ASTO | PROMOTING UK SAIL TRAINING

Cowes Small Ships Challenge

2-4 October 2026



Event Report

The Association of Sail Training Organisations (ASTO) would like to extend its sincere thanks to all those who supported the 2026 Cowes Small Ships Challenge. Your support helped make possible the largest annual gathering of the UK sail training fleet, bringing together young people from across the country for a residential adventure at sea that challenged, inspired and connected them.

Thanks to the commitment of our funders and supporters, the event remained accessible and affordable for participating organisations, ensuring that financial barriers did not prevent young people from taking part.

Event Overview



21
Vessels



222
Young People (25 & Under)



96
Staff & Volunteers

When light winds made the planned 2026 Cowes Small Ships Race impractical, ASTO adapted the programme and transformed the weekend into a Solent-wide challenge event. What could have been a disappointing setback instead became an opportunity for participants to experience first-hand how to adapt positively when circumstances change.







The Parade of Sail

The weekend showcased the flexibility, creativity and collaborative spirit that sit at the heart of residential adventures at sea, ensuring every participant was able to enjoy a meaningful experience despite the lack of wind for sailing!

After the vessels passed in front of the Royal Yacht Squadron for the Parade of Sail, the fleet was officially underway as the 9:30am starting gun fired. Participants then spent the day completing 34 practical, creative and nautical challenges around the Solent.






Parade of Sail Fun!

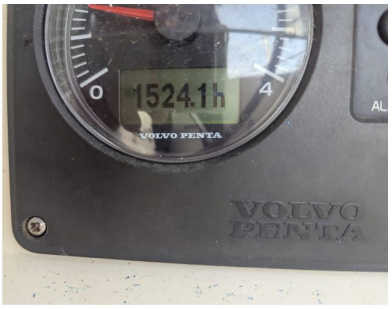
Tasks included navigation exercises, vessel-identification challenges, team flag construction, creative culinary and crafting challenges along with problem-solving activities. Each challenge carried a different points value, with bonus points available for crews who completed the day entirely under sail.



Launching the dinghy to complete a challenge



When you need a photo of a lifeboat, and one comes to you as part of a training exercise!



Engine hours evidence!

Rather than a conventional race, the revised format encouraged crews to think differently, work together and make the most of the conditions they were presented with. In many ways, the challenge reflected real life, where success often depends not on whether plans change, but on how people respond when they do.





Creative Snack Platters!

The Cowes Small Ships Challenge reflected many of the elements that make residential adventures at sea such impactful experiences for young people. Throughout the weekend, participants faced challenges that were unique to them, whether adapting to unexpected changes, trying something new, working with unfamiliar people or stepping outside their comfort zone. By overcoming these challenges, they gained confidence in their own abilities and discovered they were capable of more than they had imagined.

Life onboard also gave young people the opportunity to take meaningful responsibility. From taking the helm, helping with navigation and acting as lookout to supporting daily life on board by preparing

food and drinks, participants played an active role in the running of their vessel and experienced the value of contributing to a shared goal.



Preparing to come alongside



Flaking the Sails



Dressing Overall

Equally important was the strong sense of community created during the weekend. Living, learning and working together encouraged participants to support one another, build new friendships and develop a genuine sense of belonging. Through these shared experiences, young people gained not only lasting memories but also a deeper understanding of what it means to be part of a team.

Outcomes

We asked the young people who took part in the event, what three words they would use to sum up their experience. The top three words were: **Fun - Exciting - Amazing**



One participant sailing aboard Tall Ships Youth Trust Challenger 5 reflected on the cancellation of the race and what they learned from the experience:

> *"Plans can change, because today there was no wind, obviously the race was called off. And at first, I was quite disappointed about that, but then I thought, well, that's okay. I can still take out as much as I can from it. And I mean, it's such a learning experience that things can go wrong and it's still okay."*

This young person's words perfectly demonstrate one of the core aims of sail training: helping young people develop resilience, confidence and a positive outlook through real-world experiences.

The event also gave participants the opportunity to meet young people from different organisations, build new friendships and strengthen their sense of belonging within the wider sail training community.

Celebrating Achievement

The event concluded with a prize-giving ceremony in the Cowes Yacht Haven Events Centre celebrating participation and achievement across the fleet, where ASTO Trustee David Snelson CB praised participants for embracing the revised format:

> *"Thank you to all the crews for getting into the spirit of the event. The essence of a sail training trip is to deal with what you have in front of you, adapt your plan and make the best of it. That's what we've done this weekend. It's been great to see the energy and commitment that both trainees and boat staff have brought to the weekend and today in particular."*

Class Winners

B	Tectona
C1	Challenger 4
C2	Bright Star
D1	Eastern Star

Pictured are the Class Winners with their copies of the Reeds 2027 Almanac – kindly donated by Adlard Coles Nautical.



A special award was presented to the youngest participant in the event, aged just 12, sailing aboard Tectona.

The Discovery Sailing Project vessel Alexander Fairey scooped two awards taking home both Youngest Crew and Youngest Skipper.

The final award of the night, the Richard Langhorn Trophy, voted for by participants for the vessel that best represented the spirit of the event, was awarded to the crew of TS Royalist.



The Crew of Tectona
The Best Dressed Crew



The Skipper and Crew onboard Alexander Fairey
Youngest Crew & Youngest Skipper



The crew of TS Royalist
Winner of the Richard Langhorn Trophy

Impact

Support from funders, sponsors and partners enabled the Cowes Small Ships Challenge to successfully deliver ASTO's key objectives:

- Providing accessible opportunities for residential adventures at sea
- Supporting the personal development of young people
- Encouraging teamwork and leadership
- Building confidence and resilience
- Strengthening collaboration across the sector

ASTO CEO Kerry McMillan reflected:

> *"The challenge encouraged young people to think creatively, work together and embrace new experiences. More importantly, it gave them the opportunity to build confidence, develop skills, create memorable moments that help to cement changes that last long after the event has ended."*

The success of the 2026 Cowes Small Ships Challenge was measured not by a race won or lost, but by the resilience, adaptability, teamwork and personal growth demonstrated by hundreds of young people throughout the weekend.



Save the Date

The 2027 Cowes Small Ships Race will take place on Saturday 2 October.