

Goring Thames Sailing Club 1943 to 2013

And still going strong !

This year GTSC celebrates its 70th Anniversary . We can look back on 70 eventful years and marvel at the contrast between the Club in its present form and its facilities in the early days. One thing remains common to then and now----the love of sailing in good company and a lively social life.

The Launch

The club was launched at a meeting convened in September 1943. However a great deal of preparatory work must have preceded this meeting. The meeting approved a set of detailed rules, and elected Officers and a committee. Even the design for a Burgee was set out in detail and approved. The design is still in use.

The meeting agreed that sailing should take place on Cleeve Reach, with the Sailing Headquarters, courtesy of Mr Brooke, at the Temple, a large house with lawns sweeping down to the river, located just above the weir.

An important role of the new Club was to provide recreational facilities for aircrew from the RAF Stations at Harwell and Benson. The Autumn of 1943 saw considerable if informal sailing activity.

The year 1944 was the first year of programmed weekly racing, from Easter Sunday to the last Sunday in October. The Start and Finish line was at the Temple. This regime continued till 1946. In 1944, the club affiliated to the YRA, predecessor of the RYA, and sailed to its rules.

The earliest races were of two laps of the course leaving all buoys to port. There was a time limit of two hours. Starting was by Sound signals only with a 5 min signal, start signal, and a finishing Gong. The average number of starters varied with the season's weather from 7 to 11 per race.

In 1945 the predominant Classes sailed were the International 14 and the National 12 with a few slower classes such as the Snipe. It was a time of scarcity in this field as in most others.

Later, the Merlin , forerunner of the Merlin – Rocket was successfully introduced. Its tall

high aspect ratio rig was ideally suited to river sailing. Later (after 1946) the Firefly , a strict “One –Design” became popular.

The Swan at Streatley became the Club’s Social Headquarters. Many general meetings, committee meetings and social functions were held there.

The Swan Boathouse provided winter storage for boats and masts, both exclusively made of wood , which could not Winter out of doors. Boats could be sailed down to Streatley, an important advantage as few people had cars or petrol and road trailers were rare.

Setting up House, 1946-1950

There is evidence that, even in 1945 minds were turning towards a headquarters owned or rented by the Club. One of the RAF members, Wing Commander (Buster) Briggs donated £100 (worth today about £1200) to the club to help with the proposed clubhouse in appreciation of the facilities which he and brother officers had enjoyed. (The Telegraph Obituary of Wing Cdr Briggs is appended.)

Mr Scott-Underwood

Throughout the remainder of this note, there is one person who had a dominant influence on events, Mr Scott-Underwood. He served as Commodore for the 15 years from 1947 to 1962. He provided the consistent policy drive that laid the foundation for our on-going Club. He was determined that the Club should own the freehold of the land which we used. Time and again he made generous financial contributions to the Club’s projects.

Setting up house

At the beginning of 1946, a site adjacent to the Leatherne Bottel, (where, nowadays, its Outdoor Dining facilities are located,) was negotiated by Mr Scott-Underwood, the Commodore, with Henley Brewery who then owned the pub. After much negotiation with local authorities and with the Ministry of Works, a wooden building was erected for the Club’s use. Tables, chairs and a marquee were also purchased with important financial contributions from the Brewery and Mr Scott-Underwood

The river frontage of the Leatherne Bottel was inadequate for the number of boats in the Club. Just upstream was a plot of land divided into five sub-plots. Mr S-U rented two of them and made them available to the club.

Membership

The number of members rose rapidly so that by November 1945 there were over 100 members with 25 boats. The Club had several classes of individual membership, sailing, non-sailing and junior with concessions for families. There was also collective membership for such organisations as Colleges and Service Messes. The RAF Messes at Harwell and Benson were members as was the Royal Veterinary College. For individuals, the initial joining fee was half a guinea and there was a similar annual fee. As the facilities grew so did the costs and by 1949 the sailing subscription was £1.50 and the family subscription £3.

As with any organisation involving people, the early Club was not without controversy, for example Commodores resigned. Some favoured the move to the Leatherne Bottel, a few opposed, but the Club moved on.

The Next twenty years : 1950-1970

Freehold

The acquisition by the Club of the Freehold of the present site was by far the most important achievement of this period in the Club's history. The land had at some time been divided into several parcels in separate ownership. (I cannot be sure, but I suspect that it had been in single ownership but was divided amongst the heirs). Three of the parcels were bought by the Club in 1954, 1957 and 1964. The land was held, as it still is, by a Trust, with Trustees nominated by the Club. They are appointed for life and may nominate their successors.

