

# PASSING THE BCU 3 STAR... ...on a sit-on-top

Respected sea angling journalist and author Andy Benham explores his growing interest in sit-on-tops and all things paddlesport by taking his BCU 3 Star Award with the instructional book author and BCU level 5 coach Derek Hairon..!



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**T**wo months ago I wrote about my 'conversion' (CKUK 128, 'The Conversion') to sit inside kayaking, but for this month I'm firmly back on home ground, and on top of a kayak, rather than enclosed within it.

Over the past year or so I've been doing some training with the BCU, hoping to eventually end up as a level 2 coach, and as a result I've moved away from being a pure kayak fisherman and have become more of a kayaker, partly because things like the BCU 2\* scheme has forced me to paddle other craft, but also, as I detailed last month, because I've actually quite enjoyed messing

around in sea kayaks. However, before I could do my level 2 coach training, I had to go and get a 3\* award, although the choice of category was up to me. I decided early on that I'd like to do it on a sit on top, simply because that's where I feel most comfortable and also because I'd like to get an assessment of my sit on top paddling skills.

The problem with doing a 3\* on a sit on top is that although both the 3\* sea kayak and touring awards clearly state that you can take the awards on a sit-on-top, I think it's safe to say that some coaches have been rather slower to pick up the spirit of the changes implemented by the BCU. ►



