

PUTNEY: AT THE HEART OF ROWING

Talk to the Putney Society, Monday 24th February 2020

Talk 1 – Philip Evison

Note: Slides for Phil's talk are in Slide Pack I

Why was Putney chosen?

Some of the reasons for the formation of the London Rowing Club in Putney in 1856:

'Firstly, density of river traffic connecting London, Southwark and Westminster – barges lightening the load of ships in the Pool of London, steam tugs and ferries, passenger wherries by the hundreds, processional barges, sailing barges from the estuary which shifted life's necessities and spoils of empire inland via the Thames. Secondly, while the tidal river scene may have looked like a great moving Canaletto, in reality it was more in the mood of a Turner brooding sunset, a Monet dusk or a Whistler fog at night on Battersea Reach – accompanied in the mid-19th century by a big stink of raw sewage, culminating in the 'great stink' of 1858.'

There is a story of Queen Victoria standing by the Thames and asking what were the pieces of paper floating down the river. A quick-thinking official said, "Those, Your Majesty, are notices saying that swimming is prohibited." The sewerage system was designed by Joseph Bazalgette, who would also design the second Putney Bridge, opened in 1886. It was said that the bill drawn up for the building of the first bridge, opened in 1729, was strongly supported by the Prime Minister, Robert Walpole, who once, having visited the King in Kingston and in a hurry to cross, was kept waiting by politically motivated watermen quaffing ale in the Swan Inn on the Fulham side of the river!

Putney offered a broad stretch of river, relatively unpolluted and with a relatively uncluttered bank. The embankment was built in 1887. *(Slides 1 to 9)*

Brief details follow of Putney's three oldest rowing clubs.

London Rowing Club *(Slide 10)*

Putney's oldest rowing club, the LRC was formed in 1856, at a meeting in the Craven Hotel, Strand, where it was resolved to form an association "*to be called the London Rowing Club, having for its object the encouragement of rowing on the River Thames and the bringing together of gentlemen interested in that sport.*" Essential reading is Christopher Dodd's 2006 history of the club, *Water Boiling Aft – the First 150 Years*, which can be borrowed from Putney Library.

Thames Rowing Club *(Slide 11)*

Formed in 1860 by small group of men, mainly clerks and salesmen in the rag trade, based at Simmons' boathouse (where Chas Newens Marine now is) and a room at the Red Lion Hotel on Putney High St.

The initial aim was "organised pleasure or exercise rowing." Their first recorded win was in 1864 against the Excelsior Boat Club of Greenwich, their first trophy at the Henley Royal Regatta being the Wyfold Challenge Cup, in 1870. By 1890, they had won a further 21 Henley titles (incl. the Grand Challenge Cup four times) and were well established in their own boathouse on Putney Embankment.

In 1973, they voted to accept women as members, the United Universities Women's Boat Club moved into the boathouse, and the club quickly became a powerhouse of women's rowing. Since the founding of the Henley Women's Regatta in 1987, the club has won there over 50 times, winning the highly competitive Remenham Challenge Cup for women's eights outright in 2005.

The Boustead Cup was founded in 1947 by Guy Boustead as an annual race between Thames Rowing Club and London Rowing Club, usually rowed in early spring on the ebb tide between Mortlake and Putney, the reverse of the University Boat Race course. It has been run 54 times to date, LRC winning 30 and TRC 24.

Leander Club

The Leander Club was based in Putney from 1860 to 1896, when they moved their HQ to Henley, though they kept their boathouse in Putney till 1939.

Vesta Rowing Club *(Slide 12)*

It was founded in 1870. The legend is that, during the inaugural meeting, the name of the club was discussed and, as there was no consensus, it was decided that it should be named after the first boat to pass under London Bridge. The first was a steam tug named Vesta.

The club's first home was Salter's boathouse, which was part of the Feathers pub on the River Wandle, near Wandsworth Bridge. In 1875, it moved to the Unity boathouse (now the Ranelagh Sailing Club) and from there to the present clubhouse, next door, in 1890.

