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In ship shape

Pictou comes together to celebrate restoration of tall ship Hector

By AARON BESWICK Truro Bureau PICTOU

A CREW OF STEELWORKERS wearing hard hats, with help from a tugboat, guided the tall ship Hector backwards up Pictou Harbour to its home wharf on Tuesday.

"She's here," whispered John Meir while patting a fellow member of the Hector Quay Society on the back.

Meir's joy was all the more potent because the 33-metre ship was only returned to the water after a massive effort by the community and local industry.

Last summer, visiting tour buses found the Hector Heritage Quay closed.

The Hector, a recreation of the vessel that arrived in Pictou in 1773 with 189 half-starved and smallpox-riddled Scottish immigrants, spent last year in dry dock because the town of Pictou couldn't afford to repair the tourist attraction and get it back in the water.

Legislation had forced the town to replace water and sewer infrastructure while it struggled with a declining tax base.

After frantic meetings seeking a way to save the vessel and this year's tourist season, area residents and business owners formed the Hector Quay Society to take responsibility for the ship, which had been launched in Pictou in 2000 after 10 years of construction.

Northern Pulp ponied up \$100,000 for the sprucing-up effort while the provincial government came through with \$50,000.

Aecon Fabco, a Dartmouth company that operates the Pictou shipyard where the Hector spent the last two winters, took on the task of getting the boat shipshape.

"It was an honour," said John Zobaric, Aecon Fabco's project manager for the Hector.

Over 50 shipyard workers and their spouses volunteered to scrape and paint the hull on evenings and weekends. Contractors donated scaffolding and painting supplies. Shipwrights from Lunenburg came to recaulk the hull.

At Saturday's season opening of the Hector and the museum, blacksmith Rocky Irons will relight the quay's forge and volunteers will staff the museum. Without dedicated funding, the Hector Quay Society has signed up 90 volunteers to work four-hour shifts throughout the summer.

"It's been a huge community effort," said Meir.

"If it hadn't been for such an outpouring of support from both industry and the community, this would never have been possible."

They've got big dreams for the Hector Heritage Quay, including offering lessons in bagpiping and sail-making.

"Any school-age American knows what the Mayflower was," Meir said of the ship that brought English immigrants to Massachusetts in 1621.

"The Hector is just as important, if not more, and here in Canada so few people know its history."

That history is documented in the museum.

In July 1789, Scottish farmers, whom the conquering British made tenants on their own land, turned over the little money they had to a Presbyterian minister. The advertisement they answered promised fertile land, a year's provisions and the opportunity to create a New Scotland free of oppression.

"It was a scam," Meir said.

The Hector was a tired and rotting ship before it met a gale off Newfoundland that blew it off course. By the time it arrived in Pictou, 18 passengers, mainly children, had died of smallpox and those who remained were eating mouldy rations.

They arrived to find the fertile farm plots they had been promised were actually forests that required years of labour to clear.

Stepping off the replica at the wharf, Zobaric shook his head.

"I can't even imagine what they went through," he said.

Zobaric and his family immigrated to Canada from the former Yugoslavia in 1968, aboard a Boeing 747. "Imagine 189 souls crammed into a wooden boat for three months on the North Atlantic."

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