

THE SPORT OF ROWING

To the readers of *www.Rowperfect.co.uk*

This is the second installment on *www.Rowperfect.co.uk* of the latest draft of the beginning of my coming new book. Many thanks again to Rebecca Caroe for making this possible.

Details about me and my book project are available at *www.rowingevolution.com*. For six years I have been researching and writing a four volume comprehensive history of the sport of rowing with particular emphasis on the evolution of technique. In these last months before publication, I am inviting all of you visitors to the British Rowperfect website to review the near-final draft. Your comments, suggestions, corrections, agreements, disagreements, additional sources and illustrations, etc. will be an essential contribution to what has always been intended to be a joint project of the rowing community.

All my contact info is at my website. I will also be at the World Championships next month on Lake Karapiro, and I hope to be at the FISA Coaches' Conference in London in January. Or you can email me anytime at *pmallory@rowingevolution.com*.

For a short time you can still access the first installment. Additional chapters for your review will continue to appear at regular intervals on *www.Rowperfect.co.uk*. As you would expect, the first part of the book deals with rowing in England where the sport began, and that has presented a special challenge for me, a colonial writing at a distance of 8,000 miles from the Mother Country. That is why your various perspectives will make such a difference, so let me thank you all again for your contributions to this book project.

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4. The Migration of Sport Rowing

Oxford and Cambridge – Bumping – The Boat Race – Equipment Evolution

Sport rowing began at Eton as a fortuitous **mutation** of the British upper class perception of the artisan profession of rowing. As Etonians moved on to University and beyond, what began in the shadow of Windsor Castle quickly spread to Oxford on the **River Isis**, to Cambridge on the **River Cam** and on to the **Tideway** in London. This is an example of **migration**,¹⁶³ the third process of population genetics.



Rowe & Pitman

Leander Club at Henley during the late 1890s

Rowing as recreation and soon as competitive sport immediately resonated with English aristocratic culture.

As will be discussed in Chapter 15, the definitive 19th Century text on this era was written by **R.P.P. Rowe** and **C.M. Pitman**: “The discipline to which an oarsman subjects himself is a salutary one, and the patience, self-denial, and endurance which he cultivates are qualities that cannot fail to prove useful to him in any walk of life. From a moral point of view, the need of harmony and self-subordination has no small influence on character. Rowing has taught many a man in a practical way ‘his duty to his neighbor,’ and in the brotherhood of the oar some of our greatest statesmen,

divines, and lawyers have learned lessons to which they owe not a little of their success in after life.”¹⁶⁴

