

ALL AT SEA

As well as being used to describe a group of students rushing from one music venue to another, the words 'gig racing' relate to a fast-growing activity about boats, the water and a contest that goes way back to the mid-17th century

Gig racing's background lies in sailing ships approaching the English Channel and the treacherous Cornish coastline. To navigate into port safely required a pilot to come on board and, being the first point of land passed, the Isles of Scilly proved the natural home for people with those particular skills.

With each boat only requiring a single pilot, the race was always on to get to the incoming ship first and secure the contract. To achieve that, residents needed a boat that was fast but able to cope with the Atlantic storms; and so the wooden 'pilot gig' was born.

Over 350 years later and the gigs remain, even if ships have other navigational aids and pilots more modern means of transport. In fact they not only remain, but with 50 clubs in the South West alone, including Bristol, Clevedon and Burnham on Sea, gig racing is becoming one of the region's fastest growing sports.

All pilot gigs have six crew and a coxswain and are built to the same design as in the 19th Century with an average price for a competition gig being around £30,000. Design rules are rigorously enforced by the Cornish Pilot Gig Association (Formula 1 eat your heart out), with gigs being 32ft in length, 4ft 10in wide and always constructed of Elm. Most clubs have a mix of wooden competition and fibreglass training boats.

The highlight of the season occurs early in the year with the World Championships taking place over the May Day Bank Holiday weekend on the Isles of Scilly. The event certainly has an international feel, with competitors not only coming from the home nations but Ireland, the United States, the Netherlands, Australia and Bermuda, among others.

MATT RANDALL
Chairman, Bristol Pilot Gig Club

"The Bristol club was founded in 2007 by Steve Hedges from the Harbourmaster's office. He got a group of shareholders together to form the club and put up the necessary funds so that we could buy a boat. We had Isambard first of all, quickly followed by a second boat, Young Bristol. Both gigs were built in the city by local boat builders. The club also has two glass fibre training boats. Bristol is one of the biggest cities involved in gig racing, although we were the biggest until a London club was formed recently by Cornish exiles.

As a club we have around 130 members, roughly split 50/50 male and female and across all age groups. For the competitive rowers, during the season which runs from February to September, we train three times a week, although most do additional gym work as well.

As well as the races, from time to time we do other events such as a group of us recently rowed across Scotland through Loch Ness and down the Caledonian Canal. We had planned to row as far as Oban but the sea was a bit too choppy although gig boats are very stable. They have to be if you are rowing out into the Atlantic. I can only ever remember one instance of a

boat capsizing.

The highlight of the season is undoubtedly the World Championships in the Scillies, not just for the competition but because over the years you get to know so many people. However, competition is fierce, not just between the Cornish clubs but between all the teams. It's noticeable in recent years how much gig racing is taking off in the Netherlands. They now have seven clubs, the most of any non-UK nation.

We very much welcome new members joining us. If people come along you can have your first three rows for free. But there is a warning. Once you get into this, particularly racing as compared to social rowing, then it can become addictive."

The Bristol club hold their annual races in Bristol Harbour, starting and finishing at the Bristol Marina on Saturday, April 2. See www.bristolgigclub.co.uk for more details.

EMMA COLE
Press Officer, Clevedon Pilot Gig Club

"I first got into gig racing when we moved to Clevedon five years ago. My husband is Cornish so we thought we would give it a go. It was just a small group at the start but this has now grown to over 130 members. Overall, we have six boats with three or four crews in the senior categories and a couple of youth crews. We even have a group for 12 year olds, which is the youngest age you are allowed to compete at.

Men and women compete in the same boats over the same course. Although it's a tough sport, a heavy boat with big, heavy oars and we row in all kinds of weather and seas, every lady in our boat would always want to compete against the men.

The season really commences with the Three Rivers competition, which takes place in March and starts under the Tamar Bridge down at Caradon gig club. Its six miles and it's a horrible, gruelling race. But crews like to show off against each other a bit to put the wind up the competition before the Worlds in the Scilly Isles.

The best crews work really hard. Falmouth are the World and Cornish champions and train 15 times a week. They are virtually semi-pro. It's not the same at Clevedon, we can only manage three or four times a week and because it's not always easy to launch from the slipway at Clevedon we regularly train in Bristol Harbour alongside our local rivals.

Watch and Pray was our first boat built at the Underfall Yard in the harbour and launched on March 5, 2011. We try and put our new boats out to the town to name and of course Watch and Pray is Clevedon's motto, although it's a slightly unusual name for a gig. I think in the end the vote was somewhat influenced by the local vicar, who urged his entire congregation to vote for that name - it just tipped the balance."

For more information on the Clevedon Pilot Gig Club, go to www.clevedonpilotgigclub.co.uk

ANDREW KERSLAKE

AMANDA WILKES/ARND BRONKHORST



BRISTOL PILOT GIG CLUB



CLEVEDON PILOT GIG CLUB