

Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - October 2004

The Skiff Racing Association

Patrick Fennessey gave an interesting illustrated talk about the Skiff Racing Association for the Wargrave Local History Society's October meeting.

In the late 18th century and through the 19th three sports developed on the Thames from the activities of the professional waterman, and were taken up enthusiastically by the Victorians. Whilst rowing became a world-wide sport, punt racing and skiff racing did not seem to move successfully from the Thames Valley, and although a 'nursery' for oarsmen and women, remains relatively unknown. By the end of the 19th century, the whole river at events such as Henley Royal Regatta would be covered by boats - some canoes and punts, but mainly skiffs.

The racing skiffs were similar to these pleasure skiffs, but lacked the ornate back and support under the seat. They were clinker built, with a fixed seat and the fixed pins were strung across to prevent the oars rising out - whilst a racing skiff could be used for pleasure boating, the reverse was not true. The London watermen had used wherries to move goods and people. These were wider than a skiff, and built up by adding fairly wide board planks each side of a cut out keel, without a frame. They could run up to the steps or bank, to be loaded at the bows. Competition soon followed - with races such as the Doggett Coat and Badge, begun in 1716, and by the end of the century, gentlemen amateurs also took part in such races, although 'professional' and 'amateur' rowers never competed against each other. Cutter boats were used for these races - the River and Rowing Museum having one from the original, 1829, university boat race.

For the boat to go faster, it needed to be narrower - but the width of the boat was partly determined by the positioning of the oars. This was overcome by having riggers to put the pins on, building the boat narrower, but also longer to give the same displacement. The effect was to radically change the sport between 1840 and 1860, and in several of the larger towns, such as Twickenham, Kingston, Staines and Maidenhead., clubs grew up.

In a way, skiffs became popular due to the coming of the railways. They killed off the carriage of goods on river, but brought people - who needed 'something to do' to the riverside. The skiff was a response to that need, and from the 1860s were available either for individuals to use, or for boatmen to hire out. The Thames village regattas began with such, based on the local boatyards. The Victorians liked to 'organise' these, and formed the 'Amateur Rowing Association' - but anyone who was in 'manual labour' was barred from taking part - the National Amateur Rowing Association was formed later without this restriction. In 1895, the Skiff Club was founded at Ditton - boating looked much as now-a-days - the boats and sculling are the same, only the 'dress' of the cox has changed! It was soon decided to have 'matched skiff' - made of the same wood at the same time by the same person, so that the races would be fairer.

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The activity came to a stop during WW1, but some new clubs were formed soon after, such as Wraysbury and the Thames Valley Skiff Club at Walton., and when regattas resumed after WW2, Wargrave Boating Club was taking part - the Wargrave Chestnuts' of Wyatt, Maidment and van Zwanenburg being noted at the Hampton Court and Dittons Regatta of 1949. Although Wargrave did not compete a lot in the 1960s, it has been resurrected, and is now 'a force on the river' again. - with new boats made in recent times.

Patrick then showed two films - the 1952 punting championships, held just downstream of the Maidenhead railway bridge - which included Hugh van Zwanenburg -- and a recent Thames Ditton Regatta, which featured Carlton Barnard in several shots.