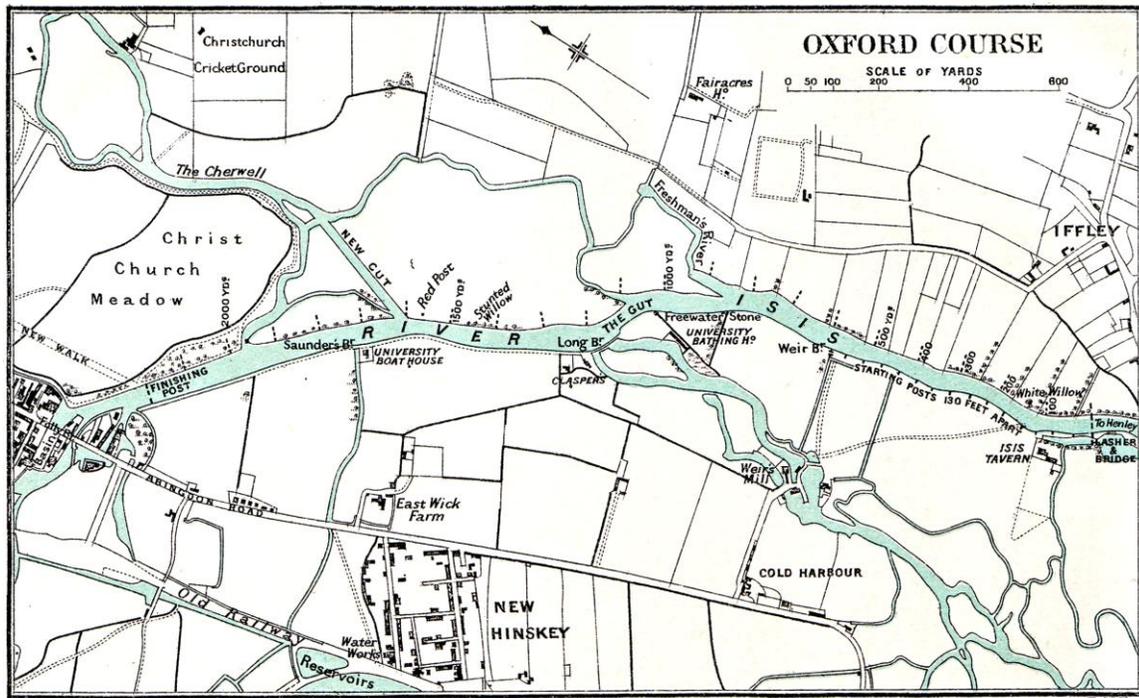
Of all the British rowing clubs which still exist today, the **Brasenose College**¹⁶⁵ **Boat Club** at Oxford is the oldest, founded in 1815. Of clubs not associated with an

¹⁶⁴ Rowe & Pitman, pp. 16-7

¹⁶⁵ one of the twenty-three colleges that made up the University of Oxford in the early 19th Century. There are now forty-four. Purportedly, its name came from a 14th Century bronze door-knocker in the shape of a nose which is now hanging above the high table in the main hall. They row with black blades.

¹⁶³ See Introduction.

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The rowing course on the River Isis at Oxford, c. 1888
Note the “starting posts 130 feet apart” for bumping races at center-right.

academic institution, the one with the longest history is **Leander**¹⁶⁶ **Club**, founded on the Tideway in London, probably around 1818 or 1819, upon the demise of *The Star* and *The Arrow*,¹⁶⁷ two other clubs which had existed at the end of the 18th Century.^{168, 169} In 1897, Leander relocated from London to the village of **Henley-on-Thames**,¹⁷⁰ a number of miles upstream

from Eton, and the club remains there to this day.

World Champion rower, journalist and coach **Daniel Topolski**,¹⁷¹ writing in 1989: “Leander Club, whose members are required to either have rowed for Oxford or Cambridge in the Boat Race¹⁷² or otherwise distinguished themselves in the domestic and international rowing arena. It is probably the most exclusive rowing club in the world, and the members are identifiable by their bright pink club socks, caps and ties, which gave rise to the Club’s irreverent nickname, the Pink Palace.

“However, the Club has for years attempted to dissociate itself from anything pink, and in its handbook it firmly asserts

¹⁶⁶ According to Greek myth, Hero was a priestess of Aphrodite, and Leander would swim across the Hellespont every night to be with her, following the light of a lamp in her tower. One stormy night, the lamp blew out. Leander lost his way and drowned. In grief, Hero threw herself from the tower and died as well.

¹⁶⁷ Lehmann, pp. 7-8

¹⁶⁸ Glendon, p. 24

¹⁶⁹ Burnell, *Swing*, p. 4

¹⁷⁰ See Chapter 5.

¹⁷¹ See Chapter 144.

¹⁷² See discussion below.

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that the true colours of Leander are in fact ‘cerise’¹⁷³

Leander adopted a “cerise” hippopotamus as its official insignia, and wags have suggested the reason was because the hippo “was the only aquatic animal apart from members of Leander which kept its nose permanently in the air.”¹⁷⁴

Rowing at the Universities

At the Universities of **Oxford** and **Cambridge** during the second and third decades of the 19th Century, crews were being formed at the various individual colleges which make up the two Universities. A system of rowing soon evolved that rivaled that of Eton in both its complexity and tradition.

