

# Crossing the Blyth

DANI Church has constructed her own destiny. The 44-year-old Walberswick ferrywoman, the fifth generation of her family to ply the trade across the River Blyth, is content and fulfilled, both rowing her little boat in summer and sanding it down, hair sprinkled with sawdust, in winter.

In 2001, earlier – cruelly earlier – than she imagined, she took over the oars from her father on his untimely death. “When I was young I used to sit on the boat with Dad. I knew that was what I would do when I got older – there was no question. Dad encouraged me to go to university and I took my career seriously, but every time I went for a job interview I knew it was not my job for life. I knew that eventually I would do this.” She was always amused when folk told her father it was a shame he had no son to take over.

“He didn’t need a son,” she says. “He’d got me to do it!” Dani still smiles when she hears ‘that a man should be at the oars’. “It’s very common when I’m rowing, but I like that. I feel proud that I can do it. I’m not strong, but I can row that boat across in any tide. It’s not about brute strength, it’s about technique. Dad taught me how to do it properly.”

For just a little over two minutes Dani Church transports her fares on a timeless journey across the racing tide, but for the mother of ten-year old Charlie, there is more to keeping the service running.

“I get up and take my old dog Nellie for a good walk. After breakfast I do the school run and, once I’ve dropped Charlie off, go straight to the ferry. When I’m doing a shift at the



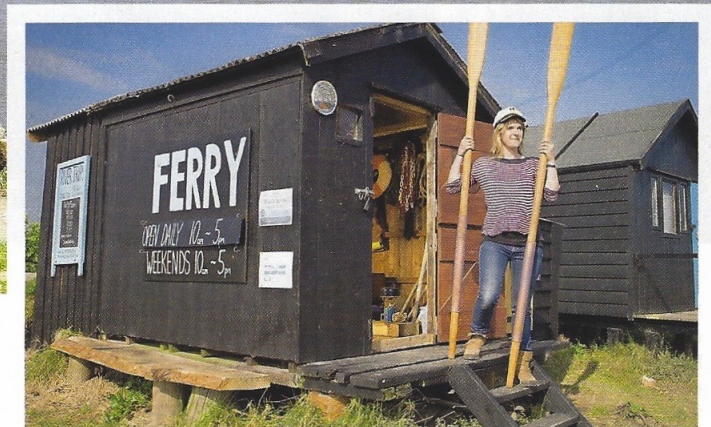
***‘I have an obsession with being down at the river or on the beach. It goes back to my very positive childhood’***

oars I’m usually there by ten-to-nine to do the safety checks at nine-thirty. I check that the bilge pump is working, the whistle and anchor are in place, the VHF radio is working, and that the electric outboard motor is clean and has a charged battery.”

Stringent regulations regarding safety, seamanship, licensing and insurance have to be complied with, and for Dani, safety is beyond compromise. “I want to make sure all my passengers are safe all the time. I couldn’t live with myself if anything happened because I hadn’t done something properly. Dad was the same.” Dani combines five shifts at the oars each week with running her business, home and spending time with her husband and son. But whenever the ferry is open she is on call. “I have to have my phone with me in case there’s a problem. If anything happens, I have to be the one to deal with it.”

Tourism has increased dramatically since she took over, and the ferry is busier than ever. Dani says many visitors come to the harbour or bring their children down just for a ride on the ferry. “It’s an institution isn’t it? The ferry has changed so much in the 16 years I’ve been running it, from me doing it all by myself with one person helping me at weekends, to having seven employees now. I’ve had to evolve as it goes along.”





The Walberswick Ferry Hut owned by Dani Church. Shortlisted in the Cuprinol Shed of the Year 2017. Picture: CUPRINOL

As Dani embarked on her programme of winter maintenance on the four boats in her fleet, almost all of which she would do herself, she reflected on a successful and significant 2017. Due to increased demand, the service remained open at lunchtimes for the first time, and continued through to Christmas instead of closing in October. She also launched a new river trips service and became a finalist in Channel Four's Shed Of The Year with her Walberswick Ferry Hut. On July 8, Dani launched her new boat, The Boy Charlie, to replace the ageing Oud Bob. Made from sustainable wood. In busy periods can now have two 12-passenger boats running at the same time. It is those busy periods, down at the river, sitting at the oars or on the jetty that Dani relishes.

"I have an obsession with being down at the river or on the beach. It goes back to my very positive childhood. I am working in my favourite place in the world. I am where I am happiest. I like the ever-changing aspects of the river and am never bored. There is always something different, whether it is the tide, the wildlife or the boats.

"Talking to people all day is more a part of the job than the actual rowing for much of the time. I am on show for four and a half hours and that can be mentally exhausting.

Although I thrive on it and love it, I can be asleep by half-past eight after a busy day." Dani used to worry that environmental changes to the River Blyth, increased flooding and strengthening tides would threaten the existence of the ferry, but she is less concerned now. She says it has changed over 800 years, so can continue to adapt. As to the future, she says she will put no pressure on Charlie although passengers often ask him if he is going to take over from his mother one day.

"He's ten now and can talk coherently about the ferry. He is very proud of it. Like me, he is a people person. He likes chatting and is very sociable, so in that respect he's got the right personality."

Dani expects to be rowing until she can do it no longer. "I don't want to retire. My job is my life, and that is what I want to do. Every year I do it I enjoy it more. It's like an addiction. My Dad was the same. Dad told me to keep the ferry going for as long as I enjoy it, so that's what I plan to do." ♦

### The full oarsome story . . .

The Story of the Southwold-Walberswick Ferry, written by Dani Church with Ann Gander, is available from the Walberswick ferry hut. The rowing boat ferry operates annually from two weeks before Easter to the end of the October half term week, 10am to 5pm. For the first time in 2017 Dani operated a motorboat ferry at weekends from October half term through to the Christmas period.