

Cygnets Rowing Club 1890~2010

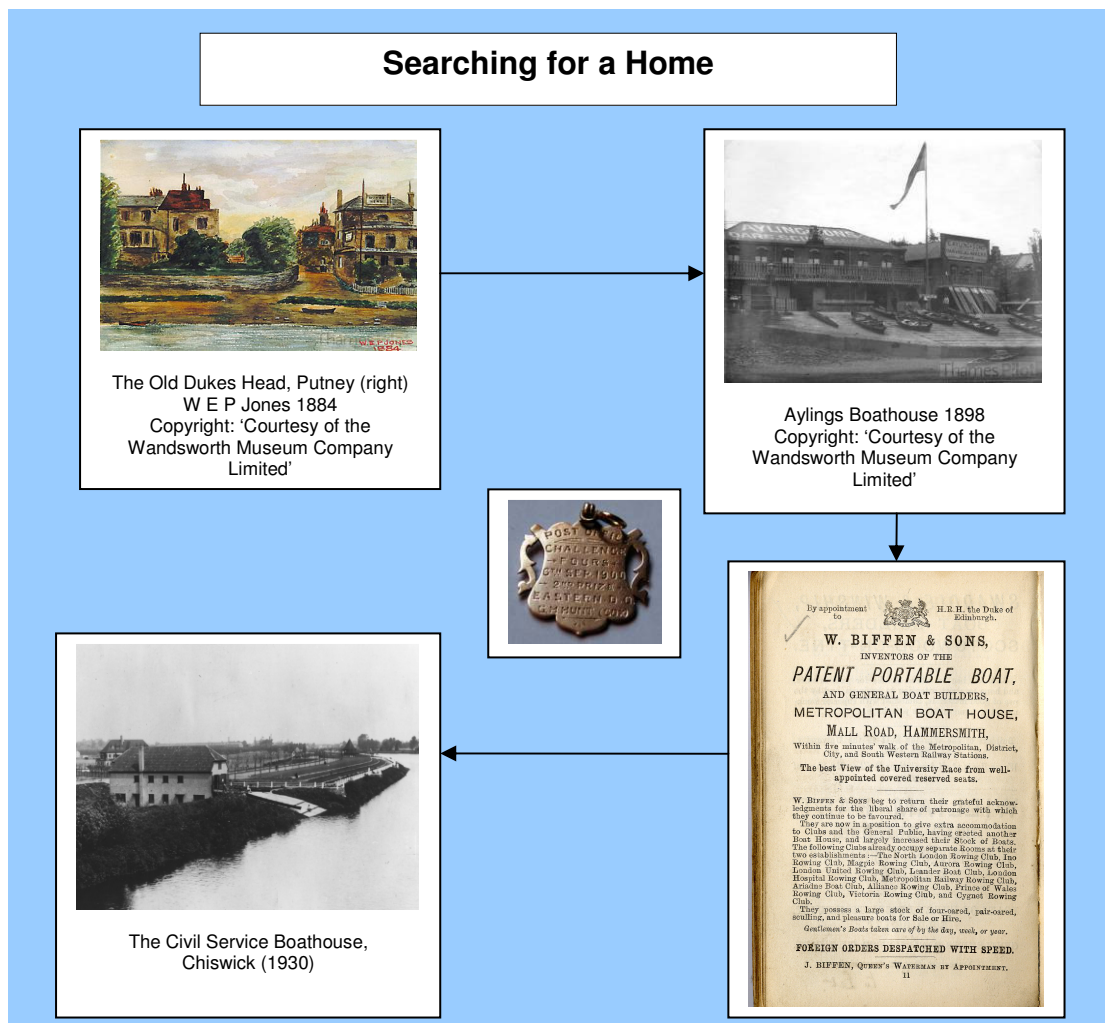
A Potted History

How It All Began

The year 1890 was not especially memorable on the world stage. History would later record that two of the best known comedians – Stan Laurel and Groucho Marx – were born in this year, while the artist Vincent Van Gogh succumbed to a premature exit. Oxford won the 47th University Boat Race and the longest bridge in England – the Forth Bridge – opened for business on 4th March. Down on the tidal Thames at Putney, organized amateur rowing continued much as it always had, dominated by the major clubs like London and Thames.



This was the 'gentlemen's' world into which ten employees of the General Post Office, 'enthused with a desire to cultivate the art and practice of rowing', stepped on the morning of 12th February 1890. They met in the (old) Duke's Head Hotel to discuss 'the desirability of forming a rowing club'. Wally Wheldal (standing to the left of the member wearing a cap in the back row in this photo of 1891) would shortly become the Club's first secretary. It was he who proposed that the club should be called Cygnets.