At first, Vesta only raced in-house, their first known entry in an open race coming in 1876. Their first open win came that year, when J Whaley won the Junior Sculls at the Windsor & Eton Regatta. From then on, they had increasing success, incl. Harry Blackstaff's double victory in the Diamond Sculls at the Henley Royal Regatta, and the Wingfield Sculls, in 1906.

In December 1936, the clubhouse caught fire, destroying many of its records and trophies and damaging or destroying 30 boats, but most of the boats were replaced in time for the following year's summer regattas. During World War 2, the London Fire Brigade requisitioned Vesta's clubhouse for the duration; they reoccupied it in 1946.

Vesta has run many annual competitions, incl. the short-course 'Vesta Dashes' (since 1923), the Scullers' Head of the River (1954) and the first Veterans' Head of the River (1981), with competitors and crews coming from across the UK and abroad.

Famous Rowing Races at Putney

Head of the River Race (HotR) *(Slides 13 to 14)*

Usually run a week or two before the University Boat Race (2020 dates: Women's HotR 7th March, Schools' HotR 18th March, Men's HotR 21st March, UBR 29th March). It was founded in 1925 by Steve Fairbairn, though the first race wasn't held until 1926. It's an 'against the clock' (processional) race for eights run on the ebb tide over the University Boat Race course, but from Mortlake to Putney. There were 21 starters in that first race, but numbers have grown hugely over the years and are now limited to 420 boats. London Rowing Club has most wins, with 14, to Leander's 13.

The University Boat Race (UBR)

Also known as The Oxford & Cambridge Boat Race *(Slides 15 to 25)*

First run in Henley in 1829 (won by Oxford). In 1836 and 1839-1842, Westminster to Putney, then from 1845 onwards, over the present 4.2 mile Putney-Mortlake course, though on three occasions, it was run from Mortlake to Putney. It has been run every year since 1856, with breaks 1915-1919 and 1940-1945. Winners have been fairly evenly spread over the years, with occasional runs to one university, e.g. a nine-win run by Oxford 1861-1869. The totals prior to the 2020 race are Cambridge 84, Oxford 80.

The women's event has been run since 1927, with occasional breaks, and has been annual since 1946. Until recently, it was a separate event but has been held on the same day as the men's race since 2015. The balance of wins prior to the 2020 race is Cambridge 44, Oxford 30.

The UBR start stone has been removed for safety during the Tideway Tunnel works at Waterman's Green. The start will be marked with a red line on the public 'promontory' which will be a legacy of the tunnel works. It is not known whether the start stone will be replaced. *(Slide 18)*

UBR dramas in the men's race over the years

Dead Heat (Slide 23)

Perhaps most famously, the 'dead heat' of 1877. The race judge that year was a member of the well-known Phelps family, the so-called 'Honest John' Phelps, and some – possibly apocryphal – stories have grown up over the years. It is certainly true that there were no finishing posts at the time (they were installed for the following year's race) and probably true that Phelps was over 70 and blind in one eye. However, the Phelps family has always denied that he was drunk and lying under a bush at the time of the finish, and/or that he announced the result as "dead heat to Oxford ... by six feet."

Sinkings (Slide 24)

Boats have sunk over years. Cambridge in 1859; both crews in 1912; Oxford in 1925 and 1951; Cambridge in 1978 and 1984, the latter after they collided with a barge before the start.

Mutinies

There were mutinies by the Oxford crew in 1959 & 1987, the latter being the subject of the 1989 book (and 1996 film) *True Blue*.

The Protester (Slide 25)

More recently, in 2012, Australian Trenton Oldfield leapt into the river at Chiswick Eyot and swam into the path of the boats, as a protest about spending cuts, erosion of civil liberties, élitism in British society etc. He was spotted by assistant umpire Matthew Pinsent and the race was stopped. Restarting after 30 minutes, the boats clashed, an Oxford rower broke his oar, and Cambridge went on to win by 4¼ lengths.

Putney Town Regatta

This has been run since 1911. The 2020 event is on Saturday 16th May.

PE, 11th March 2020