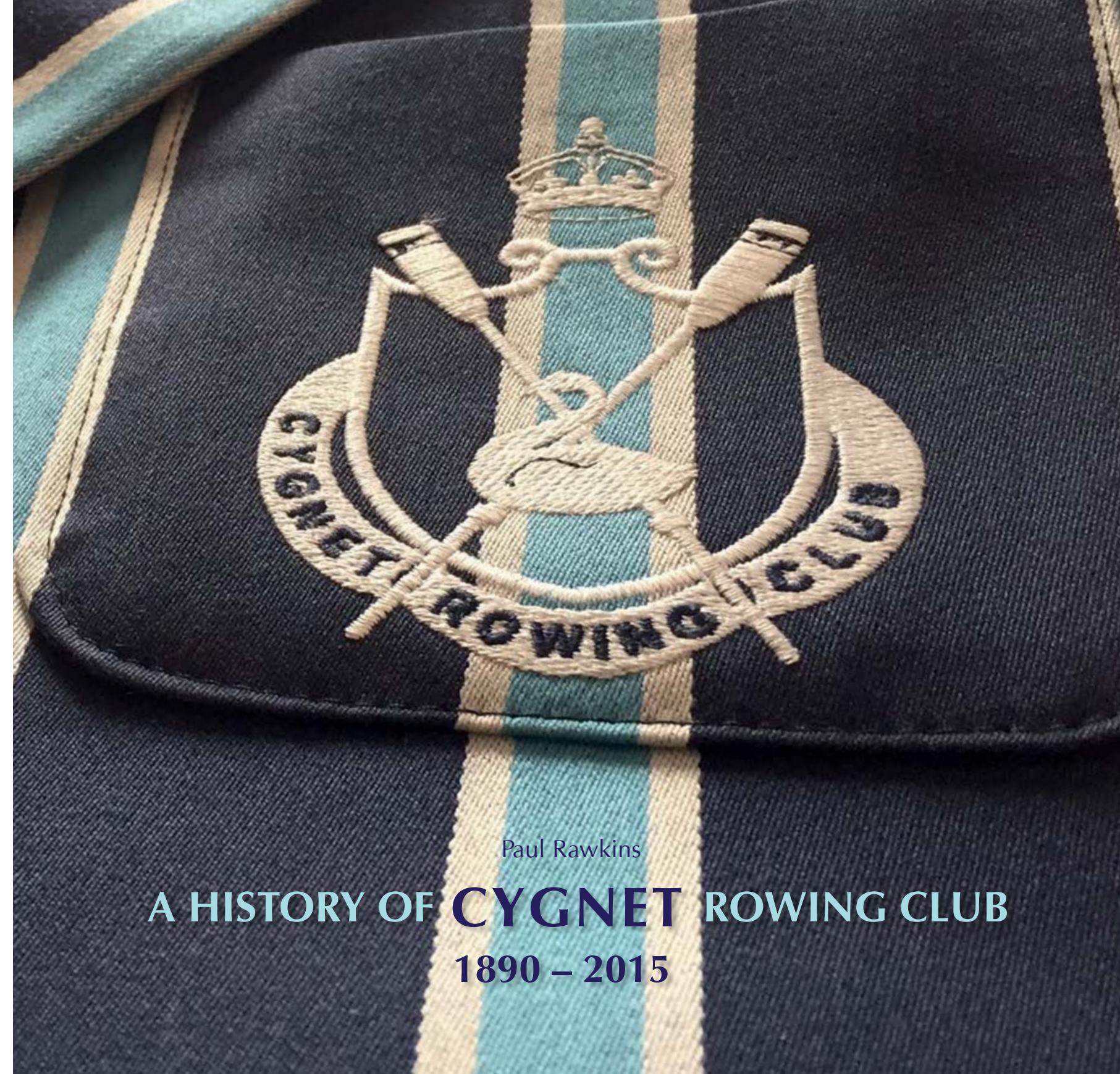


# CYGNET RC

These are just a few pages to whet your appetite. There is no digital version of the complete book which contains 84 pages in full colour with a hard cover.