During the 19thC and early 20thC, it was not unusual for boat clubs to exist in name alone, hiring boats and changing rooms from one of a number of commercial boathouses located between Putney and Chiswick. Cygnet started life at Messrs Thompson & Bowers at Putney, before moving to Ayling's (also at Putney) in 1898. Faced with a large membership and increasingly cramped premises at Putney in the early 1900s, Cygnet started to look further afield, eventually accepting an offer from Biffen's Boathouse, Hammersmith in 1904 for the use of six boats and the provision of a changing room at a cost of £40 a year.

With the move from Putney to Hammersmith, Cygnet's 'headquarters' for meetings shifted from the Duke's Head to the Rutland, where they were to remain until the early 1930s. One of the attractions of boating from Biffen's was that on club regatta days members enjoyed access to the balconies at the boathouse and the adjacent Rutland Hotel. In the late 1920s, the Club moved next door from Biffens to the West End ARA Boathouse. By this time, however, Cygnet was eagerly anticipating migration further upriver to its very own purpose-built premises at Chiswick in 1932. Thus began a new era of civil service rowing that has endured until this day.

Workers Unite

Today, we take it for granted that when a new member joins the club he or she will automatically register with the Amateur Rowing Association (ARA, forerunner of British Rowing), particularly if they intend to race at regattas. In 1890, however, the larger tideway clubs effectively ran the ARA as a 'closed shop', defining amateur status so tightly as to exclude manual labourers including general post office workers. Moreover, not only were members of clubs like Cygnet denied amateur status; they were also deemed to be professionals and therefore disqualified from amateur competition. Not content to accept the status quo, in October 1890 Cygnet joined forces with a number of other rowing clubs to form the National Amateur Rowing Association (NARA) whose mission statement was to redefine the concept of amateur rowing and run their own events under NARA rules. While Cygnet was to figure prominently in early NARA events, by 1908 the two had parted company and the Club began what would turn out to be a lengthy crusade to gain access to the hallowed halls of the ARA; membership was eventually granted in 1923.

The Regatta Circuit



Membership of Cygnet expanded rapidly in the early 1890s and within only a few years it had become one of the strongest clubs of its kind on the Thames¹. Victory in open competition followed and by 1894 Cygnet was winning Championship IVs and Vllls at the annual NARA regatta. The first Club Regatta was held in September 1895 and was an immediate success. Indeed, so well patronized were these events that it became necessary to hire a pleasure launch to bring spectators up from Waterloo Pier to Putney.

Swimming was added to the Club's activities in 1892 and early regatta programmes show that swimming races (in the Thames) were at least as popular as sculling and rowing events. By the turn of the century, the centerpiece of the club regatta had become the Ayling's

Challenge Cup for 'equal half outriggered tub IVs, with sliding seats'. The entry for the event was 10/- and gold medals were awarded to each member of the winning crew.

After 1900 and the move to Hammersmith, in-house regattas began to give way to open competition and Cygnet crews were venturing as far afield as Bedford, Leicester and Nottingham pre WW1. The early 1920s were a time of great evolution for Cygnet and Civil Service rowing. Cygnet featured prominently in civil service regattas from 1922; provided pacing crews for the 'Light Blues' ahead of the University Boat Race in 1923; participated in the first Hammersmith Regatta in 1924 and the first Tideway Head in 1926. But it would be the second half of the 1930s that would really put Cygnet and civil service rowing on the map.

¹ Not all and sundry were welcome however; thus the Club minute books record that three out of thirteen applicants were rejected in March 1890 alone.

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. By 1938 they were closing in on Thames Cup class – the premier Vllls event of its day at most regattas – and, later the same year, would attain their goal of competing at Henley Royal Regatta for the first time in the club's history. Cygnet's success would continue into 1939, ending on a Thames Cup class win at Molesey, before WW2 brought half a century of sporting and institutional milestones to a temporary halt.



It would be another thirty five years before Cygnet would appear at Henley again – rowing as Cygnet rather than the Civil Service Rowing Association as in 1938 – and another decade after that before Henley Royal would become an annual fixture for club crews. Regatta successes for Cygnet continue to ebb and flow; the quality of the equipment, the level of dedication and training commitment is on a level that would be hard for our forebears to grasp; but the aspiration to compete with the 'best-in-class' remains unchanging.