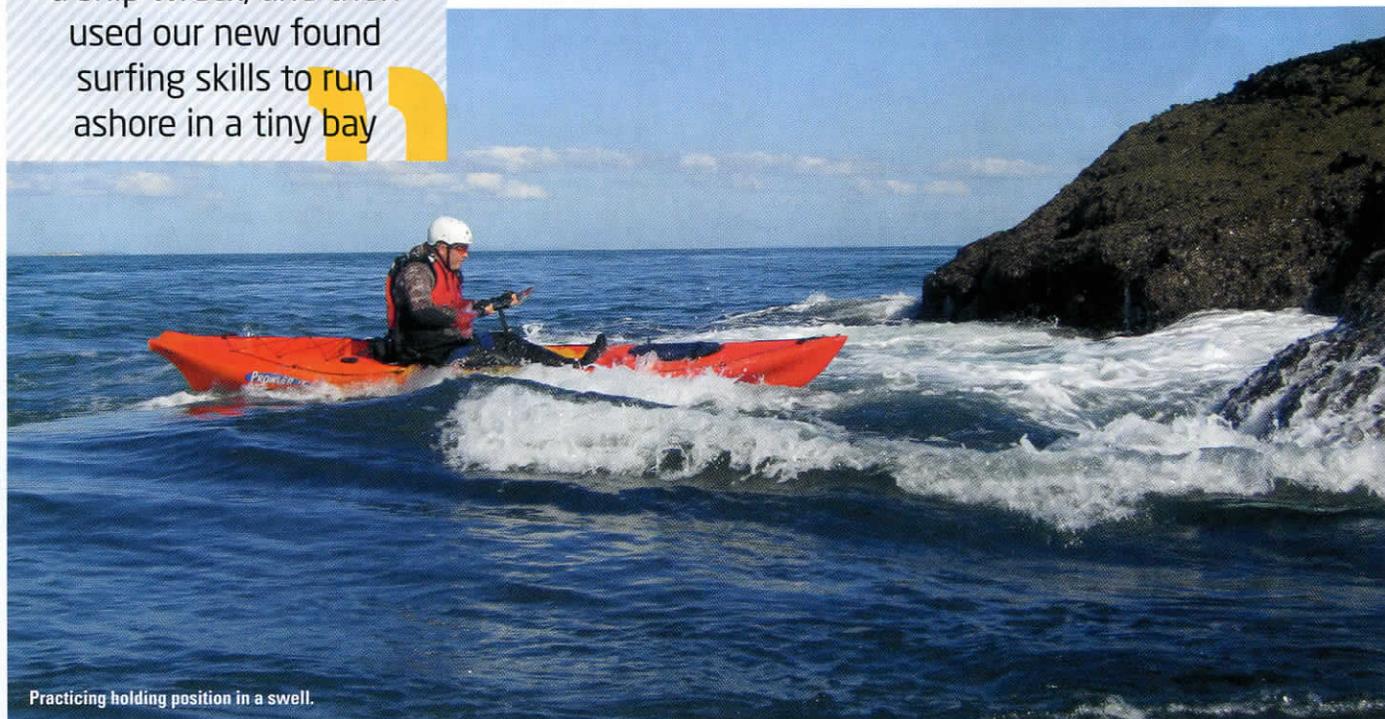
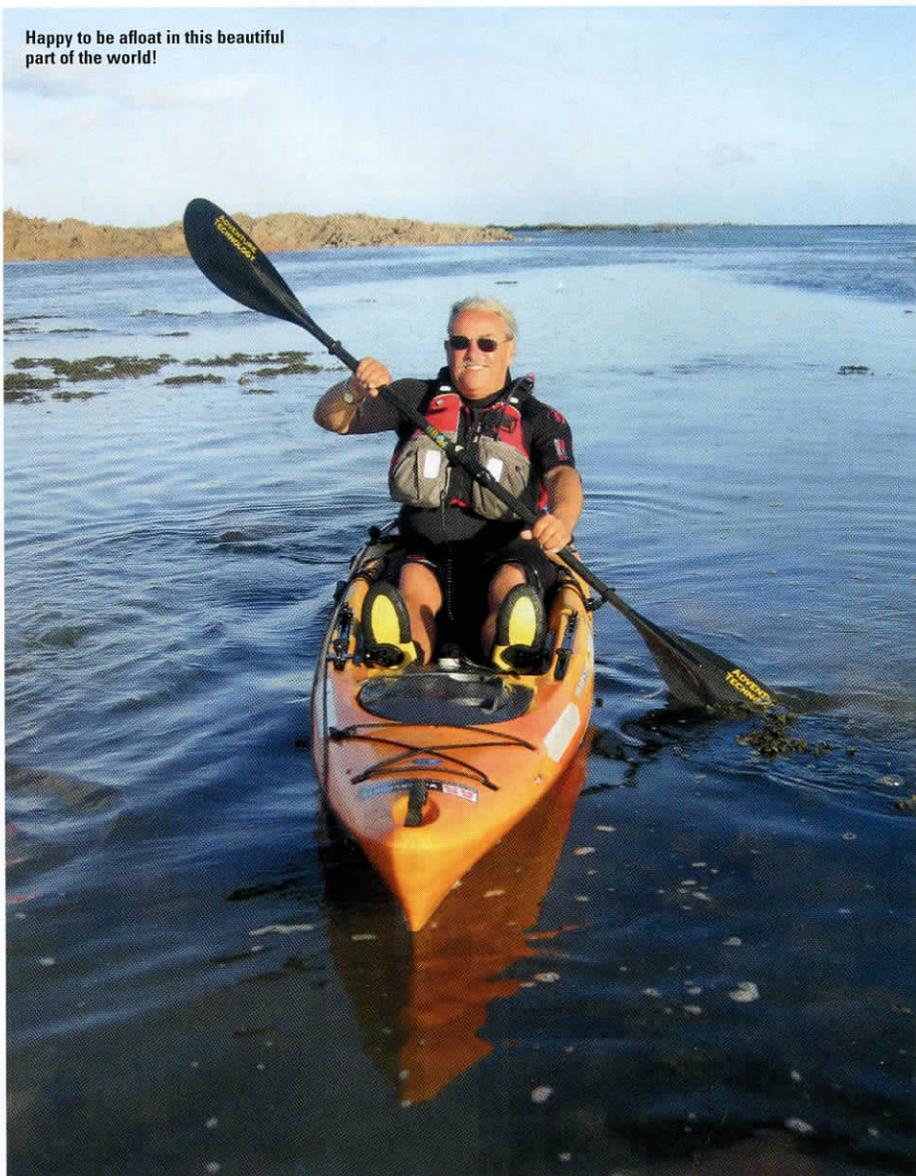
So, to put it simply, the choice of coach is everything if you want to take one of these awards on a sit-on-top. For me, the choice was actually rather easy. I'd had quite a few chats with Derek Hairon, who quite literally wrote the book on sit-on-top kayaking, having first made his acquaintance when I was writing my own book on kayak fishing. I even borrowed a few of Derek's images for my book. As a result I knew he was a passionate advocate of sit on top paddling. Add in the fact that he is based on the island of Jersey, a superb venue for both paddling and fishing, and I was soon chucking the kayak on the roof of the car and disappearing into the cavernous bowels of a Condor Ferries catamaran, en route to St Helier.

I'd asked Derek to sort the course out a few weeks previously, and he'd said he'd have a look around and see if there was anyone else who fancied it, so I got rather lucky when I turned up on Jersey and was told that Keith White was going to be joining me for both the training and assessment. Keith is a manic bass fisherman, best known for his 'skishing' sessions, where he goes fishing for bass with just a wetsuit, a fishing rod and oversize fins; this can be a little extreme at times, to the point that when he does it at night he takes along a wrist mounted depth gauge, so that if a fish drags him down below a certain depth he can ease off a little on the clutch.

Keith is just getting into kayak fishing, and Derek has been coaching him for a few months, Keith being very keen to learn to handle a kayak properly so that he can explore some of Jersey's more interesting coastal features, and get a kayak into places where

There was a bit of swell, but nothing to write home about, we spent some time playing around the boilers of a ship wreck, and then used our new found surfing skills to run ashore in a tiny bay

Happy to be afloat in this beautiful part of the world!