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Paul Rawkins

**A HISTORY OF CYGNET ROWING CLUB**

**1890 – 2015**



# The ‘Glory Years’ of the Thirties

Committee minute books of the time convey none of the excitement, upheaval and high expectations that must have accompanied Cygnet’s move to Chiswick in the closing months of 1930. To begin with, Cygnet was only one of a number of men’s clubs boating from Chiswick; others included the Post Office Savings Bank, the Ministry of Health and Customs & Excise. Women’s clubs were equally numerous. A great spirit of rivalry seems to have existed between all the resident clubs and never more so than at the Civil Service Regattas, which were always well attended.

The facilities on offer at the new Civil Service Boathouse were a world apart from anything Cygnet had been accustomed to at Hammersmith. In particular, the club had access to a relatively modern fleet of boats with swivel rowlocks rather than fixed tholes and thus the means to adopt the ‘Jesus’ – Cambridge – style of rowing championed by Steve Fairbairn at Thames.



Fortunately for Cygnet, club captain H.W.T (Jack) Sheppard was a devotee of Fairbairnism and wasted no time in introducing the club to modern techniques.

The early 1930s were the precursor of modern day squad rowing as we know it at Cygnet. As so often happens in a small club, a fresh intake of talented young individuals transformed the club’s prospects from 1932 and was soon making its mark on the local regatta circuit. Anxious to give these newcomers every advantage, in 1933 the captaincy proposed that the club purchase a state-of-the art ‘shaved’ clinker VIII from Sims and Sons of Putney for £125.17s, including a set of blades, which was duly agreed.

The impact of this purchase on club morale appears to have been instantaneous, amply justifying the expense of the new boat and giving Cygnet a significant competitive advantage over other less progressive clubs. Under the tutelage of external coaches Jack Wingate and George Mealing, two rowing heavyweights of their time, Cygnet came 32nd out of 140 in the Tideway Head in 1933 and won the ‘Beverley’ Eights and the ‘Grace Sabin’ trophies for both Lightweight and Heavyweight Vllls events the same year.

By 1934, the fame of the new shaved clinker VIII had begun to spread and Cygnet lost some of its competitive edge. However, by then, Cygnet had set its sights on a new shell VIII, funded by the CSRA for the use of all CSRA-affiliated clubs at Chiswick. This was purchased in 1935 and would stand Cygnet in good stead in the ‘Glory Years’ of 1937-39.

**Left:** An impressive haul of trophies, 1933

**Top Right:** Winners of the Sabin Heavyweight Vllls, 1933

**Right:** John Bull reliving 1937 regatta triumphs, 2004

## Going it Alone

By the mid-1930s, Cygnet boasted a hard core of experienced oarsmen like C.H. Genever-Watling, E.E. Fray, F.E. (John) Bull, G.P. Jefferies, E.T.J. Lee, G.W. Mealing and others. These men had benefited from the foresight of Jack Sheppard and Dan Gallagher, who were quick to appreciate their racing potential and had arranged for them to be coached by such notables as Southwood (Thames), Harry (Quintin) and Lou Barry.

G.P. Jefferies assumed the captaincy in 1935 and wasted no time in raising standards of attendance, training and coaching such that by 1936 it was clear that Cygnet had the potential to go it alone, rather than row under the flag of the CSRA. Up until this time, many of the club’s best oarsmen had been selected each year to row in representative CSRA crews and were therefore lost to Cygnet for most of the season. However, in 1936 winter training commenced for a purely Cygnet VIII and a heavy racing programme was planned for 1937.

A ‘Regatta Fund’ was instituted and Cygnet duly competed at Hammersmith, Putney, Chiswick, Kingston and Kingston Borough regattas; it also represented the Civil Service at the Metropolitan, Molesey and Staines. Victory came swiftly with a win in Junior Vllls at Putney, followed by Junior-Senior



Vllls at Metropolitan and Staines. The 1937 season thus served to put Cygnet on the map in terms of open competition. By a strange quirk of fate, ‘John’ Bull, the stroke man and by then sole survivor of this successful crew, was reunited with the Putney Junior Vllls trophy in 2004.