Each year there were two tiers of races between eights¹⁷⁵ representing the various individual colleges. For the less experienced, there were the **Torpids** at Oxford and the **Lents** at Cambridge, both rowed in boats with fixed seats, both held prior to the yearly Easter break. Later in the post-Easter term¹⁷⁶, there were the **Eights** at Oxford and the **Mays** at Cambridge for more experienced crews, rowed using boats with sliding seats after their invention in the 1870s.¹⁷⁷

In the fall of his freshman year, the novice rower would go down to the boathouse of his college, there to be instructed by an

experienced rower in a tub pair for several days.

C.M. Pitman (describing Oxford): “About the end of the second week of the [Michaelmas] term, the freshmen are picked up into fours. These crews, which row in heavy tub-boats, practise for about three weeks for a race, which is rowed during the fifth or sixth week of the term. After a day or two of rest, the best men from these fours are taken out in eights.

“During the last day or two of the term, the captain, with a view to making up his Torpids for the next term, generally tries to arrange one or two crews selected from the best of the freshmen and such of the old hands as are available, and justly proud is a freshman if, having got into a boat for the first time at the beginning of the term, he finds himself among the select few for the first Torpid at the end of it.”¹⁷⁸

Rowe & Pitman: “At the beginning of the [Hilary] term the college crew, or crews, will start regular practice, and gradually those who are to row will be chosen, and their order settled. Strict training will commence from a fortnight to three weeks before the races begin, and thenceforward all members of the crews will have to be in bed and up betimes, to cut off smoking, and to live on wholesome food and drink – with only a limited quantity of the latter. This simple *régime* should prove no great hardship to any but the confirmed smoker, and this the freshman is hardly likely to be as yet, except in imagination.”¹⁷⁹

Pitman: “The Torpids train for about three weeks before the races, which take place at the end of the fourth and fifth weeks in [Hilary] term.”¹⁸⁰

“Most of the college captains devote their time after the Torpids, for the rest of the term, to coaching their men in sliding-

¹⁷³ Topolski, p. 127

¹⁷⁴ Ivry, p. 123

¹⁷⁵ There were also competitions in singles, pairs and coxless-fours.

¹⁷⁶ The Oxford academic year is divided into three terms, the **Michaelmas** term from October to December, the **Hilary** term from January to March and the **Trinity** term from April to June. At Cambridge, the terms are called **Michaelmas**, **Lent** and **Easter**. All names refer to Christian holidays. The April-to-June term is sometimes referred to as the **summer** term.

¹⁷⁷ See Chapter 8.

¹⁷⁸ C.M. Pitman, *Isthmian Rowing*, pp. 197-8

¹⁷⁹ Rowe & Pitman, p. 165

¹⁸⁰ C.M. Pitman, *Isthmian Rowing*, p. 199

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seat tubs, the time at the beginning of the summer term being so short that it is absolutely necessary to get the men who have been rowing on fixed seats in the Torpids thoroughly accustomed to slides by the end of the Lent term, and also to have the composition of the next term's eight as nearly as possible settled.

"It is the custom at most colleges to make the eight come into residence about a week before the end of the [Easter] vacation.

"The Eights are rowed at the end of the fourth week and at the beginning of the fifth week in term, six nights in all."¹⁸¹

Bumping

The format of the Torpids, Lents, Eights and Mays races held every year at the Universities is unique. "**Bumping**," as it is called, goes back to the very beginnings of recreational rowing on the Isis and the Cam.

