

Wansbeck Paddle Sports Club worked together with Borders Kayak Club to put on a 4* Sea Leader Training in April 2011. Tom liaised with George Maskell who many in the club remember from Spain and from trips to Anglesey.

Tom assisted the good friends of the club, Peter Jones and Philip Clegg in organising the course and Bjoern, Lee, Chris and Craig joined the course to develop their sea kayaking personal and leadership skills.

As Craig says “I, Bjorn, Chris and Lee made our way up to ‘Pot a Doodle Doo’ which is a delightful Wigwam and Yurt village in Scremerston near Berwick the rest of people on the course had stayed the night so hosted a breakfast of toast and ground coffee when we arrived in Bjorn’s semi- electric car, I know this day gets better and better haven’t even paddled yet”.

And Chris gives a flavour of the thoughts and discussion on the way “the thought that “it’s only training” was going through my mind on the drive up to Scremerston and that should the conditions prove too much for my meagre sea kayak experience I could fall back on these often quoted words”.

The friendly tone of the weekend started with a round of introductions and paddling history – it is really good to meet others and to share understanding – Craig realised “we were among some pretty experienced passionate paddlers”. The group moved on to a detailed discussion about the 4* Leader sea remit, the appropriate conditions and the difference between paddling as a group of mates and leading a group. This led to an analysis of the current sea conditions.

As Bjoern puts it “ southwesterly 5 to 6 gusting 8, slight or moderate, occasional rain, moderate or good. This was the Met Office forecast for the 2nd of April. With this wind my usual reaction would be to turn around in bed and sleep another few hours.

Well, we went paddling.....”

Pete ran a theory session on the bank at Tweedmouth, The conditions out to sea were extreme, in the estuary merely serious. Craig recalls “Pete Jones gathered us up and let us in on some highly valuable hints and tips about the kit we should think about carrying and where we should carry it. We discussed flares, VHF, first aid kit, splits, pumps etc.

Next Pete lined up a couple of boats and demonstrated the proper use of tow lines, contact tows, the length of tows and how to set them up. We took a look at the different lines people were carrying, pointed out potential downfalls and how we could fix them”

Bjoern has some other recollections of this session “Before starting we packed all equipment in the boats. I thought, “it’s windy, sea kayaks weather cock, so I distributed the weight to avoid weather cocking. Shortly later we had a preparatory talk by Pete, we got shown useful tips on how to use a tow line for a contact tow,

given advice on what to carry and where to carry the equipment. 'Pack your boat so that it is weather cocking, if it is packed to go downwind, you can't correct by using the skeg! Did anybody notice that I shifted a large clothes bag from the rear to the front hatch ? The equipment to be carried included pump, VHF, Flares, First aid Kit, Repair Kit, Spare clothes etc.

We worked on paddling in windy conditions (no choice really) and worked on towing. Bjoern states "In line tows went smoothly, husky tows with 4 boats towing reminded me of a knitting class and I wouldn't recommend it on the sea".

Craig has important memories too "Phil paired us up and set us off to do some contact tows, we paddled out into the river and around a channel marker to experience the tow with a bit of wind and tide. Once everyone had had a go we were summoned back to discuss our thoughts and findings. Next up was the fan/husky tow - we split the whole group in two and set up the tow. The two groups set off with only innocent intentions but unfortunately it turned into a race (which by the way my group won). After a short discussion we pretty much decided we hated that tow and there must be a better more efficient option. Inline towing was up next again a race ensued and the little extra excitement highlighted the benefits of the in line tow. "

Over dinner we did a boat repair scenario and agreed that all the repairs should be in place after the afternoon session.

Bjoern summarised the afternoon thus "The afternoon was wet –NO, not the 'occasional rain and showers'- we trained rescues. Rescues with towing, rescuing a paddler with a dislocated shoulder, rescuing a kayak with a missing front hatch, self-rescues and rescuing a paddler separated from his boat."

A key point was noted by Chris when we practiced the scenario where paddle becomes separated from boat in windy conditions - "on rivers it's usual to see to the safety of the person, then rescue the gear, but it became obvious that if you try and do this at sea you will quickly loose the kayak in windy conditions and be stuck trying very hard to paddle a kayak with someone holding on to the stern or bow. So check the swimmer is ok then head straight for his kayak, catch it and bring it back to the swimmer. This lesson was learned the hard way!

On the same scenario Bjoern was impressed with the learning "some went for the swimmer first and then tried to tow him to their boat which was blown by the wind. There was no chance of catching up and if this would have been in earnest, they would have brought a corpse home. Good to have trained this under controlled conditions and it once again drove the message home: **'If you capsize at sea: DON'T let go of your boat!!!!'**

Craig had another way of putting it that may drive the point home" We started off with paddler separated from boat, if this pointed out one thing to me then it was to never ever let go of your boat. Sitting in murky open water alone without a boat is horrible

just couldn't help imagining a version of Jaws with a huge and angry Seal instead of a shark. This did improve the speed that I got back into the boat when my partner returned it.