In a lighter vein on Easter Monday, 1937, a Cygnet VIII acted as the pilot boat in the Sculling Championship of England between Eric Phelps and Lou Barry. In keeping with the times, the VIII rowed as VII, the bow seat being occupied by Bert Barry. Bert sat facing the bow so that he could steer his brother over the course from Putney to Mortlake, thus saving him the trouble of looking round to determine his course. Ronnie Lambe, who joined Cygnet in 1947, recalls hearing live commentary of the race on the radio.

Some sense of what the scene must have been like can be gained from an illustration from the Illustrated London News depicting a similar event in earlier times, although Phelps was followed by a launch rather than an VIII. The Barry v Phelps race was an exciting one with both men sculling level for three-quarters of the course. The Cygnet oarsmen acquitted themselves well by all accounts, but Lou Barry ultimately lost by four lengths.





## Upgrading the Second Estate

The Second World War marked a watershed in many aspects of life at Cygnet, not least the second estate at Hamhaugh Island, Shepperton. Genever-Watling, author of the History of Cygnet Rowing Club, 1950–74, wistfully recalled that:

*“the ‘camp’ had become the ‘bung’ and the old magic of the hurricane lamp, pub crawls with the treble and double scullers up or down river were now ‘of another era.’”* So, too, were the rudimentary cooking, water and sanitary arrangements and ‘the good old Shiny Boys’.

Pre-war, The Camp had been the preserve of ‘stag’ parties; now, it was starting to enjoy a wider appeal, attracting families and friends. Still, there was only so much improvement that

could be wrought from a pair of glorified 1914–18 Nissen huts and by 1963 the structure was deemed to be beyond renovation, notwithstanding the arrival on the island of electricity and mains water. In 1963 the committee therefore backed a proposal by Derek Bush to rebuild the bungalow completely.

Not for the last time, a bungalow sub-committee was formed and, after some deliberation, recommended the purchase of a red-cedar sectionalised building to be made to specification by a Chertsey firm. The cost of this, together with the additional timber for flooring, was in the order of £650. Most of this sum was raised in interest-free loans from a small number of club members.





# Inter-Club Connections

## Barnes Bridge Ladies

No history of Cygnet could ignore Barnes Bridge Ladies (BBLRC) and its predecessor, the Civil Service Ladies Rowing Club (CSLRC), which, like Cygnet, had absorbed other service clubs in the immediate post-war era to become the sole representative of women's rowing in the civil service.

For most of the second half of the 20th century, CSLRC was arguably the most powerful women's rowing club in England, together with the likes of Bedford and Weybridge, most other women's clubs having been absorbed into men's clubs. Thus, throughout the seventies and eighties, Cygnet often found itself living in the shadow of CSLRC, whose members formed the nucleus of the women's national squad and several of whom were at the forefront of women's participation in the 1976 Montreal Olympics.

By the turn of the century, with women's rowing enjoying exponential growth, CSLRC had ceased to be a towering force in the sport and the club changed its name to Barnes Bridge Ladies Rowing Club in 1997, to broaden its appeal.

Today, BBLRC is proud to describe itself as one of only two women-only clubs in the UK (the other is Weybridge Ladies ARC) with a dedicated fleet of boats tailored specifically to female rowers.

Living cheek by jowl under one roof has meant that relations between Cygnet and BBLRC have ebbed and flowed over time. Perhaps inevitably, there have been periodic discussions about merging the two clubs, giving rise to a mountain of correspondence in 1993–94 and again in 2001–02, of which more later.

In the event, both clubs continue to retain proud separate identities and the status quo has prevailed. Thus, life at the Civil Service Boathouse goes on much as it always has, characterised

by a high level of goodwill, cooperation and close personal bonds leading to matrimony fairly frequently. Indeed, the uninformed observer would scarcely know that Cygnet and BBLRC remain two separate clubs, although we have yet to see a repetition of 1981 when the two clubs were captained by a husband and wife team – Rodney and Gillian Beer.



