

## THE CYGNET GUIDE TO HENLEY ROYAL REGATTA

HISTORY has been kind to Henley, not least because it has long been a staunch Tory constituency (represented by the flamboyant Boris Johnston until he became London Mayor) and prides itself in self-preservation. Standing on one of the most unspoiled reaches of the river, Henley has been one of the most popular and fashionable Thames-side towns since the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The Regatta was first held on this stretch in 1839 - when it was raced in a single afternoon - and the Stewards continue to do all they can to uphold the standards and ambience of that era (but thankfully the loos have kept up with the 21<sup>st</sup> century!). Despite the unstoppable march of multi-lane courses, Henley Royal remains the club oarsman's Olympics.

QUALIFYING races have become increasingly necessary in recent years because so many of the events are over subscribed and take place on the previous Friday, 25<sup>th</sup> June. Starting in the afternoon and continuing until the early evening, they are a spectacle in themselves without all the pomp and circumstance of the following week.

RACING proper begins on Wednesday 30<sup>th</sup> June and continues until Sunday 4<sup>th</sup> July. At least half of regatta goers

- the corporate hospitality set - are completely unaware that any boat races take place at all! For the more dedicated spectators (eg: the Chairman and Dowager Chairman seen above), racing begins at the crack of dawn on Wednesday to Friday, usually finishing around 7pm each evening, before settling down to a more civilised hour on Saturday and Sunday (semi-finals and finals day). If you manage to endure the full five days of spectating from the bank (far more demanding than actually racing), you deserve a medal.



CYGNET first rowed at Henley in 1938 under the guise of the Civil Service Rowing Association. More than three decades elapsed before the Club again appeared at the Regatta in the early 1970s. Since the 1980s Cygnet crews have competed at the Regatta in most years entering Thames Cup (Vllls), Wyfolds (IV-), Silver Goblets (II-) and the Diamond Sculls. The most successful crew to date has been a coxless IV which won through to the quarter finals of Wyfolds in 1996. Cygnet crews have also won heats in the Silver Goblets, but have yet to attain the elusive club goal of winning one or more heats in the Thames Cup. This year, Cygnet hopes to have entries in the Wyfolds and the Britannia (IV+).

THE COURSE is 2112 metres long and looks distinctly uphill if you happen to be sitting on one of the starting pontoons. The Start is often the most exciting part of the race and even the most seasoned rower can learn a lot from just watching crews warm up before the 'off'. As soon as the umpire's flag goes down there will be a chorus of 'backs please', as long-suffering coaches pedal hell for leather alongside their crews on the towpath. It helps to get to grips with 'course speak' early in the day: 'Bucks' and 'Berks' refers to either side of the river (few people can remember which, especially after Friday); 'at the end of the Island' means the first pain barrier; 'at the Barrier' often heralds the make or break of the race; 'hitting the booms' confirms the break, quite literally.

THE ENCLOSURES at Henley are legend. Stewards, Leander and Remenham are the most exclusive. Quite a number of older Cygnets are members of Stewards and may be able to help with tickets, while this year Cygnet has again been invited to apply for tickets at Remenham Club on Wednesday, Thursday and Sunday (contact Paul Rawkins). If you are hoping to go into Stewards, beware the 'dress code' police (see opposite): men -



jackets and ties, no jeans; women - the Stewards insist that dresses must come below the knee and no trouser suits. There is a General Enclosure next door to Stewards, which is open to all, subject to an entry fee and a less stringent dress code.

DRINKING (AND EATING) are essential parts of the Henley experience. The alcoholic drinks of choice are Brakspears real ale (sadly no longer brewed locally) and Pimms, the last usually sold at elevated prices in Stewards and elsewhere. On course, the best place to sample a pint of Brakspears, is at The Barn at Remenham, about 250 yards down from the President's house going towards the start. Henley itself is not short of pubs and restaurants, although the latter do tend to get booked up at lunch times. There is also a range of less formal eating establishments dotted along the course. Further afield at Aston, about a mile distant from Old Blades, is the Flowerpot, a Victorian fishing inn much favoured by Cygnet senior hands and a good stopping place on the way home (if you're not driving).