Rowe & Pitman: "In each case, the narrowness of the river and the large number of crews competing make it almost impossible for the racing to take place in any other way."¹⁸²

Eton rowing historians, **Byrne & Churchill:** "Eton was not alone in its love of processions, for Oxford at **Commemoration** and Cambridge at **Commencement** were doing much the same thing. Naturally enough, these processions were not always sedate, and boats used frequently to challenge and chase each other. This practice no



Frank Dadd, Woodgate

Smoking is Forbidden!

doubt gave rise to what was then known as a Bumping race."¹⁸³

Dean Merivale, a member of the Cambridge crew in the first ever race against Oxford in 1829: "In the summer of 1826, just before I came into residence at **Cambridge**, there were only two eight-oars on our water, a Trinity boat and a Johnian,¹⁸⁴ and the only ideas of encounter they had was that each should go, as it were casually, downstream and lie in wait, one of them, I believe, sounding a bugle to intimate its whereabouts, when the other coming up would give chase with as much animation as might be expected when there were no patrons of the sport or spectators of the race."¹⁸⁵

Byrne & Churchill: [At Oxford,] "it was the custom with early eights to row down to Sandford [about three miles, five kilometers] and then return through Iffley Lock. The boats were large ones, with a

¹⁸³ Byrne & Churchill, p. 116

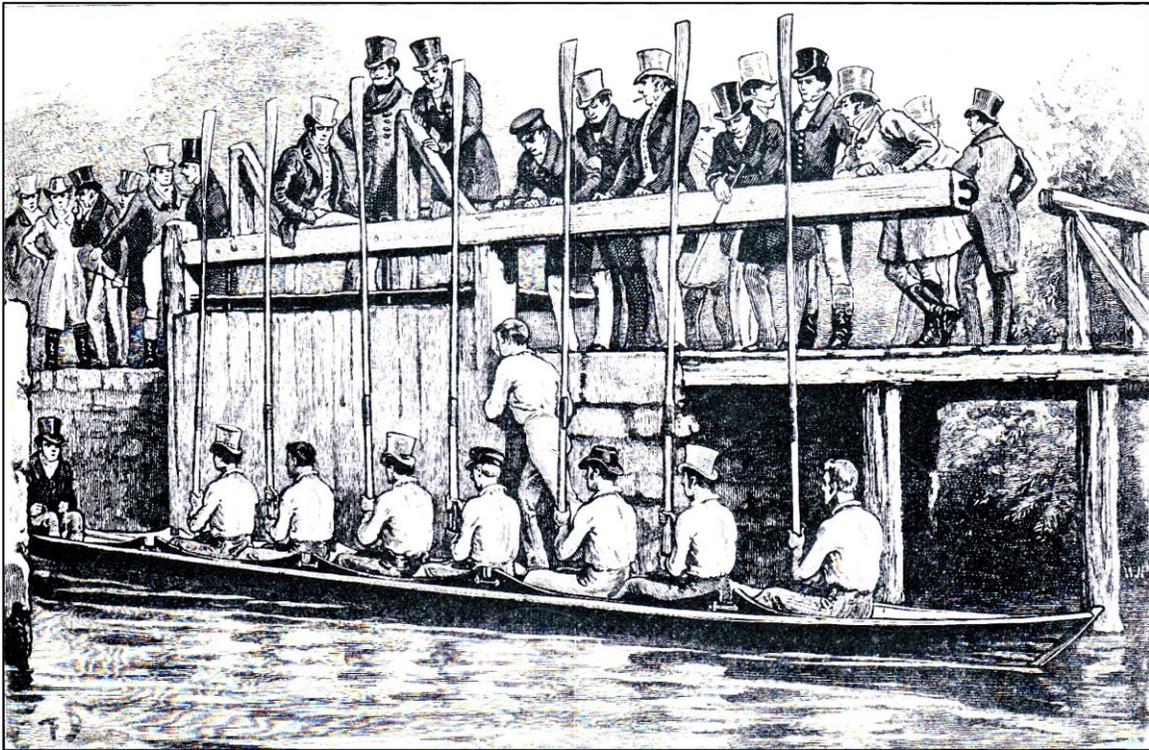
¹⁸⁴ **Trinity College** and **St. John's College**, two more of the colleges that make up Cambridge University.