Practicing holding position in a swell.

Another assisted rescue in the rip.



you are likely to find bass, but unlikely to see even the smallest of boats.

We'd organised to have a couple of days with Derek, the first being a pure training session, the second being the actual assessment itself.

### Surf's Up!

On the morning of the day of the training I was actually a little nervous, the Condor ride over the day before had been more than a little interesting, we'd gone right through the tail of that hurricane that battered America in the middle of September, and I think it safe to say that the water as we rounded Alderney on the way over was slightly above what the BCU would describe as 'moderate'. However I needn't have worried as Derek had said the night before to meet him at St Brelades, and as I came over the headland it was as if I was entering another world. The bay was tucked right out of the wind, the sea round the harbour was almost mirror calm, and the sun was beaming down, making me search out the sunnies and sun cream, both of which I didn't think I'd be needing on this trip.

The bay itself was very interesting, where we launched the boats, at the small port at the Western end, it was almost completely sheltered from the swell, but as you headed East along the beach the swell started to build, so that by the time you reached the far end of the kilometre long stretch of sand, there was a decent surf running. Derek started by asking us what we wanted to learn. This is always an interesting question, and I was tempted to answer that what I most wanted to learn was how to drift about on a flat calm sea, in blazing sun shine, but after a little pushing, both Keith and I decided that we had better face one of our joint demons, and confessed that surf was often a problem for us, I hate surf landings and I'm always very aware of the cost of all the fishing gear on the boat and the chance that a rod will get snapped if I take a tumble. Derek just grinned and said he's show us how to get the better of it. "Great" I thought, Derek is going to teach me to surf. Actually no, it was quite the opposite, Derek actually taught us both how not to surf, showing us how to brake the boat so that we went in under control rather than at the mercy of the waves.

After a while both Keith and I were coming in under control even in some quite decent waves, so

Derek started to let us ease the brakes of a little, and we actually started surfing, soon we were both laughing like lunatics and jostling for position on the biggest waves, an amazing change from a couple of hours previously. OK, we still took the odd spectacular tumble, but we were wearing helmets and learning at a massive pace, I can honestly say that those couple of hours in the surf taught me what would have taken weeks on flat water.

### Rock Hopping

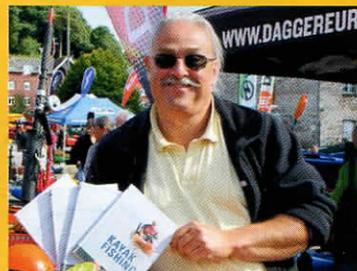
As the tide receded the surf started to die off so Derek led us around a headland, and into the full brunt of the wind, here we spent a couple of hours playing in rock gardens, practicing close quarters re-entries, and learning a bit more about how to get the best from our boats. After a hearty lunch, and an hour or so to recover, we loaded the kayaks back onto the roofs of the cars and went over to the South East corner of the island. Just as an aside, I was amazed at the quality of facilities on Jersey, there seemed to be a slip and car park, most free, almost every mile, and they all had really clean toilets that made changing a pleasure, and most of them even had fresh water showers on hand to wash both the gear and paddler after the session.

The view that greeted us at Green Island was stunning; the tide looked like it had gone out as far as France, with mile upon mile of the most amazing sea bed uncovered. Just have a look at a map of Jersey, or Google earth and you'll see what I mean, the whole South East corner just fades into the sea, with a very very shallow gradient, that leaves miles of rocks uncovered at low tide. Derek's partner runs a company taking people out on 'Moonwalks', and we could just see a group making their way off the reef, having walked several miles out to an old fort. By the time we'd got the yaks off the cars, and relayed a recovery vehicle down to our exit point a few miles down the coast, most of what had been hills had become islands, and the sea bottom was now covered in incredibly fast flowing water. We launched into the flow, and the game was to hole up in a pool, watching the tide fill up before your eyes, and then when the way forward had enough water, shoot through to the next pool, and then repeat the whole process. I suspect this was closer to river paddling than sea

ANDY BENHAM

### ABOUT THE author

Andy has been fishing the sea for as long as he can remember. He spent his formative years on Brighton Beach developing his skills with rod and reel and his passion for sea angling. He also experimented with a flotilla of small boats to access the best spots. In his professional life Andy has established himself as a respected journalist within the sea angling world, working on a number of titles including Sea Angler, Boat Angler, Angling Times, Trout & Salmon and Improve Your Coarse Fishing. He has also a spell at the BBC, and worked for the BBC on titles such as BBC Wildlife and Countryfile. More recently Andy opted out of the hustle and bustle of modern life and relocated to Devon, so he can spend more time afloat in his kayak and fishing from the shore. He can also paddle to his favourite pub! Andy was also the author of a successful book on kayak fishing Discover Kayak Fishing published by Pesda Press\*



\*visit the online shop at [www.canoekayak.co.uk](http://www.canoekayak.co.uk) to order a copy of the excellent title.

paddling, with loads of eddies, and much ferry gliding between bolt holes, you really didn't want to have to paddle directly into that tide. All too soon we were at the exit point, the coppery Autumnal sunshine giving a wonderful glow to the water, and all three of us laughing like lunatics as we did the final ferry glide to the beach and headed off for a much deserved pint.

