

# Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - May 2004

## Traditional Boatbuilding on the Thames

Colin Henwood is a boatbuilder, with a yard at Hambleden specialising in building and restoring this type of boat. Some of the design features are peculiar to Thames craft. The skiffs - for example, are very elegant boats that provided for pleasure seekers able to travel from London by the - then - new railway. The boats are very finely built - the sides only about ¼" thick, but about 24 feet long. They evolved from the Thames wherry working boats - the 'Ford Transit' of their day, which were adaptable, with sturdy decking able to carry goods or passengers. They were clinker built, with sawn frames, and designed to be easily propelled by oars or sculls, but due to their broad shape (about a 5 ft beam) would resist sinking too far into the water when loaded. The classic Thames double skiff had a stem shaped to cut easily through the water, but widened out to give it stability, and room (just!) for two people to sit side by side. They were built typically from Honduras mahogany, with English oak for the stem - and often the inside of the boards have the name of the original boat builder pencilled onto them. Other features that Colin showed were cane seating - lightweight, but comfortable - and canvas fenders (which looked good, but were useless as fenders!). Although skiffs are not easy boats to care for, pictures taken at the Wargrave and Shiplake Regatta showed that skiffing was still 'alive and well', with the boats being worked hard.

The punts also evolved from working boats, the ballast punts, which were large box-like craft - some large enough to get a cart into, and often used for ferry crossings. The basic construction is a ladder. Oak or teak was commonly used for the treads (cross pieces), and at the end a 'huff' would tie it all together - and take the impact if the punt was inexpertly landed. Although they appear 'box-like', there is a lot of subtle shaping in a punt. Sadly, the act of punting is seen as something of a 'black art', and so they are not used so much now as they used to be.

The Canadian canoe is probably the simplest form of these beautiful boats, and quite a few survive (in part as being only around 16 ft long, they are easier to store). Many were imported by firms of gentlemen's outfitters in Piccadilly in London. Motorised canoes later became popular - from 1875 electrically powered, but once small petrol engines became available, these became the preferred source. Very few of the early electric canoes survive, although some that had been converted to petrol engines have since been restored to electrical power.

Steam launches were also very much part of the Thames scene - but once the petrol engine became popular, no-one wanted steam power. They too are very elegant and fine boats in the Thames tradition.

Colin then described the *Consuta*, an historic boat built as an umpire's launch in 1896. It was commissioned from Samuel Saunders, of South Stoke, as a launch for the Henley Royal Regatta that would create less wash than the existing boats. Saunders re-thought the

whole hull shape, and used the propellor tunnel to create a hydro-dynamic effect that would keep the boat level at speed, and able to run faster. He also developed a new method to build a light weight hull, with 4 thin layers of mahogany planking stitched together with copper wire (which process he patented). The boat was very light - only about 3 tons for its 50 ft length, and most of the weight was the steam engine, which develops around 100hp. For comparison, a slightly earlier umpire's launch - the *Pierette* - is 45 ft long, has a 75 hp engine, but the effect of the propellor is to cause the bow to rise at speed, which creates lots of wash, and slows her down.

The well known 'slipper' launch was a style invented by the Andrews boatyard at Bourne End, and copied by many others. They are very lightly built, often used to be powered by a Morris 1000 engine. Most of the craftsmanship is in the deck and cockpit - they are a comfortable boat - but much longer (either 25 ft or 30 ft) than is needed for their seating capacity.

Colin ended by showing us some of the boats used by the Atlantic Challenge - an international charity that he supports which helps young people to learn to work together as a crew.

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