We worked on a variety of scenarios:

- Rescuing a capsized paddler from a boat with a missing hatch cover
- The casualty being blown onto a cliff one rescuer and one paddler towing them both away from the danger
- An injured paddler unable to climb into their boat using the scoop method.

We also practiced re-entry and roll, as Chris puts it "Practice makes perfect and the demos from Phil in self-rescue were done in the blink of an eye, his re-entry and roll was amazingly quick, and took a couple of demos as some people had in fact blinked and missed it! I made a mental note to try that at the next pool session as I was beginning to suffer brain freeze from several ineffective attempts". We finished practicing the Cowboy self-rescue (where you climb back into your boat) amongst mirth at the reverse cowboy innuendo.

We had a fairly rigorous kit test, Craig tells us "between the paddlers there were 5 different pumps. In a very informal test there seemed to be one clear loser and one that was that little bit better than the rest. The one that didn't compete was the Lomo pump £12.50 and the one that seemed best was Wilderness systems Bilge Pump \$29.95."

Back at 'Pot a Doodle Doo' we had a theory session. Bjoern learnt from the analogy that Pete presented – using the metaphor of a child being walked to school by a parent. Where does the adult position themselves, when walking on a pavement, when approaching a junction, in the park etc. Bjoern's conclusion "This struck a chord with me, I do this every day when I go cycling with my daughter". The theory session finished with a real plan for a trip to Inner Farne the next day and again Bjoern was impressed "In the evening: some navigation work (4* doesn't include vectors). I was particularly impressed by Phil's 'trip planning sheet' and already have some ideas for my own design, which I'll publish on the web once I have it on the computer."

Chris, Bjorn and Lee had to head home, everyone else stayed on at the Wigwam village. After showering we made our way by taxi into Berwick for an Indian meal and a couple of pints. A great night was had and stories were shared between the party of 16 paddlers. It was brilliant to meet up with new and old friends (this included Bob Baird who we hadn't seen for a few years) passionate about the sport we all love. We should do more paddling with other clubs. It was great to hear that many of the team will be attending the Anglesey Sea Symposium.

The following morning phone calls led to us all meeting up at Seahouses in glorious sunshine and a fair wind to continue training. Our pre planning for the trip to the Farne Islands was not only fresh in the mind but attached in a waterproof map case strapped to the deck of the kayak. Another crisply delivered theory session on the beach and a lesson in how and how not to use a vhf radio was really useful. We should integrate more VHF activity into the club sessions.

We set off out to sea with some real students to lead. One group started with a simulated launch through surf.

Chris was in the other group and takes up the story "I decided to get the leaders hat on first and was instructed to take the group out to the buoy in line with our eventual target of Inner Farne. Well it wasn't long before things began to go astray, the question was raised, " which way is the tide going?" out of a group of 5, 4 all said without hesitation North West, one meekly pointed the opposite direction SE. After checking our transits more carefully and despite what all our prior planning - looking at tide tables and tide streams plotting courses – it was duly noted that the tide was indeed going SE. Totally opposite to what we had planned for and so hard to actually accept when on the water. **But that's life on the sea, you have to go with what is actually happening around you at the time.** After resetting transits we continued onto the buoy without further incident. Leadership requires a heightened awareness of the conditions, the group and many other factors. My own paddling went to pot at the start. Well I am a bloke and multi- tasking is hard! Bjoern is interested to know "Did anybody notice the 2 Sandwich Terns roosting on the buoy? Beautiful birds!"

While Saturday was all about skills, today it was all about leadership and all about: CLAP, CLAP, CLAP, CLAP, CLAP and CLAP....

- **C**ommunication
- **L**ine of sight
- **A**voidance
- **P**ositioning

There is more detailed explanation on our website:

<http://www.wansbeckpaddlesports.org.uk/documents/1CLAP.pdf>

Paddling to Inner Farne and the landing spot we had a chat with a new warden there, she is a keen paddler and is hoping to get a sea boat there to help in her work!!

After a relaxed paddle in the sheltered water, rescue practises resumed -some planned with partners and others where Pete Jones "capsized" to put our skills to the test. Crossing some tidal races and playing in them was a thrilling experience, to see the tide flowing into a tidal race was amazing, and to then play on the small waves was fun. We split into smaller groups and Bjoern's recollections are:

“My first bit of leading was around Knoxes Reef. I was supposed to lead the group into some rock hopping. Well, there were no rocks to hop and the sea was calm. But we saw a colony of 2-300 seals. I would have loved to stay longer, but this wasn't the purpose of the trip. Cautious as I am I steered the group around a submerged rock and its white water. Shortly later I was stopped by Phil and the group was sent to 'play' in these waves. **'Bugger!'** I missed to give the group some excitement and rock hopping.