### The Test

The day of the actual 3\* test itself dawned much as the previous day, quite windy, but with some decent sunshine to be had. To start Derek took us to one of the island's surf beaches, and we did our stuff again, although this time with a little more control. Again the surf dropped as the tide went out and soon it was boats out of the water and time to head across the island to the North coast.

Now, Keith and I have a rather different outlook when it comes to adventure, and anyone who zooms around the island in just a wetsuit looking for large fish to annoy has obviously got far more bottle than I have, so it rather unnerved me when Keith rather innocuously enquired if I had brought some toilet paper for the next bit. Even with my limited intelligence I could figure out where we were going, even my road map had 'tidal race', with an exclamation mark shown just around the corner.

As we paddled along Bouley Bay, heading for Tour de Rozel, there was a bit of swell, but nothing ▶

Improving all the time.

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write home about, we spent some time playing around the boilers of a ship wreck, and then used our new found surfing skills to run ashore in a tiny bay, Derek leading us up through a hole in the rocks and into a large cave, complete with blowhole, the whole thing being lined with sponges. The tourist bit wasn't to last however, as we came around a headland and arrived at our destination. The rocks here tower above the water and have been daubed in white paint, as an aid to navigation, passing ships being well advised to keep clear of the narrow channels and pinnacles. But this was where Derek wanted us to show off our skills. Keith and I played ring a roses around the last of the pinnacles, using the eddies to get us around into an ever increasing tide, and for 40 minutes or so we practiced rough water handling, until the tide streams became just too strong and we had to abandon our resting position in the lee of the pinnacle. After ferry gliding across to the mainland, we were having a rest, looking at the ever-increasing rip, when Derek announced that this was where he wanted us to show off our recovery skills. I think he was a little surprised that neither of us had ended up in the water so far, Keith and I were certainly remarkably surprised that we were both dry, but practicing recoveries in the rip made good sense, as this was the sort of water where we were likely to find ourselves swimming, not the calm waters of a sheltered bay. Luckily both Keith and I have practiced a huge amount of rescues recently, and so we started to race against the clock, I think the best we achieved was under 30 seconds to right the boat, get back on board, and paddle away. After a few each, we moved onto assisted rescues, which proved rather trickier, not so much for the person in the water, but more for the person coming

to the rescue as they had to get good close quarters control in the rip itself. Still, it was great fun, and we were soon punching the tide through a gap in the headland before a leisurely paddle back to the beach.

Sitting outside the pub, after around 9 hours on the water, both Keith and I were completely knackered, but it was with an immense sense of satisfaction that we received the news that we had both passed our 3\*.

### Two Rips

The day after the actual exam, Derek and I headed back up to the North East corner of the island, but this time we turned left. It was blowing a force five, right into our faces and we were also paddling against an ever-increasing tidal flow. Derek gave me the personal challenge of making it far enough round the coast to look into Bonne Nuit Bay. Luckily, the hotel where I'd spent my time on Jersey had been plying me with a ridiculous number of calories every night, because boy was I going to need them this afternoon. Long story short, we made it, through not one but two rips, and the glimpse into the bay left me with a great sense of satisfaction, we then practiced turning the boats round against wind and tide, and then had a superb session running back to where we started, dodging behind the odd rock here and there to rest in the lee. To finish off the day we headed back across the bay and met up with another group of paddlers that Derek had out, six women who were walking around the island, and had decided to book a kayaking trip to add to the adventure, most of them had never

even paddled before, but they were all happy as Larry, zooming around the bay on their sit on tops, under the watchful eye of one of Derek's staff instructors.

All too soon it was time to head home, the Force 5 had become a 6, but the Condor ploughed through it all relatively unscathed, rather a shame really as I'd hoped to be stuck on the island for few more days, and before long I was back in Weymouth, but even as I made my way home I was already planning how I could make an excuse to get back over to the island. I'd had an amazing time, my kayaking skills had come on leaps and bounds and I was really looking forward to applying my new found skills to paddling a fishing kayak, both Keith and I being firmly convinced that picking up new paddling skills can only help to increase your catch rates. So, with my 3\* certificate in the post, I can move onto my Level 2 coach training, that just leaves me to figure out how I'm going to get my open boat skills up to the same standard! **CK**



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