Captains and Presidents

Robert Henderson is the Club's 48th captain. Three of the 'original ten' – Miller, Prior and Wheldal – held the post in the first ten years of the Club's life. Although Miller proposed the formation of the Club, it is Wally Wheldal who is the best remembered of the founding fathers; he held many club posts throughout his life and remained a prominent member until his death at 82 in 1947. The longest serving captain was J P Jeffries (1935-51) whose tenure embraced the victorious years of the late 1930s and the immediate post-war period; his diaries of this era have recently come to light. A number of captains have been gluttons for punishment, choosing to serve multiple terms, among them Vic Reeves, Mike Arnold-Gilliat, Paul Rawkins and Richard du Parcq. A new milestone in the Club's history was passed in 2002 when it appointed its first woman captain – Marjorie Israel.



Club presidents have been less prolific, but no less notable. In its formative years, Cygnet sought the patronage of distinguished figures at the Inns of Court – Sir Charles Russell QC (1892-94), who became Lord Chief Justice of England in 1894 – or City notables like Sir James Whitehead, Bart. (1894-1902), who had been Lord Mayor of London in 1889. Two rowing 'greats' – R B Etherington-Smith (Ethel) and Rudy Lehman – filled the post in the years up to WW1. Intermittent incumbents followed until 1975, when Cygnet elected Peter Sly. Today, Cygnet is proud to count Peter as our longest serving president. Among his many

attributes he lays claim to a superior piece of real estate located midway along the Henley reach, from whence he and his wife Pat dispense their legendary hospitality during regatta week.

The Bungalow

The bungalow at Shepperton is a unique club asset and one that is dear to all our hearts and so it has been – the site, not the current structure – for more than a century. The Victorians' love affair with the Thames manifested itself in frequent jaunts at weekends to Richmond, Twickenham, Hampton Court and Windsor. Cygnet was no exception and such trips were well established in the club fixture card by the early 1900s. Warming to popular sentiment, the committee voted to rent an up-river plot on Hamhaugh Island in 1909, furnishing it with a tent, camping equipment and a punt. Annual rental of the current site with its extensive river frontage cost £2.10/- until 1915 when it was raised to £5.00.

One of the best preserved photographs in the Club's archive is of the 21st Grand Reunion held at 'The Camp' in 1911. Club revellers enjoyed a leisurely trip by launch from Richmond to Shepperton for tea, followed by games and a group photograph. This programme was repeated on similar lines every year until 1914, by which time Cygnet had acquired its own orchestra – the Cygnet Sextet – which was much in demand for functions like launch trips and concerts.



Unshackled from the trials and deprivations of the First World War, the Camp enjoyed its most popular year ever in 1919 and in March 1920 a meeting of Club members unanimously agreed to purchase the site for £114.00. Rental charges were fixed at 3/- for a weekend and 2/- a day from Monday to Friday. The forerunner of the current structure was constructed in 1930 from the remains of two First World War Nissen huts and did valiant service until the early 1960s when Derek Bush, who still sits on the bungalow sub-committee, masterminded the erection of the building we now know as the Bungalow. Today, the bungalow boasts mains electricity, running water and bathroom facilities; it is a palace compared to earlier times thanks to the unflinching efforts of Ronnie Lambe and his team.

Tailpiece

As this publication goes to press, the Club's active membership has passed eighty, its highest level in living memory. The longest standing members are Ronnie Lambe (left) and Vic Reeves (right), both of whom joined the Club in 1947. Cygnet has moved a long way from its Post Office roots: the most recent intake of new members included a solicitor, a recruitment manager and a database analyst. Nonetheless, it remains first and foremost a Thames Tideway club with a proud history that has spanned six monarchs, two world wars, a transport revolution, the computer age and the invention of the worldwide web.



Throughout that period Old Father Thames has evolved from a working river to a recreational resource. In 1890, the river banks from Putney to Chiswick would have been lined with soap factories, malt houses and sugar refineries. Thames barges would still ply their trade between the Pool of London and Putney, Mortlake and Brentford. Today, industry has capitulated to residential sprawl and it is rare to see a tug above Hammersmith Bridge. The Thames' banks above Putney are much more wooded than they were and the coaching bike has long since been superseded by the coaching launch. Doubtless, Wallie Wheldal and the rest of the original ten would applaud Cygnet's continued determination to promote the 'art and practice of rowing'; grasping the concept of the club website might be more of a challenge!

The club still has a number of copies of the Illustrated Club History 1890-1990; these are available from Paul Rawkins at a discounted price of £5.00. Please e-mail him on prawkins@googlemail.com or call on 020 8748 4415.