

Dawson Hill – Marine Society Apprentice

Good afternoon Sirs, Ma'ams, Ladies and Gentlemen,

My name is Dawson Hill, and it's a real honour to tell you how I went from being a sea cadet at Littlehampton Unit, TS Sussex, to becoming a Marine Society apprentice at Shoreham Port.

I joined Sea Cadets in 2020. I wanted something practical and active, with the chance to get on the water, learn real skills and be part of a team.

I should probably admit that I wasn't always the best-behaved child, so my dad was very enthusiastic about me joining. Discipline! He thought it was a brilliant idea.

What neither of us knew was how much it would influence my future.

About a year after joining, I had the chance to go on a voyage aboard TS Royalist. It was my first experience of living and working as part of a ship's crew. There were watches, routines, hard work and moments when I looked around and realised I was doing something special.

I also discovered that I wasn't nearly as brave as I thought. Climbing Royalist's masts while being terrified of heights was a memorable way to learn that.

But I came home knowing that I loved being at sea, and that it could be more than a hobby.

Another big step was gaining my RYA Powerboat Level 2 qualification during a District Camp on the Isle of Wight. I had to listen, practise, make mistakes and correct them. Passing the course felt fantastic, and I began to think a job on the water might actually be possible.

Sea Cadets gave me other challenges too. In 2023 I competed in the National First Aid Competition, and our team won. We looked at each other in disbelief when we heard the result. We were proud to take a trophy back to our Commanding Officer.

I was also Drum Major for my unit band. Leading at Remembrance and Armed Forces Day parades taught me a different kind of confidence. My dad served in the Navy and never missed a parade. He was very proud, although he seemed to specialise in taking the worst possible photographs of me.

All those activities taught me something different: teamwork, responsibility, self-belief and how to work with people who know more than I do.

As I grew older, I started thinking seriously about what I wanted to do when I left Sea Cadets.

I knew I enjoyed life on the water. But enjoying something and knowing how to turn it into a job are two very different things. I didn't know all the routes into the maritime industry, the qualifications I would need or who could help me take the first step.

That's where the Marine Society came in.

One of the things I think makes being a sea cadet so valuable is that the Marine Society is part of the very same charity. The people who had helped me discover an interest in the maritime world were part of an organisation that could also help me find a route into it professionally.

It meant my journey didn't have to stop when I got older. There was another door to open.

While I was still a cadet, I began a Marine Society apprenticeship as a Small Commercial Vessel Crewmember at Shoreham Port. The skills I had developed through Sea Cadets helped me feel ready for that step. I already understood the importance of safety, teamwork, listening and doing your share as part of a crew.

But there is a big difference between learning those things on a cadet activity and putting them into practice at work. At Shoreham Port, these are real operations. People depend on you, and the standard matters.

I've been able to work around different vessels and learn from experienced crew members and port staff. Every day there's something new to understand about how a professional marine workplace operates.

I've particularly enjoyed the residential training courses at UKSA and working towards my RYA Coastal Skipper theory qualification. Although I should confess that I managed to forget my laptop on a recent training course with Jamie. So clearly there's still room for improvement.

The Marine Society team has supported me throughout the apprenticeship. They've helped make it possible, supported my training and given me people I can turn to as I find my feet in the industry.

That's important. Not every young person has family contacts in the maritime sector, or knows where to start looking for a job at sea. An apprenticeship gives you training and real experience, but having a dedicated team behind you to help connect those opportunities makes the pathway much easier to see.

What I value is the continuity. My story began at Littlehampton with volunteers who gave me their time and encouraged me to try new things. Through Sea Cadets I gained qualifications and discovered what I enjoyed. Then, through the Marine Society, I could build on all of that with an employer and a proper apprenticeship.

Sea Cadets and Marine Society aren't separate chapters for me. They are parts of the same journey, supported by the same charity, from a young person discovering the water to an apprentice beginning a maritime career.

And that is an opportunity I'm very grateful to have had access to.

My ambition is to become a Tug Master and, eventually, to progress into leadership roles in harbour and port operations. I know that will take years of experience, more qualifications and a lot of hard work. But I can now see a route towards it.

When I was younger, I knew I liked boats. Now I know the kind of work I want to do, what I need to learn, and the next steps that will help me get there. That's a huge difference.

If there's a young sea cadet who enjoys practical work or being on the water, I'd encourage them to look at the opportunities available through the Marine Society. You might not yet know what a maritime career could look like, but there are people who can help you find out.

I want to thank the volunteers and instructors who supported me at Littlehampton, the people on the courses and voyages that helped me grow, the Marine Society team, and everyone at Shoreham Port who is helping me learn the trade.

And to the trustees, members, funders and friends of MSSC here today: thank you for backing a charity that can support a young person through all these different stages.

Sea Cadets helped me discover what I loved. Marine Society helped me turn it into a future I can work towards. I hope many more young people get the chance to follow that path.

Thank you very much.