Sanctuary by his doctor. Karen and Nick had never met before, but became firm friends, finding they had much in common: among other things they are both single parents of young adults. Karen told me that it was “nice for me to feel comfortable around a bloke after a lifetime of that not being the case”. Nick said that although his depression hasn’t gone away, sailing with Sea Sanctuary has helped him cope with it better.

Nick told me that his *Donna Capel* experience gave him the confidence to look for a boat for himself, and he has since bought a 15ft (4.6m) cathedral-hull motorboat and is “learning so much” from her.

## GETTING THE RIGHT CREW

When Joe started Sea Sanctuary he spent considerable time finding the right team. Joe describes skipper Paul as “a real anomaly: a Yachtmaster extraordinaire, very capable, very calm under pressure, very good with clients, and very energetic”. The main facilitator is Kirsten Leslie, who is described by Karen as “utterly amazing”. She also works in the NHS as a therapist and has sailed in three legs of the Clipper Round The World yacht race.

Joe made a point of explaining to me that they “don’t just take people from their often lousy lives,

show them something beautiful and then boot them off at the other end, because that would be doing them a disservice”. They are keen for clients to come for repeat sails as there are additional benefits each time. Joe also has a Cygnus 21 motorboat that he uses to “take clients fishing, have a talk and a bite to eat”. He is also planning to start a “drop-in service on a Friday (the four-day trips are Monday to Thursday) whereby clients can come and just sit on the boat and talk to the same staff”.

Sea Sanctuary aims to help people with many different mental health issues, including young kids; people recovering from alcohol and drug dependency; even those suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. To that end, Joe has been talking to organisations such as Combat Stress and The Royal British Legion to try to progress this idea further.

It was only ever expected that *Teka* would be a

stop-gap solution as she could have been sold at any time. As it happens, Sea Sanctuary has recently acquired a bigger boat that seems to fit the bill in every way, thanks, once again, to the generosity of a *Classic Boat* reader who had read the 2011 piece.

Although budgetary constraints had forced Joe to seriously consider something in GRP, happily the new boat is timber. She’s called *Grace*

(formerly *Tangaroa*) and was built in 1925 as a fishing boat in Denmark, and converted to a yacht in 1989. She’s 62ft (18.9m) long and boasts 11 berths. Her 2014 programme is expected to include the Falmouth to Greenwich Tall Ships Regatta, starting on 28 August.

Sea Sanctuary always makes a point of asking its clients what difference its service has made to their lives and Joe told me about one particularly moving response. One satisfied client said: “Before your intervention, I lived a life devoid of hope but I can now see the point in living again. Four days may not seem a long time but they were the best four days of my life.” With that kind of commendation, Sea Sanctuary will go from strength to strength.



seasanctuary.org.uk Tel: +44 (0)1326 378919/7966 086856

“Every client gets a certificate and it recognises the courage it takes for them to attend”

Below, left to right: group meals encourage social interaction; Sam Lawton (left), the skipper’s wife, with Barry, one of the volunteers working with Sea Sanctuary



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