Sunkum Meade

The final and most important parcel known as Sunkum Meade was bought by the Commodore and was made available to the Club. It had an important asset, viz., a handsome dry boat house, ideal for the winter storage of wooden boats. Since 1954, the Club had access to Sunkum Meade on payment of the rates and insurance of the boathouse and normal maintenance of the river frontage. This continued after Mr Scott-Underwood's purchase in 1956. Sunkum Meade had potential to permit a vehicle road access to the site from the lane above, replacing access across the Leatherne Bottel forecourt. It was the Commodore's intention to leave the Freehold of this land to the Club in his Will. However, all did not go smoothly.

The Leatherne Bottel had been owned by Henley Brewery until circa 1965 when it became owner managed. In December 1965, the new owner served notice on the Club to quit the rented area where its Clubhouse stood. The committee considered making a legal challenge but advised by lawyer member Roland Hills, it reluctantly accepted that the costs would be

high and the documentary basis of the 1946 arrangements was such that the Club might not succeed at Law. However, there was a strong case based on use and wont that the Club had right of access across the LB frontage to the neighbouring land for pedestrians, cars and boats. This compromise was accepted by the LB in exchange for our acceptance of the Notice to Quit.

The club house, a temporary wooden building, was moved from The Leatherne Bottel forecourt to the land the Club now owned.

The Commodore took a poor view of this compromise and felt that we should fight. He announced that he no longer wished to bequeath Sunkum Meade to the Club. But, after lengthy negotiations conducted by Jack Hornby, another compromise was reached whereby the Commodore would sell Sunkum Meade to the Club for £650. Contributions from members rapidly made up this sum and even the Commodore himself contributed £100!

In this way, by 1967 the Club owned the Freehold of its present land – a privilege shared by few Clubs round about. This allowed the Club to contemplate building a new club house, (the one we use today) and to provide vehicle access from the lane.

Not as nature made it

To buy the land is one thing, to improve it so that it would serve as a sailing club required much effort and expenditure. In a state of nature, the frontages were similar to, or worse than, the bank opposite today. The water table was high and much draining with land drains and filling in some areas and concreting others, was necessary before the land could become useful. Today we enjoy a steel piled frontage protected by fenders and two slipways. This was only achieved after considerable effort and some trial and some error.

Up until the mid-60's, when Terylene sails were introduced, sails were made of cotton and if not dried after use, mildew would soon reduce them to rags. So, at an early stage, a hut where sails could be hung up to dry was very desirable. This was in due course built and with many patches and props survived until 1990 when it was demolished, to be replaced by the Hornby Building. In the early days, toilet facilities were provided by the LB. To provide them on our own site necessitated both water and provision of a septic tank. This was achieved in 1965 and gave independence from the Leatherne Bottel. Electric power, which today we take for granted, was laid on only when the present club house was built in the early 70's.

All these facilities were provided using a mixture of means – voluntary labour, use of local contractors, and supervision by expert members. Funds were needed both for land purchase and provision of amenities and these came from subscriptions, donations, interest

free or low interest loans from members, and profits from social events. However, the Club is also indebted to both national and local government for a variety of grants and soft loans. The loans were meticulously repaid and the grant conditions carefully adhered to, so that the Club has a good track record.

Social Life

From the Club's inception, there was a lively and varied social life with dinners, cocktail parties and dances. (I attach the Social Calendar for 1978 as an example.) There were also lectures and sailing film shows. All of these, as well as AGMs were performed in outside venues such as The George at Wallingford, The Shillingford Bridge Hotel, self-catered in the Morrel Rooms, less formal social evenings in The Leatherne Bottel and the school hall. Perhaps the most pleasant social evenings occurred in the late 60's when Brigadier Leese was Commodore and later President. He had a large house 'Greycourt', in Manor Road, with interconnecting rooms. With the interconnecting doors open and the carpets lifted, these became a ballroom. The only restraint was that stiletto heels, then fashionable, were banned!

One exception to the 'offsite rule' was the barbeque which was held on site as early as 1957. These were at first very informal affairs aimed at families. Later they became more ambitious. For the 1969 barbeque, a temporary power line was run from a house on the other side of the lane to provide light and power. There was music and dancing and the evening ended with fireworks! The fireworks were later dropped, but the more sophisticated evenings were here to stay. The barbeque became a village event and the profits financed later improvements in our site.