**Above:** CSLRC winners of the Charlton Cup at Nottingham International Regatta, 1974

**Below:** Joint club photo, Civil Service Boathouse, 2003



## Ruder-Gesellschaft Benrath

As the largest country in Europe, Germany has a surfeit of rivers and lakes and a long tradition of the sport of rowing, not to mention après rowing of an alcoholic nature. By the 1960s, both Germanies – the Federal Republic and the Democratic Republic – had started to make a strong showing on the international scene following the dislocations of the Second World War.

In 1965, three Cygnet members, Messrs Arnold-Gilliat, Burden and McVeigh went to watch the European Rowing Championships in Duisberg, West Germany. While there, they contacted the German Rowing Association for the name of a suitable club where they might try their hands at rowing on the Rhine. In response, they were given an introduction to Ruder-Gesellschaft Benrath, based in a suburb of Düsseldorf, where they were warmly received by Fred Blasberg, Ferdi Picker and Dietmar Hohn.

From this rather impromptu beginning, close and enduring links have evolved between Cygnet and RG Benrath. Indeed, the 50th anniversary of this relationship coincides with Cygnet's 125th birthday.

RG Benrath subsequently became the first German crew to compete in the Head of the River Race since the Second World War, in 1970, starting a veritable flood of overseas entries. Similarly, Cygnet marked its first overseas entry in 1980 by competing in the *Düsseldorfer Marathonrudern*, (aka. Rhine Marathon) rowed over a course of 43 kilometres from Leverkusen to Düsseldorf. Initially treated as a survival course, by 2005 Cygnet crews had honed their coastal rowing skills sufficiently to win the medal for the fastest overseas crew. Cygnet members have also made more relaxed rowing tours of the Mosel, and Benrath tours of the Thames.

Generations pass, but the Head of the River and the Rhine Marathon remain firm fixtures in both clubs' annual fixtures lists. Socially, Cygnet and Benrath have jointly marked their respective centenaries in 1990 and 2008 with much fanfare. A reminder of the relationship between the two clubs is the ship's bell that hangs in the bar at the Civil Service Boathouse. This bell, presented by Benrath in 1981, is ceremoniously rung by anyone wishing to buy drinks for all those present in the bar, nay, hearing distance.



**Above:** 'Enjoying' the Rhine Marathon, 2011

**Below:** Cygnet's 1965 pioneers reunited with their hosts at Old Blades, 2005



**Below:** Presidential aside; Peter Sly and Günter Füh at RG Benrath's 100th anniversary





CYGNET ROWING CLUB CAPTAINS		
1890 - 1891	-----	J.W. MILLER
1892 - 1896	-----	R. PRIOR
1897 - 1898	-----	T.W. KIDDS
1899 - 1901	-----	T.S. CLEVELAND
1902 - 1903	-----	W.J. WHELDAL
1904 - 1905	-----	G. EASLEY
1906 - 1911	-----	W.J. WHELDAL
1912 - 1916	-----	A.G. BURGESS
1917 - 1918	No Election - World War I	
1919 - 1920	-----	A.G. BURGESS
1921 - 1923	-----	D. GALLAGHER
1924 - 1926	-----	J.F.W. HARRIS
1927	-----	J.M. ADAMS
1928	-----	J.F.W. HARRIS
1929 - 1931	-----	H.W.T. SHEPPARD
1932	-----	J.T. MURRAY
1933 - 1934	-----	J.F.W. HARRIS
1935 - 1940	-----	G.P. JEFFERIES
1941 - 1945	No Election - World War 2	
1946 - 1951	-----	G.P. JEFFERIES
1952 - 1955	-----	V.H. REEVES
1956	-----	G.B. DOYLE
1957	-----	V.H. REEVES
1958 - 1959	-----	R.N. GURTEEN
1960	-----	F.L. CAUGHLIN
1961	-----	W. F. PEER
1962	-----	V.H. REEVES
1963	-----	M. HUGHES
1964	-----	M. HUGHES
1965	-----	D. B. CARLISLE
1966	-----	L.T. HUGGETT
1967	-----	E.T.J. LEE
1968 - 1969	-----	C.R. DOMINY