GETTING TO HENLEY can be half the fun. Some members of neighbouring rowing clubs have been known to row there, but not Cygnets who tend to go by road or rail (extra train services from Paddington/Waterloo). Getting home is often the greater challenge for Cygnet members, particularly if you fail to curb your alcoholic intake. Past years have found Cygnets resting in ditches, lying face down in the food tents and taking showers fully clothed. Wherever you wake up on Saturday morning, don't say you haven't been warned! Finally, take an umbrella, lots of money, comfortable shoes and an umbrella - essential Henley kit!

BOATS come in all shapes and sizes. While the rowers slog it out on the course in the likes of Janouseks, Sims, and Empachers, the leisured classes drift up and down in all manner of craft. One hundred years ago, the regatta goer would have been greeted by serried ranks of houseboats, all decked out for the occasion and the booms would have been packed



with race goers (as this post card scene from 1905 shows). Today, the scene is as eclectic as ever embracing punts and skiffs, steam canoes and slipper launches, paddle steamers and canal boats and even the occasional gondolier. Pity the coxless pair trying to thread its way through this milieu on its way to the start. But at least the course has been buoyed since the late 19thC, making the actual race much less hazardous than it was!



CYGNET PRESIDENTS have had a long association with Henley Regatta. One of our early ones - R B (Ethel) Etherington-Smith (1902-13) - won the Grand Challenge Cup on three separate occasions between 1901 and 1905 (but, sadly, he was rowing for Leander rather than Cygnet). Another, Rudy Lehman, was Captain of Leander in 1894-95. Peter Sly, our current president, may not have rowed at Henley (or been a captain of Leander), but he can claim to have won a rather larger prize - a superior piece of real estate located midway along the course at Remenham named 'Old Blades'. On Henley Friday, Peter and Pat Sly extend a warm welcome to members of

Cygnets and Barnes Bridge Ladies to this the most exclusive enclosure of all. Try not to wake the President on the way out!

### HENLEY SMALL TALK (FROM THE ARCHIVES)

SCENE: House boat in good position  
TIME: Evening, Henley Regatta, early 20thC  
PRESENT: Cygnets Old Blade and Female Admirer



FEMALE ADMIRER: Did you come down by train?  
CYGNETS OLD BLADE: Good Lord no, I asked Simpkins to park the Roller Thames-side.

FEMALE ADMIRER: Where are you staying?  
CYGNETS OLD BLADE: The Flower Pot at Aston. The proprietor understands us, but one's rooming companions leave a little to be desired.



FEMALE ADMIRER: Very pretty, the lights, are they not?  
CYGNETS OLD BLADE: Perfectly charming. So nice after the heat.

FEMALE ADMIRER: Yes, and really, everything has been delightful.  
CYGNETS OLD BLADE: Couldn't possibly be better. Wonderful how well it can be done.

FEMALE ADMIRER: Yes. But, of course, it wants management. You know a lot comes down from town.  
CYGNETS OLD BLADE: Will the stores send so far?

FEMALE ADMIRER: Yes, and if they wont, others will. And the local tradespeople are very obliging.  
CYGNETS OLD BLADE: But don't the servants rather kick at it?

FEMALE ADMIRER: No, because they are comfortable enough. Put them up in the neighbourhood.  
CYGNETS OLD BLADE: Ah, to be sure. And one's colleagues have been reasonably well-behaved.

FEMALE ADMIRER: Yes, although I thought I saw one 'resting' in a ditch yesterday evening.  
CYGNETS OLD BLADE: (Moving swiftly on) It's awfully nice chatting all day.

FEMALE ADMIRER: Yes, when one doesn't go to sleep.  
CYGNETS OLD BLADE: And, of course, we can fall back upon the circulating libraries and the newspapers.

FEMALE ADMIRER: And so much better than town. It must be absolutely ghastly in Piccadilly.  
CYGNETS OLD BLADE: Yes, so I hear. And then there's the racing!

