

# Wargrave Local History Society

## Latest News - January 2013

### Experiences of a Rowing Coach

For the January meeting, Wargrave resident Brian Armstrong came to recount his Experiences of a Rowing Coach. He had been a coach and international manager for the British rowing team - for which British Rowing had given him a Life Time Achievement Award for his contribution to rowing.

He began by explaining that as a teenager he had friends in Cumbria who rowed, although he was into athletics, such as fell running. He would often train by running round the lake whilst his friends rowed on it, but one day in the early 1950s he was asked to get into a boat. He enjoyed it, and has remained with the sport ever since. Various career moves took him to the north-east, to London, and back to the north-east, but each time he was able to find a rowing club, and - back on the Tyne - became club captain and coach to the senior eight. During time at university he coached the university eights - 'a most enjoyable period' as there were no 'prima donnas'. A further career move then brought him to Reading in 1972, and he joined the Wallingford Rowing Club - from that became involved with what is now GB Rowing.

The Amateur Rowing Association (forerunner of GB Rowing) had appointed a Czech - Bob Janousek - as their first full time rowing coach. He was based at Nottingham - but 4 of the athletes from Wallingford were part of that first squad.

Previously, the GB crews for the Olympics had been the fastest crew in the country - coming from the big clubs. It was realised that there were better athletes in some of the boats that were lower placed, and so trials were held to identify the 'real boat movers'. The change was in place in time for the Montreal Olympics of 1976. At the same event, Brian had his first international crew. It was, however, still very much an amateur sport, with rowers and most of the officials still having other full-time jobs. Brian then progressed to become the selector for the British senior men's team in 1983, and the Chief Coach for the 1984 World Championships in Montreal, and then Team Manager for the World Championships in 1985 in Belgium, 1986 in the United Kingdom, and 1987 in Denmark - and these were still as a volunteer. In 1986, he also was Team Manager at his first multi-sport event - the Edinburgh Commonwealth Games - which was rather different to a purely rowing one.

In his earliest years as an international coach, rowers would typically train for 15 hours per week, the team doctor and physiotherapist were volunteers, and there was no physiologist, psychologist or nutritionist. The first full-time Team Manager was when Brian took up the post in 1990, and after the Atlanta Olympics, all the athletes are full time as well, and train for 24 or more hours per week. This is largely possible due to the funding from the Lottery of over £5 million per year. In 1976, the British rowers came back with one silver and one bronze - the result in 2012 was a gold, two silvers and three bronze for the men, three golds for the women, and a further gold in the Paralympics.

Brian then described two particular Olympics - at Seoul in 1988 and Atlanta in 1996. For the former, a training location was needed for several weeks before the games, and a good lake and good hotel were found near Chuncheon city, near the South / North Korean border. They were the first sport to arrive in Korea - and the Koreans laid out the red carpet to welcome them. At a 'civic reception', the local Mayor sat next to Brian, with an interpreter - although once the wine flowed, the Mayor could speak fluent English! Brian was also provided with a personal bodyguard by the host nation. Brian told of the flag raising ceremony as each team entered the Olympic Village, and the showed pictures of himself and the team during the opening ceremony. By the time of the Atlanta Games, his accreditation pass showed him



as a 'Team Leader' - this was the Olympics where Redgrave and Pinsent won the coxless pairs - and the transportation was a nightmare!

After the Beijing Games, few athletes retired, as the 2012 was a 'home' Olympics. Great Britain was the top nation in the World Championships - with 6 medals in Poland in 2009, 11 in New Zealand in 2012, 14 in Slovenia in 2011, and of course at the 2012 Olympics. This has been achieved using the new training base, at Caversham Lake. Brian had started work on that project in 1994 - it was eventually completed in 2006. At a cost of 13 million it provides 7 lanes 2200 metres long, with a boathouse crew rooms, gymnasium, changing rooms and a medical suite etc. A constraint on the development was that - although the area had been a gravel quarry for many years previously, no materials were allowed to be taken on, or off, the site. In the four years up to the 2012 Olympics, both the men and the women would train there daily. And now, there is a new cycle, with rowers from the 2011/12 under 23 teams, preparing for Rio in 2016.

Brian also outlined another project with which he had been involved. Until the 1990s, rowing had largely been something found in private schools,

are rarely in state schools. The idea was to expand, and Project Oarsome set out to link state schools (including the Piggott School in Wargrave) with existing rowing clubs. It has been such a success that an extra 104 state schools are now involved with rowing as a sport.

As a result of his work with international rowing, the British Olympic Association invited Brian to be one of the torch bearers for the 2012 Games, and Brian kindly brought the torch for members to see.

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The next meeting will be on Tuesday, March 12th, when the Society will hold its *Annual General Meeting*, and the programme for the forthcoming year will be announced. The meetings start at 8pm in the Pavilion, on the Recreation Ground. For more information, visit [www.wargravehistory.org.uk](http://www.wargravehistory.org.uk)

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