1970 - 1973	.....	M.A.ARNOLD-GILLIAT
1974 - 1975	.....	N.R.COWLING
1976	.....	R.J.W.BEER
1977	.....	R.P. du PARCQ
1978	.....	A. AZZARO
1979	.....	J.B. SIMKINS
1980 - 1981	.....	M.A.ARNOLD-GILLIAT
1982	.....	R.J.W.BEER , D.T.WYNNE
1983	.....	P.L.RAWKINS
1983 - 1986	.....	P.L.RAWKINS
1987	.....	T.R.SKINNER, D.T.WYNNE
1988	.....	N.J.WYLIE
1989 - 1990	.....	R.P. du PARCQ
1991 - 1992	.....	P.T. O'CONNOR
1993	.....	J.G. HARRIS
1994	.....	C.F. SHEA
1995	.....	C.F. SHEA
1996 - 1997	.....	M.W.DAVIES
1998	.....	A.S.K.FORSYTH
1999 - 2001	.....	A.COX
2002	.....	M.H.ISRAËL
2003	.....	S.M.KEATING
2004 - 2005	.....	M.P.COLLIER
2006 - 2007	.....	N.V.PICKFORD
2008	.....	R.I.KEYSER
2009	.....	P.HUMPHRIES
2010	.....	R.A.HENDERSON
2011 - 2012	.....	S.A.GIBBONS
2013	.....	N.R.BATES
2014 - 2015	.....	D.R.FRENCH

# Captains of Boats

Captains have come in all shapes and sizes; some have chosen to be active captains, rowing in competitive crews, others have chosen to be administrators. Early captains were mostly concerned with ‘cultivating the art and practice of rowing’ and carving out an identity for Cygnet in a ‘gentleman’s sport. Three of the ‘original ten’ – Miller, Prior and Wheldal – held the post of captain in the first ten years of the club’s life.

By the 1920s, as we have seen, Cygnet had graduated from in-house competition to open events, initially at provincial regattas and latterly on the Tideway. Successive captains in this era sought to push the boundaries and widen Cygnet’s horizons: D. Gallagher, J.F.W. Harris and H.W.T. Sheppard were especially instrumental in this. Inevitably, two world wars disrupted the normal course of captaincy elections; thus, there were no elections in 1917–18, while G.P. Jefferies, the pre-war incumbent, nominally remained captain throughout the Second World War.

## Gluttons for Punishment

Prior to the Second World War, most captains served multiple terms: Wheldal, Burgess and Harris all did several stints at the helm, providing much valued stability, continuity and leadership. Most also served in other capacities: Harris did more than twenty years as club secretary, while Wheldal was a glutton for punishment, performing key roles in the NARA and the CSRA, as well as Cygnet.

H.W.T. Sheppard, a free-thinker who served as captain in 1929–31, will chiefly be remembered as an unflinching devotee of the ‘Fairbairn’ or ‘Jesus’ style of rowing who had the foresight to ensure that Cygnet embraced this opportunity with both arms, following its move to Chiswick in 1930. However,



Above: G.P. Jefferies, Cygnet Captain 1935 – 1951

the captain most synonymous with success in open competition was Jefferies (1935–51) whose tenure embraced the ‘Glory Years’ of 1937–39 and the immediate post-war era.

A convert from middle distance running, Jefferies was a great disciplinarian who kept meticulous records throughout his tenure; his diaries came to light comparatively recently and have proved to be an invaluable source of information in the compilation of this history. Jefferies was an active captain who rowed in the first VIII throughout the thirties and at one point in 1937 threatened to resign, if fellow club officers failed to take more of the strain, briefly throwing the club into turmoil.

## Hail the Administrators

V.H. Reeves was the first of the post-war intake to become captain in 1952–55. More of an administrator than an oarsman, he would serve three stints as captain throughout the 1950s and 1960s, overseeing Cygnet’s return to open competition. Reeves would subsequently become General Secretary of the CSSC in 1974–81 and an invaluable supporter of rowing throughout his career. C.R. Dominy became the club’s first non-civil service captain in 1968–69. Dominy’s main claim to fame was as a coxswain of Nautilus, the forerunner of the National Squad, in 1965.





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