FEMALE ADMIRER: Ah, to be sure. To tell the truth, I didn't notice that very much. Was there any winning?  
CYGNETS OLD BLADE: Oh, yes, a lot. But I really quite forget what.....

FEMALE ADMIRER: Oh, never mind. We can read about it in tomorrow's papers, and that will be better than bothering about it now.  
CYGNETS OLD BLADE: Absolutely, but it's the umpiring that really makes the race

FEMALE ADMIRER: Oh, really. Do you know much about umpiring?  
CYGNETS OLD BLADE: A little - it's the pink tie and socks of course, they're a bit of a give away ...and so on



SCENE CLOSES TO SOFT MUSIC ON THE BANJO/ FROM PUNCH (WITH SOME AMENDMENTS)

## CYGNET GOES TO HENLEY

The 1920s were a time of great evolution for Civil Service rowing and by the 1930s the powers that be in the Civil Service Rowing Association (CSRA) and the Civil Service Sports Council were keen that the Service should be represented at Henley Royal Regatta. That time finally arrived in 1938 when a Cygnet crew was selected to row under the colours of the CSRA, much to the dismay of some older Cygnet hands who felt Cygnet should have rowed under its own name, since the crew was formed entirely of Cygnet members. However, the lure of special leave and expenses carried the day and fitted well with the government of the day's Get Fit campaign.

As always, there were concerns in the ranks that the crew was not up to standard for such an auspicious event. However, these misgivings were soon laid to rest by 'Thames Cup' class wins at Walton and Chiswick. The opinions of such eminent rowing heavyweights as Jack Beresford (Senior) were also sought: Beresford averred that the crew had trained hard and deserved to row at Henley. The crew made its first formal appearance under CSRA colours at Marlow Regatta on 18<sup>th</sup> June. Some idea of the intensity of the competition can be gained from the fact that there were 28 entries in the Marlow Eights (Thames Cup Class). The CSRA's performance was reportedly unremarkable and the coxswain, A Henry, offered his resignation, but this was rebuffed.

The crew moved to Henley on Sunday, 26<sup>th</sup> June and lodged with Mrs Forman at the Old White Hart, Hart Street (since converted into shops and galleries) at a cost of three and a half guineas per person per week. Evidently, some members of the crew were more taken than others by the atmosphere: 'the Henley course is unique, but the atmosphere of the town is so relaxing that it takes some time to get acclimatised', bewailed the coach.

On the day of the race, the crew had a short outing before taking up their station on Berks, their opponents Eton Excelsior having drawn Bucks. At the start, Eton struck a slightly higher rate but the crews were level until the end of the island, when the CSRA were caught off balance by the usual cross wind. Eton pressed their advantage and by Fawley they had a lead of two lengths. From Remenhan the CSRA closed the gap to a length and a quarter, a disparity that prevailed until the finish. Despite not winning their heat, all agreed that the crew had rowed well, maintained form until the end and looked good for the cameras.

G P Jeffries, Captain of Cygnet at that time, noted in that Cygnet/CSRA was beaten decisively by a very fast crew. While conceding that the crew should have taken up residence at Henley earlier and settled more convincingly to the task in hand, he also noted that experts on the day considered that the conditions gave Eton on the Bucks station an advantage of  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a length - so no change there then!

### CSRA Training Regimen Henley Royal Regatta 27<sup>th</sup> June ~ 2<sup>nd</sup> July, 1938

- Rise at 7.00am; grapefruit
- 3 mile walk broken by short spells of running and skipping
- Cold bath followed by breakfast (no bacon or tea, milk preferred) at 9.00am
- Rowing over the course at 11.00am
- Cold lunch (no potatoes) at 1pm; one pint of beer
- At rest 2.00-4.00pm, sleep if possible
- Rowing over the course at 5.00pm
- Dinner at 7.30pm (no potatoes or starchy stuff); one pint of beer
- Comfortable stroll, bed by 10.30pm

