

PUTNEY: AT THE HEART OF ROWING

Talk to the Putney Society, Monday 24th February 2020

Talk 2 – Caroline Whitehead

Note: Slides for Caroline's talk are in Slide Pack II

Amateurs and Professionals

As Phil has pointed out, the University Boat Race was enormously popular and remains so today. Although the Oxford & Cambridge crews were obviously amateurs, it began to feel necessary to define who was eligible to take part in the increasing number of competitive races and, most importantly, who was not.

In 1877 a meeting was held at Putney between various Rowing Clubs – London, Thames, Leander etc to decide on the definition of an Amateur, and in 1883 The Amateur Rowing Association went further by defining who was NOT an amateur. [\(Slide 2\)](#)

Here is an Amateur: [\(Slide 3\)](#) Duggie Stewart ticked all the right boxes: Public School, Cambridge, rowed in the Boatrace and the Olympics, was an Officer in WW1. By profession, a Solicitor and rowed for Kingston & Thames Rowing Clubs.

Here is a group of Professionals: [\(Slide 4\)](#) Charlie Phelps & his sons. They worked on the river as boatmen, stewards to Rowing clubs and in boat building.

Apart from the fact that professional rowers, who earned their daily bread on the water, were obviously better at rowing, there were also undertones of snobbery & class – and then there were the foreigners. You never could tell who exactly they were!

Jack Kelly was an American rower who had originally emigrated from Ireland and had served an apprenticeship as a bricklayer before going into the construction business and becoming a millionaire. He is said to have been banned in 1920 from competing at Henley on the grounds of having once been a manual labourer. He was the father of Grace Kelly [\(Slide 5\)](#) who later was honoured at Henley being asked to present trophies, start races etc..

The situation came to a head in 1936 when an Australian eight bound for the Olympics were barred from Henley Regatta as they were Policemen! However, all this went on for a surprisingly long time with a few tweaks here and there. And some would say that the issue generally in sport has never really gone away.

Steve Fairburn: An Amateur

Steve Fairbairn [\(Slide 6\)](#) had perhaps the most influence on rowing technique and style in the early part of the 20th Century and much of his rowing career took place in Putney. He was born in Australia, followed his older brothers to Jesus College and rowed for Cambridge several times in the Boat Race. Although he graduated in Law, he did not take it up and, after a short spell back in Australia, returned to England and went into business.

He rowed and coached for Thames Rowing Club and developed his theories on rowing - often referred to as "Fairbairnism", although he disliked the term himself. He developed the use of the sliding seat to allow better use of the legs and rejected what he considered the more rigid style of orthodox rowing, instead going for looseness and ease.

These ideas attracted a fair amount of opposition and his strong personality and abrasive temperament meant that he did not suffer fools gladly. Steve believed that rowing, if properly done, should be the sublimely enjoyable experience expressed in his poem, Oarsman's Song. [\(Slide 7\)](#)

The effect of Steve's coaching was reflected in a winning streak for Thames, however he eventually fell out with some of the Committee and in 1926 transferred to the London Rowing Club with a similar resulting boost their success in competitions.

Steve was a strong believer in distance training to develop stamina – as he said: "Mileage makes champions" - and it was Steve who in 1926 instituted the Head of the River Race from Mortlake to Putney to mark the end of winter training. Incidentally training on the river did not take place during the winter months at this time, unlike today when we see rowers out on the river night and day all year round. During this 'close season' rowers took to other sports such as rugby and cross-country running to keep up their training and the Thames Hare & Hounds Alumni Race is a survival of this, still run every year on Wimbledon Common.

Coaching. One of the Putney Society Rowing pictures which were given to the Society by Whitbread when the "Coach & Eight" Pub [\(Slide 8\)](#) on Upper Richmond Rd reverted to its former name "The Fox and Hounds". The picture can be seen today in Putney Pantry.

Did Steve coach on a horse? Alas no. Apparently, he coached from a launch or on a bicycle.