¹⁸⁵ Byrne & Churchill, p. 210, Lehmann, pp. 4-5

¹⁸¹ C.M. Pitman, *Isthmian Rowing*, p. 199

¹⁸² Rowe & Pitman, p. 168

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Frank Dadd, Woodgate, Rowe & Pitman

“Out of Iffley Lock” prior to 1825

“When the lock gates opened, the stroke of the head boat who was standing in the bow with a boathook ran down the boat along the plank and pushed her out of the lock as quickly as possible.” - Byrne & Churchill

gangplank running across the seats down the middle of the boat. When the lock gates opened, the stroke of the head boat who was standing in the bow with a boathook ran down the boat along the plank and pushed her out of the lock as quickly as possible, immediately taking his seat and rowing. The first boat was followed as quickly as possible by the second, and that by the third, and thus the race was started.”¹⁸⁶

“As the lock gates opened, the first crew out would race away and try to get to their clubhouse [two kilometers away] before the other crews caught them.”¹⁸⁷

A crew behind would win if it could catch up with the crew ahead, and the crew ahead would win if they reached their destination or if the crew behind finally gave up. With no definite finish line, the race would last as long as both crews persisted. If the leader was caught, it could be over quite quickly. This put a premium on initial speed and encouraged a “fly-and-die” strategy to surprise and/or demoralize your opponent.

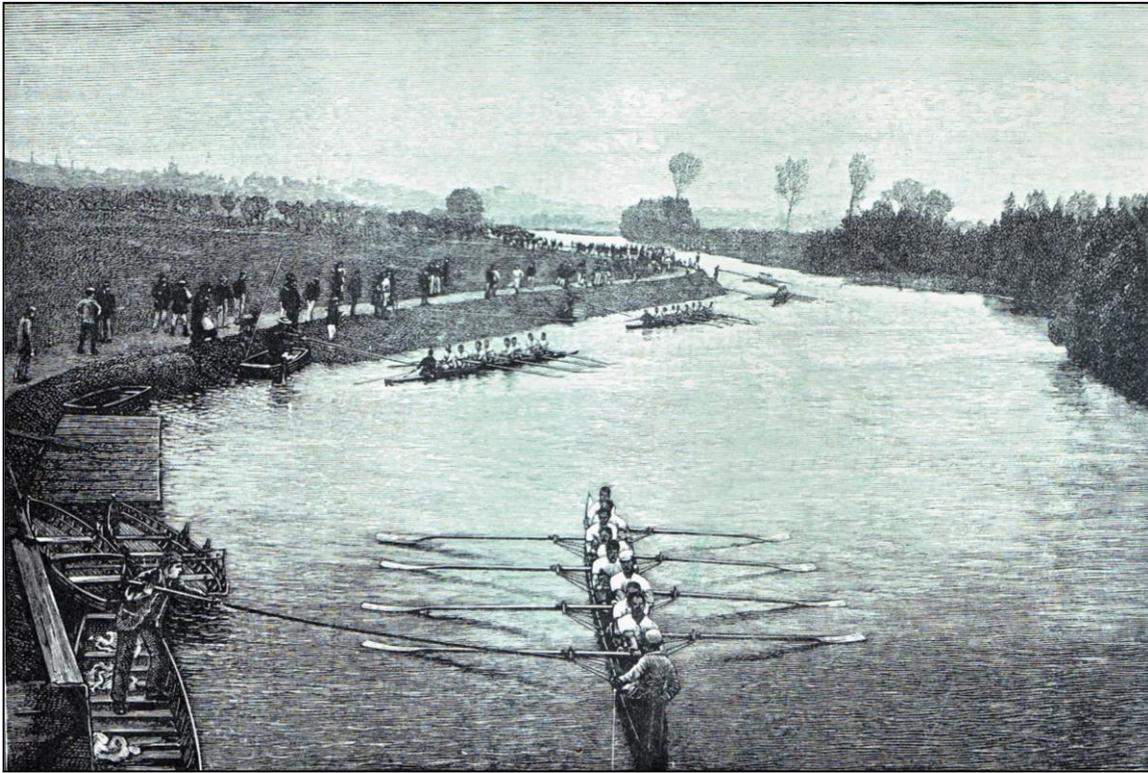
These encounters were soon organized and codified at both Oxford and Cambridge. In order to be sure that a crew had indeed caught up to its opponent in front, it was required to actually make contact or “bump” the stern of its adversary with its bow.