Next Craig was leading and came upon a rock hopping opportunity: 'Just go for it!' was his approach. To be truthful, I would have avoided this spot. The first paddler went in, was washed on the rocks and after a while of bracing and draw strokes was able to get out of the spot. The next two paddlers didn't fare much better. I didn't go in, as I had a glass fibre boat and we didn't want to get this scratched..... Phew! Good excuse!!!

During a debrief Phil pointed out: 'The water wasn't deep, not much swell, what could have happened'.

Well, some scratches on the boat, in a worst case scenario some bruises and a bruised ego. I reluctantly agree....

Then playing in what appeared to be a vry simple. I try some rolling -fail, try a self rescue -fail, get finally rescued by Craig. This is getting a bit disappointing!]

Sufficiently revived by a good break on Inner Farne we set off in groups again. Chris was leading his group and comments "it was time to head back and once again I volunteered to lead for the homeward leg. Crossing a tidal race that we had done before lunch ought to be easy enough I thought... conditions had changed somewhat and the race and wind had grown, after getting the group across and into what I had expected to be flatter water was the only the beginning, the flatter water was being battered by a strong wind so to stay in position meant to paddle constantly. Instructed to head for Bamburgh castle, I got the group moving only to find that we were in the midst of another tidal race being swelled by the wind and waves appearing to becoming from all angles. Spotting the other group looking content in smooth water round the corner of Inner Farne I looked expectantly at Peter Jones hoping for the nod for me to lead the group to the easier water. Not a bit of it, keep heading for the castle was the order, straight into the turmoil of the tide race. The least experienced of all the group was bashing away at the front with head down trying to batter his way to the beach, the first time he had been at the front of the group all day! The experience was excellent paddling into the large choppy seas was great fun, after the initial concern had passed, so much better than going up and down the Wansbeck. After safely leading the group to within swimming distance of the beach we practised a few rescues and rolls – well I did anyway”.

Bjoern tells the story of the other group "I lead again, this time around the north west corner of Inner Farne. In the mean time we have a southeasterly current of 2.4kn and a decent tiderace where I have to get the group around.

CLAP! Should be easy:

- Bring the group to a safe spot outside the race
- communicate to them to come one at the time, stay close to the corner and get in the eddy behind
- position myself in the bouncy water just at the corner, ready for rescuing

Well, so much for the theory. I read the water wrong, lead them far too close to the race and into the danger of being sucked in the race. So: 'Stay there – back paddle'... It could have been much easier for them. The rest went without major upheavals. One of the group capsized, but rolled up. All safe in the eddy.

Some more play in the tiderace. I tell Phil him that I want to try some rolling but am not sure that I'll come up. 'Go for it! If you don't manage I'll send someone after you'.

So I set up to roll on the right, capsize, don't manage to get my body under the boat in the waves, change sides and roll up on the left. What a different experience to roll in conditions! On the Wansbeck after the roll, you put the paddle to the side, orientate yourself and relax, here there was no time for this, I had to go straight into 'bracing mode'. Confusing! I definitely have to do this more often.... Later I successfully perform a self- rescue.

Leading back to the shore through bouncy water, our group stretches and I am advised to stop the person paddling in the front and set the speed from now on. I look back often, wait, then decide to paddle a few strokes, look back again, the group has split even more, Phil is racing up to stop me! We are towing a 'casualty'! and I hadn't noticed. I get into the tow. Towing in the front is quite fun and a good workout. Towing in the middle is less comfortable. I get jerked from the front and back.."

Being in Seahouses with Tom means that the debrief will be done in a chip shop over a steaming mountain of the finest that Seahouses has to offer. There were a number of learning points both for individuals and us as a club.

An absolutely fantastic weekend was had by all, some of the key elements of the great fun include:

- meeting people from other clubs
- comfortable place to stay with kitchen facilities and good showers, checkout <http://www.northumbrianwigwams.com/>

- socialising, both the restaurant in Berwick and the fish supper hit the spot perfectly

Great paddling environment:

- world class coaches who get the best out of the less promising environment of the Tweed estuary in difficult conditions
- The Farnes –enough said

Great learning:

- Skills of the coaches
- Meeting people who do some things differently and are open to sharing
- Finishing with action plans

Some things to work on identified by Chris, Bjoern and Craig:

- Improve personal paddling skills – make skilful performance unconscious so you can concentrate on the environment, the group etc
- Have a go – whether it is rock hopping, rescuing, playing, setting up tows and scenarios on flat water, rolling in conditions
- Understand the environment – what is happening not just what was predicted/planned
- Remember “its only training” after all!, no need to be nervous
- CLAP, CLAP,
- Aim for assessment and keep up the progress

For the club:

- We can get world class coaches in to raise our standards and learning
- We can go to world class coaches as we have done on trips to Anglesey
- Four members did the training – other places this would have cost 660 pounds –we spent much less