Sailing

In the period to 1950 boats were a scarce commodity and members would sail whatever they could lay their hands on. As well as International 14's and National 12's there were Sharpies and a Snipe and several unpedigreed boats. A tremendous blossoming of new dinghy types then followed with Jack Holt the leading designer. He produced the first design of Merlin intended as a cheaper substitute for the International 14's as well as the GP-14, capable of being built in plywood by a moderately skilled amateur. (several were built by Club Members). The 12 ft. Firefly (and its big brother the Albacore) was built of hot-moulded plywood and was a rival to the National 12. As soon as choice became possible there was a settled policy to restrict the number of classes of boat sailed at the Club. The earliest prescription I can find was:

12' – Firefly and National 12

14' – Merlin and existing but no new International 14's

The next to be introduced from 1957 was the GP-14 which grew into a major class, having its hey-day in the late 60's and early 70's. From 1969, the Solo class was adopted as the Club's single handed choice. For reasons which it is hard to understand, support for the 12' classes, Fireflies and National 12's slowly died away and by 1968, they had disappeared.

Over this period, racing became more formal – declarations were required, class measurement certificates were insisted on, first for the trophy races and then generally: buoyancy tests were mandatory, not surprising when much buoyancy consisted of inflated bags.

From 1950, Club competition centred round the weekly Points racing on a handicap basis, the latter on a class rather than personal basis. With few classes it was possible to gain enough data to have our own PYs relating to sailing on the river and the relationship between the Merlins and the GPs was adjusted from year to year.

There was steady pressure for Class racing which was eventually established as the mainstay of the racing programme. In 1970 there were 20 days class racing, 5 days points (handicap) racing and 4 days pursuit racing. This was in addition to the special events such as the 'President's Bowl'. The Class trophies were awarded on the results of the Class racing series.

The level of participation in Sunday racing varied from year to year. There were just fewer than 8 boats per start in 1963, but 14 in 1965, slipping back to 12 in 1966 due to poor weather. From 1957 there was Wednesday evening racing on a more informal basis, a tradition that has continued to the present day.

The Club's Trophy collection gradually grew with the presentation of the Wilson Trophy in 1962 to be sailed for by GP-14s. In 1968, Brigadier Leese, the Commodore, presented an antique compass to the Club and this is still sailed for.

An important requirement for racing is a 'rescue boat'. At the very least, it is needed to lay the buoys as well as to assist crews in difficulty. It is not possible from the records to determine exactly when or how 'Indiana' came into the Club's possession but for much of this period it fulfilled this role. 'Indiana' was a wooden displacement launch circa 12' long with a tiny inboard Stewart Turner petrol engine. 'Indiana' spent the summer in the river, moored opposite the OOD's box, being too heavy to haul out each week. It was very slow and of doubtful adequacy in spring and autumn conditions. Gradually its reliability

diminished, and the search for a replacement was put in hand.

Epilogue

Over the twenty years from 1950 to 1970 the Club became established in its modern mould. Undoubtedly the key achievement was the acquisition of the Freehold of the land we today occupy. This gave the Club the security of tenure it needed to make the 'leaps in faith' needed to carry forward the Club's development.

In 1970 we leave it in a very healthy state with a flourishing sailing programme, plans for a new rescue launch, and plans for vehicle access direct to our land, and active exploration of the possibilities of a new club house which would serve its social as well as its sailing requirements.

Still going strong!

One of our past members visiting the Club in 2013 would be astounded by the physical improvements we have made - the Clubhouse with a comfortable Bar and Junior Snug, the Hornby building with its garage for the rescue boat, Men's and Ladies' changing rooms with Hot Showers and the Sail Loft for storing Masts and sails, as well as our own Marquee.

Our Club-owned fleet of 18 modern racing dinghies, two handed and single handed, including four Optimists facilitates Training at all levels and is a great asset.

But perhaps the greatest change is in the number of children and young people taking a full part in the sailing life of the club. When I joined the Club in 1968, children crewed for father or stayed at home with Mum. Now we have the Youth Club, Saturday and Sunday morning events, and RYA Training on and offsite to a very high standard. A total of 39 Juniors attended the 2013 Launch Party! This very lively scene is made possible by members willing to give up their time to supervise Youth activities.

I also see many long term members still enjoying their racing, as well as a drink at the Bar and a chat with old friends.

Happy 70th Anniversary

Archie Ferguson

President GTSC