

Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - January 2017

Boats of the River Thames

At the Wargrave Local History Society's January meeting, the room was full to hear Daniel Wood, who grew up in Wargrave, give a most interesting and enjoyable account of some of his experiences on the River Thames. He began by explaining that it had not been his intention to make his career working afloat! His father had taught his brother and him to row, and his first chance to take control of a craft was in the Scouts, when he could go out in a canoe, and he got to try various other small boats. Like many young people, he had a desire to learn to drive, but was at that stage too young to drive a car - but he could learn to drive a boat. After his time at school, he went to Portsmouth University to study for an Environmental Science degree, following which he worked for a while for Portsmouth City Council.

However, he thought he would like to try something non-academic, and saw an advert in the Maidenhead Advertiser for a boatman - "some boating experience would be helpful". As a result, he has spent the last 20 years as a boatman on the Thames - the upper reaches, the lower reaches, and sometimes in coastal waters.

The job advertised was to work for the owner of Cliveden House, who had two vessels. Suzy Ann was a Naval Officer's launch, which had recently been restored by the local boatyard of Henwood and Dean, whilst the other was Liddesdale, an electric canoe that had once belonged to Nancy Astor. (The latter had now been gifted to the National Trust, and, as it happens, Daniel had been earlier in the day to collect it.). He thought the boat work would last for the summer, and so he took up another ambition, to go to Canada and train as a snow-boarding instructor. As often with such trips, money was in short supply when he returned, but he was able to 'fall back on' things he knew, and on being offered the boat work at Cliveden, took that up again for the summer. For several years this pattern of 6 months in Canada and 6 months on the Thames worked well, but gradually the tasks on the river became longer and more involved and he took on contracts to drive boats for others, so becoming a full time boatman.



For the last 15 years or so, he has been

associated with one particular boat - the Amaryllis. This 50 ft long umpire's launch was built in 1928 by Hobbs boatyard, being formed of carvel planks on a timber frame. The propeller is contained within a tunnel under the hull, which enables it to be reached through a hatch on the rear decking ("not a pleasant experience" though, said Daniel) if necessary. It currently has a 5 litre V8 engine (its third), and was built

for the Cambridge University Boat Club. Although owned by them, it was used for much of the year by Hobbs as a charter vessel, and regattas on the Henley Reach, but was taken down to Putney for the University Boat Race, the journey usually taking Daniel 1½ days. When, in 1996, the boat was in need of major restoration, the University decided it could not afford the work, and so it was bought for a nominal sum by Dr Walter Scott, who then arranged for the work to be done.

On the Henley Reach, the annual Henley Town and Visitor's Regatta, Henley Veteran's Regatta and Henley Royal Regatta all make use of Amaryllis as an umpire's launch. For the last of these, 5 launches are used, the other 4, which belong to the Regatta, all being made of fibre glass using the same mould, which was taken from Amaryllis. By means of time lapse photography, Daniel showed how the umpire's launches were used - races starting at 8am, and sometimes continuing to 8pm, made for long days.

Amaryllis still sees annual use at the University Boat Race, for helping the Cambridge crews prepare, as well as on race day itself. For the 4 days prior to the race, the boat is used to show the cox and crew the landmarks on the course, and where the main flow of the stream is (it varies from year to year), and also to help prevent them being 'pushed around' by their opposition, and then to follow the practising eights with their supporters, so that they can be as close as possible to the crew. Daniel again used time lapse photography (ie a 'speeded up' version) to show these trips. On one occasion, near the race finishing line, the Goldie (Cambridge reserve) crew were aboard, with their cox steering Amaryllis, when it came to a sudden halt, and started to drift. The anchor was put over the side, the cox, crew, coach and Daniel all being mid-stream. Lifting the hatch, Daniel expected to see dark weeds all around the propeller, but instead the whole area was white. It turned out that a builder's 1 ton gravel bag was completely wrapped round the propeller. Daniel had a small knife to cut it up - the crew cheering loudly as each piece was removed. The engine then started well - but the boys were taking a long time to pull up the anchor ("take care not to scratch the paintwork"). The reason soon became apparent - it was trying to lift a discarded mini car back axle from the river bed!

On Race Day, the launches follow the crews, although they do not know which team will be on which side of the river



until just before the actual start. Amaryllis (unlike the other launches) has its rudder over the stern, so care is needed not to get 'left behind' and thus hit by a wave from the other boats, as that could cause the rudder to come up out of the water.

Another traditional event on the Thames is the annual swan upping, which dates back to 1186. Daniel was invited to become a member of the Royal Household in 2014, as one of the Queen's Swan-uppers. It is a task for which no training is given, so he had to "pick it up as he went along". The ceremony takes place during the last week of July (timed so that the adult birds are in moult and the cygnets cannot yet fly) over the 79 miles between Sunbury and Abingdon, the crews staying at Cookham and travelling by coach to each day's start point. Daniel is one of two who row the boat that goes ahead of the brood, others joining bow to stern behind, so that the birds are contained between the boats and the river bank. The swans are

then taken onto the bank to be weighed, measured and their health checked, and the ownership of the cygnets determined (the Queen having the majority).

One particularly special occasion that Daniel took Amaryllis to was the Thames Diamond Jubilee Pageant in 2012. The up-river boats mustered at Teddington and then proceeded down to their buoys on the day before the pageant itself. Apart from these special duties, Daniel specialises in classic boat restoration, filming work on the river, etc

The next meeting will be on Tuesday, February 14th, when Graham Jones will tell us about The Lambourn Valley Railway which had a special kind of traffic from the start - and a different special kind of traffic at the end of its life. That will be followed on Tuesday March 14th by the Society's Annual General Meeting.