Steve Fairbairn wrote a number of books on his philosophy of Rowing which are still in print today. He died in 1938 and his ashes are buried at Jesus College, He is commemorated on the Towpath between Putney and Hammersmith by an obelisk [\(Slide 9\)](#) at the Mile Point of the Boat Race. A Memorial Trust was set up in his name with the aim of providing rowing facilities for young people.

Phelps Family: The Professionals

Watermen (Slide 10)

The Phelps, who can trace their family back to late Stuart times, worked as professional watermen, plying for hire around the very important ferry crossing between Putney and Fulham.

By the middle of the 19th century the family were mostly living around what Maurice Phelps in his book calls 'Poor Putney', that is the area around Lower Richmond Rd, The Platt and Felsham Road. Frederick and Alice Phelps and their seven children, for example, lived in Spring Gardens Lane (where Spring Passage is now) in a two-up, two-down cottage with a shared outside loo and tap. The girls would have gone into live-in service as soon as they were old enough and the boys, probably from the age of five would have been helping their father on the river. If they were lucky, they might have learned basic arithmetic and spelling at

Thomas Martyn's Foundation School (Slide 11)

Thomas Martyn was a Putney gentleman who was said to have been saved from drowning by a waterman. He set up a charity to provide a school for the sons of waterman. The School opened in 1718 in Putney Bridge Road but had to move to more modest premises in Lower Richmond Road when the District Railway was built. It finally closed in 1911. However, the Charity still exists as an Educational Trust, providing grants for the education of the sons & daughters of watermen from all parts of London. At the moment they have 30 cases on their books.

As public transport took over from river travel in the 20th C, traditional watermen's jobs declined and many of them took posts as stewards and boatmen at rowing clubs and public schools; some even moving abroad to coaching jobs. Christopher Dodd, the rowing historian, attributes the success of the German and Austrian teams at the 1936 Olympics to their British coaches. Others moved into non river jobs, but

Bossie Phelps (Slide 12)

Bossie managed to set himself up with a partner in the boat-building business on the embankment close to Ruvigny Gardens. He had married a school teacher and their first child, Young Bossie, was sent to Emmanuel School & not to Thomas Martyn's. Young Bossie took over the business when his father died and moved his family further up the social scale living in Festing and then Hotham Roads.

Between the wars, several of the family won the Doggetts Coat & Badge Race.

Tom Phelps, Bargemaster (Slide 13)

Several of the Phelps family became prominent as Bargemasters, an honorary post which came with little remuneration but a splendid uniform. Bossie Phelps became Kings Bargemaster and Harry was Bargemaster to the Fishmongers, Tom, shown here, was Bargemaster of the Watermans & Lightermen's Company and had the honour of standing a lone figure at the bow of the boat which carried Winston Churchill's coffin

up river from Tower Pier in 1965. Tom's day job was boatman at the London RC for many years. He was also a winner of Doggetts. In 1971, he dropped dead wearing his Doggett's uniform on the Rowing stand at the Earl's Court Exhibition.

Incidentally the present Queen's Bargemaster is Chris Livett, owner of Putney Pier. [\(Slide 14\)](#)

To bring Phelps history up to date: The latest generation is now enjoying success. Richard and Annamarie Phelps are both Great Britain internationals and both rowed for Cambridge.

Richard's grandfather was Dick Phelps, boatman to Thames for many years, and with him in the picture is his great-grandfather 'Honest John'. [\(Slide 15\)](#)

In 2017, Tom, Richard's son, stroked a Thames eight which won the Thames Challenge Cup at Henley Royal Regatta. So, you could say that the family has moved from being banned professionals to feted amateurs!

The Phelps family used to be commemorated in the Coat & Badge pub in Felsham Road, where the names of the Phelps winners of Doggett's were inscribed on the beams [\(Slide 16\)](#). Sadly, the management has recently had the pub redecorated and obliterated any reference to Doggetts, the Phelps and anything else to do with the Pub's name & heritage.

Now for some good news! River travel and the watermen are returning to the Thames on the Clippers & pleasure boats.

These are some of the Watermen of today on the Thames Clippers [\(Slide 17\)](#).