



The Lagan

DRAGONS

Jade Beecroft heads out to meet the Lagan dragons; Northern Ireland's first dragon boat team for breast cancer survivors

Squinting up the River Lagan on a crisp autumn Saturday, I shade my eyes as a long narrow vessel rounds a corner by Ormeau Park and cruises into view.

The beat of a drum drifts down the river and, through the morning haze, I can see twenty bobble-hatted heads moving as powerful shoulders paddle towards me.

These ladies are the Lagan Dragons, Northern Ireland's first dragon boat team made up of breast cancer survivors and their supporters.

Most of us know somebody who has been touched by breast cancer, with its grim repercussions of hospitals, surgery, chemo and hair loss, radiotherapy and other invasive treatments.

But as the paddlers pile out of the dragon boat and head indoors for a well-earned coffee and cake, faces glowing with exhilaration and clothes dripping, the realities of cancer treatment feel a million miles away.

The camaraderie and sisterhood between these women is instantly obvious as they

jostle around the kettle and chatter about the morning's paddle.

Joanne Rock

Team captain Joanne Rock, 48, from Bangor, helped found the Lagan Dragons in September 2015.

Joanne was just 37 when she was diagnosed with breast cancer, back in 2007, and the double mastectomy and aggressive treatment left her at a low ebb.

She came across dragon boating on a trip to Dublin, where the Pirabelle Paddlers are a well-established team with one thing in common – they've all survived breast cancer.



Credit: Eugen Baban

"We prefer to say we're made up of those living beyond a diagnosis of breast cancer," explains Joanne. "Life after treatment is tough; in effect I was dealing with a surgical menopause."

"Once I started paddling that was it, I got the bug. It just felt so positive and empowering."

The movement of dragon boating for breast cancer survivors began in Canada. Treatment for the disease commonly includes the removal of lymph nodes in the armpit, which can leave patients with reduced function in their arm and at risk of lymphedema.

A Canadian specialist put together a dragon boat team of patients as an experiment, to see whether the upper body exercise required to paddle a dragon boat would be beneficial to their recovery. It was a huge success and, after the research was finished, the women kept right on paddling. Word spread and a global movement was born.

There are now more than 100 dragon boat teams across the world made up of breast cancer survivors, their families, friends and supporters.

In Belfast, the Lagan Dragons have 55 members who turn up to paddle and socialise every Saturday morning, from their base at Bryson Lagan Sports, on Ravenhill road.

Their season runs from February to November, and during the winter months they train on dry land instead.

Lesley Jennings

Lesley Jennings, 58, from Belfast, is one of

GET INVOLVED

Anybody who has been affected by breast cancer in any way can have a go at dragon boating with the Lagan Dragons, and men are welcome as well as women because men can get the disease too. Equipment is supplied for those who want to try their hand at paddling.

The breast cancer charity Pretty 'n' Pink pays for the first three sessions for people who have been directly affected by breast cancer. If you then decide to join as a member you can pay 10 monthly instalments of £15, or pay the full season's registration fee of £150 up front. Non-club members pay £10 per session.

For more information visit:
www.lagandragons.com

the team's newbies, having started paddling earlier this year.

She was diagnosed at 51 after being called for her first mammogram.

"It just shows how important it is to go for your mammogram as soon as you're invited," she says. "They discovered a lump that was too small for me to have found myself, which meant I got treatment at an earlier stage."

Lesley's consultant told her about the Lagan Dragons; she'd never been sporty but agreed to try one session.

"As soon as I started paddling I was

hooked," she remembers. "It didn't matter that I wasn't very good at it at first. I found myself out in the fresh air, in this huge boat surrounded by strong and supportive ladies all working together. It felt wonderful."

"Breast cancer treatment can be life-changing, but in this group we can share our war stories without judgement."

The team is open to anyone. About 80 percent of its members are female breast cancer survivors, but they're also joined by family, friends, and even the medical professionals who have treated them.

It's primarily a social group to improve their physical, mental and emotional wellbeing after a breast cancer diagnosis.

But members also put forward teams to take part in regattas across the UK and further afield.

"We held our own regatta on the Lagan for the first time in 2017, which was amazing," says Joanne, who has also taken part in the International Breast Cancer Paddlers' Commission (IBPC) Participatory Dragon Boat Festival in Sarasota, USA.

"It was brilliant seeing all our

families and friends cheering from the embankments."

Jo Miles

For team member Jo Miles, 45, from Lisburn, it's the "crack and camaraderie" that keeps her turning out to paddle, come rain or shine.

Jo went through her cancer journey in 2013, with treatment including surgery, chemotherapy and radiotherapy. She was in hospital when another patient mentioned the Lagan Dragons.

"I was told that there's this group of girls who go out paddling," laughs Jo. "I was intrigued... to say the least!"

"As soon as I tried it I just fell in love; it's good for the soul. You're out in the fresh air, exercising and feeling strong, and you know you're not the only one to have gone through breast cancer."

"We're all in it together. Dragon boating is like a huge sisterhood."

The Lagan Dragons are a registered charity and their mission statement is to encourage those who have been treated with breast cancer to lead full, happy and active lives, as well as raising awareness of the disease and its symptoms.

They also work hard to provide friendship and support to team members, family and friends.

And these girls are taking it global... they are currently fundraising to get a team over to compete in the 2018 IBPC Participatory Dragon Boat Festival in Florence in July.

"Dragon boating is so empowering and it's wonderful to get out and meet other teams," says Joanne. "All over the world women are being brought together by this sport."

To help get the team to Florence visit:

<https://www.justajobing.com/lagan-dragons>