As the number of boats increased, the annual end-of-winter and end-of-spring rac-

¹⁸⁶ Byrne & Churchill, p. 207

¹⁸⁷ Porter, p. 18

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Frank Dadd, Woodgate

“Bumping Race – Waiting for the Gun” along the River Isis at Oxford.
See map earlier in the chapter.

es at both Universities were organized as multiple-boat bumping regattas held over four to six days with all crews positioned at equal intervals along the river and starting simultaneously on a gunshot command. If one crew succeeded in bumping the crew ahead, the two would exchange places for the next session.

Rowe & Pitman: “The races have to be rowed each evening in separate divisions, each division containing some dozen or more crews. These crews are stationed one behind the other at regular intervals, each one thus having its own starting post. In the Torpids at Oxford, these posts are 160 feet apart, in the Lents at Cambridge 175 feet.”¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁸ The distances were reduced for the Eights and Mays after the Easter break.

The actual distance between the nose of one boat and the stern of the one in front of it is, therefore, about a length and three-quarters in one case, over two lengths in the other.

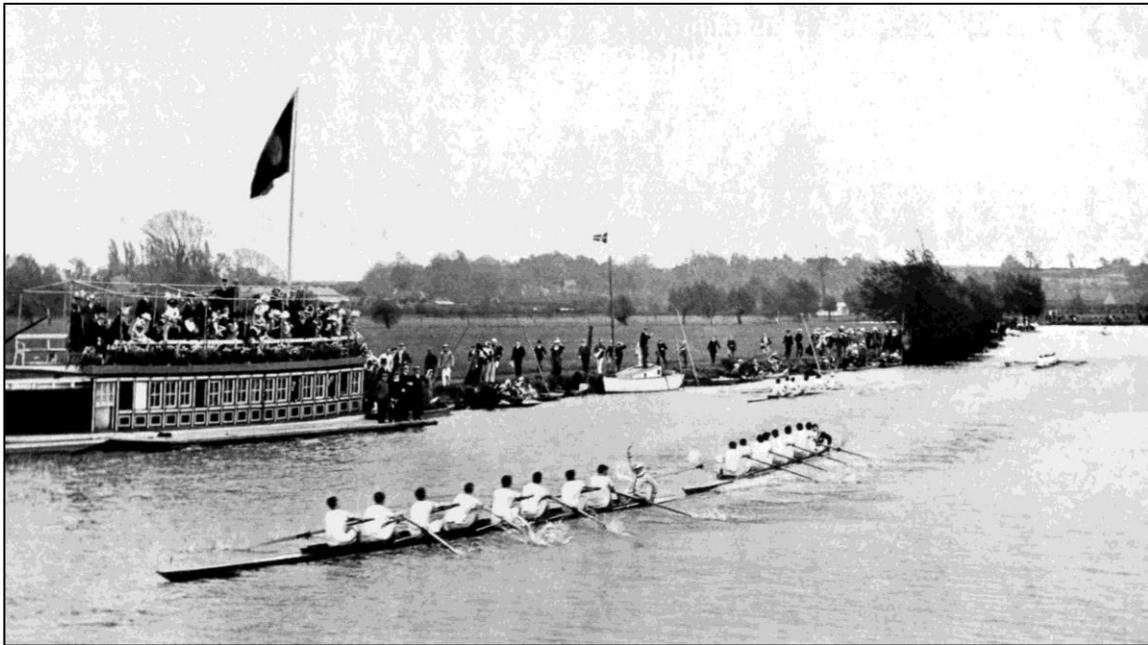
“At Cambridge the head boat has about a mile and a half to row to the finishing post, at Oxford a bare mile. In both cases, the race is upstream.”¹⁸⁹

