

# Wargrave Local History Society

## Latest News - July 2002

### Wargrave and Shiplake Regatta

The *Wargrave & Shiplake Regatta*, was the subject of Peter Symons' presentation to the Wargrave Local History Society's July meeting - 20 years after the Society first heard about this notable village event.

Peter began by explaining that the regatta aims to foster the traditions of traditional boating on the Thames - for the villages of Wargrave and Shiplake in equal measure - as a family event. It is the second largest regatta on the Thames, and has more races in 2 days than the Henley Royal Regatta does in 5 -- though without the budget of the latter!

There was a growth of interest in the Thames in the mid 1800s, when houseboats, skiffs, canoes, punts etc all became popular - particularly on the upper Thames. This gave rise to the first regattas, run by and for the riverside families - at that time the distinction between professional and amateur status was important, and the two groups would not compete against each other - this remaining a feature of the Wargrave and Shiplake Regatta until 1939.

It is not clear when the Wargrave and Shiplake event started - a trophy exists marked Wargrave and Shiplake Regatta 1853, but the first one reported in the *Berkshire Chronicle* was on 28th August 1867 - and that is taken as the starting date for present Regattas. The 7 races (including one for steam yachts) took place from Bolney Island to Wargrave Ferry, and started at 1 pm. By 1888, the races were held from the railway viaduct to Wargrave Lawn, with 15 events on the Saturday, and preliminary races on the Friday. Higgs & Co (as now) printed the programme - which included many still familiar village names such as Hermon and Wyatt. There was the first dongola race - between teams from the Little House, Ash Tree House and the Vicarage - each team being 4 ladies and 4 gentlemen. At this stage, it was known as the Wargrave Regatta, and had the character of an aquatic festival, rather than a serious regatta - with displays of illuminated boats and the riverside houses lit up during the evening.

In the 1900s, Shiplake became more involved - particularly the Shiplake Lock islanders, and the name changed to Wargrave and Shiplake from 1907. The oldest of the challenge cups - the Dongola Grand Challenge - dates from 1908. (Many of the Regatta cups, and examples of programmes from the past 100 years were on display at the meeting). In 1911, a Wargrave Regatta was also held - for "residents for the time-being of the parish of Wargrave and their guests" - as a 'local' event, not competing with the Wargrave and Shiplake. In 1912 the Wargrave was on July 20th, the Wargrave and Shiplake on August 10th and the Wargrave and Shiplake Non-Amateur on August 24th - a busy time.

No regattas took place during the war, but a Wargrave 'Peace Regatta' was held in 1919, and a 2 day event was arranged in 1920. Shiplake was cordially invited to join in 1921, with the event taking on the liabilities, cups and traditions of the old Wargrave and Shiplake Regatta.. The event

flourished through the 20 and 30s, but was again suspended during wartime - by which time the class barriers had also been eroded.

Revived in 1946, - with the added attraction of the greasy pole - Bill Wyatt being probably the only person ever to get to the end! - by 1948 there were 83 races. The Regatta has grown steadily - 240 races in 1985 (with the addition in 1982 of the Thames dongola) to 375 races in 2000, and 409 this year.

Work for the Regatta is a year-round task - planning starting in the previous October, with boat maintenance in the winter, mailing in January and May, contact with suppliers and the Environment Agency from March, clearing the bank from June, and the Regatta itself in August. It is run by 8 officers and a committee of about 17. It is an expensive event to stage - over £36,000 in 2001 ( and rather more this year) paid for by subscriptions, entry fees, gate receipts, etc

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