Pitman: “A hundred and sixty feet is a considerable distance to make up in about three-quarters of a mile, and at the head of a division a crew must be about fifteen seconds faster over the course to make certain of a bump.”¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁹ Rowe & Pitman, pp. 168-9

¹⁹⁰ C.M. Pitman, *Isthmian Rowing*, p. 199

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Lehmann

Bumping at Oxford

The crew that had bumped its way to the head of the line by the end of the regatta was declared “Head of the River.”¹⁹¹

For Americans having trouble grasping the concept, the British branch of Metro Goldwyn Mayer accurately portrayed a bumping race in the 1938 film, *A Yank at Oxford*, starring Robert Taylor, Maureen O’Sullivan and newcomer Vivian Leigh.

The Brasenose College Boat Club Book of 1837 records bumping races at Oxford beginning in 1822.¹⁹²

Former Eton River Master **Frank Grenfell**: “Bumping races were a way of racing a large number of boats simultaneously, or at

least in rapid succession with several divisions, and actually made it possible to finish a contest between large numbers of boats (say fifty) within a reasonably short time. It may be that Bumps were used for that reason, even when side-by-side races was also possible. Now, of course, bumps linger as a kind of historical curiosity, but they served a very useful purpose in the past.

“I have always believed that bumping races first evolved at **Eton** (of course) and were then carried to Oxford and Cambridge by Eton boys.”¹⁹³

In 1897, *Isthmian Library*¹⁹⁴ rowing author **W.E. Crum** had a different perspective. He decried the only recent arrival of bumping races at Eton. “In the last few years, another race has been established for the Lower Boats, but it has not met with the approval of many Old Etonians. It is a bump-

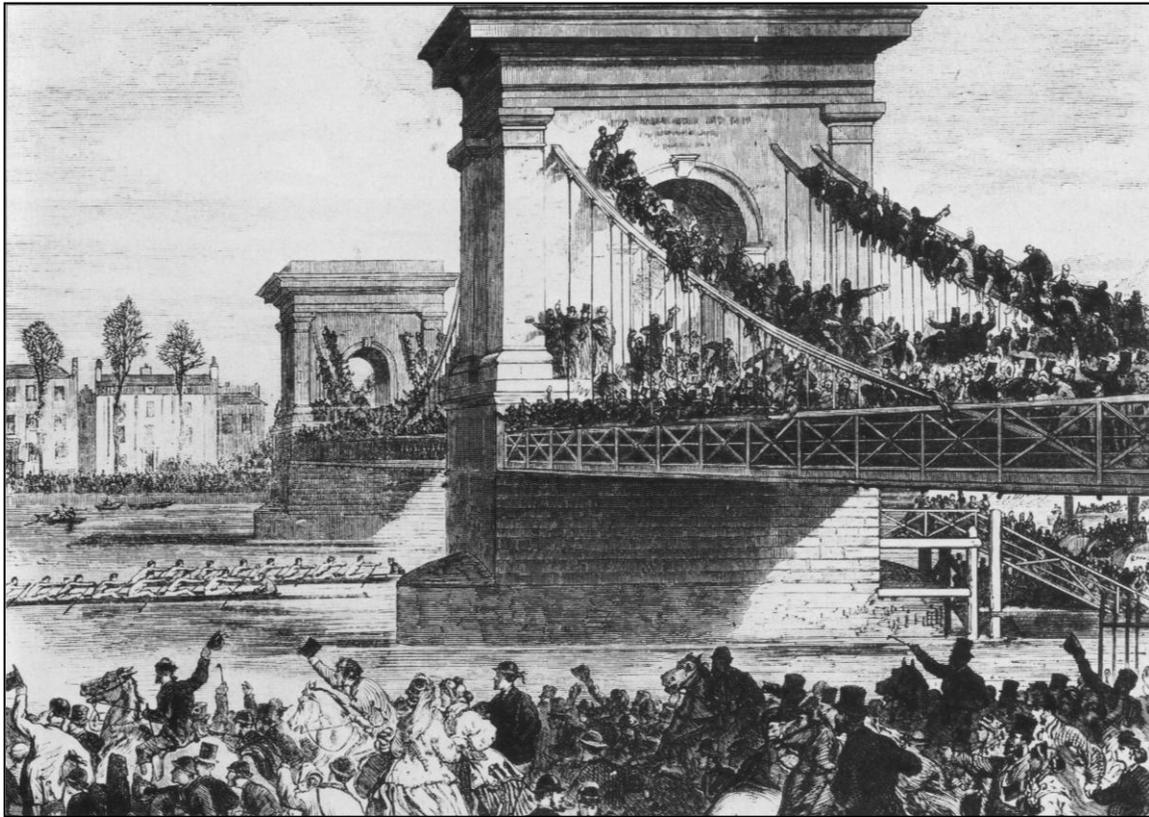
¹⁹¹ Modern head races such as the **Head of the River** in London, the **Silverskiff** in Torino, Italy and the **Head of the Charles** in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where crews row consecutively over a set course at intervals and are ranked by elapsed time over the course only became practical with the advent of modern communication and chronometry.

¹⁹² Burnell, *Swing*, p.4

¹⁹³ Grenfell, personal correspondence, 2008

¹⁹⁴ See Chapter 16.

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Dodd, *Oxford Cambridge Boat Race*

1866 Boat Race clearing Hammersmith Bridge

ing race, similar to those at Oxford and Cambridge.

“Opponents of the measure object that a bumping race is the very worst that can be rowed. It is necessary at the Universities, on account of the narrowness of the rivers, to hold these races, for two boats cannot race abreast; but they must tend to make crews rush and hurry for two or three minutes, and then try to get home as best as they can.”¹⁹⁵

Today, as University rowing in England enters its third century, bumping races still go on twice a year at Oxford and at Cambridge and are still a very big social and athletic endeavor for the college crews.

¹⁹⁵ W.E. Crum, *Rowing at Eton College*, Chapter XIV of *Isthmian Rowing*, p. 243

The Battle of the Blues

The now annual rowing competition between a boat made up of the best eight rowers of the various colleges at Oxford and their counterparts at Cambridge is referred to simply as **the Boat Race**.

The crews that represent their Universities in the Boat Race are called the Oxford and Cambridge **Blue Boats**. Participants in the Boat Race are said to “have gotten their Blue.”

Rowe & Pitman: “Throughout the October term at both Universities the President of the University Boat Club is very busy with the selection and arrangement of the **Trial eights** [a tradition that comes directly from Eton]. These two crews, when finally

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International News Photo, Thomas E. Weil Collection

“Oxonians Defeat Cantabs” [shown approaching the finish line]

March 31, 1937 – “In the slowest time on record, the Oxford Crew is shown leading its traditional rival, Cambridge, home in the annual Boat Race classic on the Thames. This was Oxford’s first victory in fourteen years. The margin of victory was three lengths.”

made up, contain the sixteen men from whom – after adding the President himself and one or two old blues whom it may not be thought necessary to row in Trials – the Varsity eight is itself chosen in the following term.”¹⁹⁶

Author **Stephen Kiesling**¹⁹⁷: “The original Oxford-Cambridge Boat Race, in June, 1829, marked the beginning of the second intercollegiate sport. The first was cricket,

which Oxford and Cambridge had begun playing some years before, and, in fact, it was a member of the Cambridge Cricket Club who challenged a friend at Oxford to gather a crew and race on a twisting course at Henley-on-Thames.”¹⁹⁸

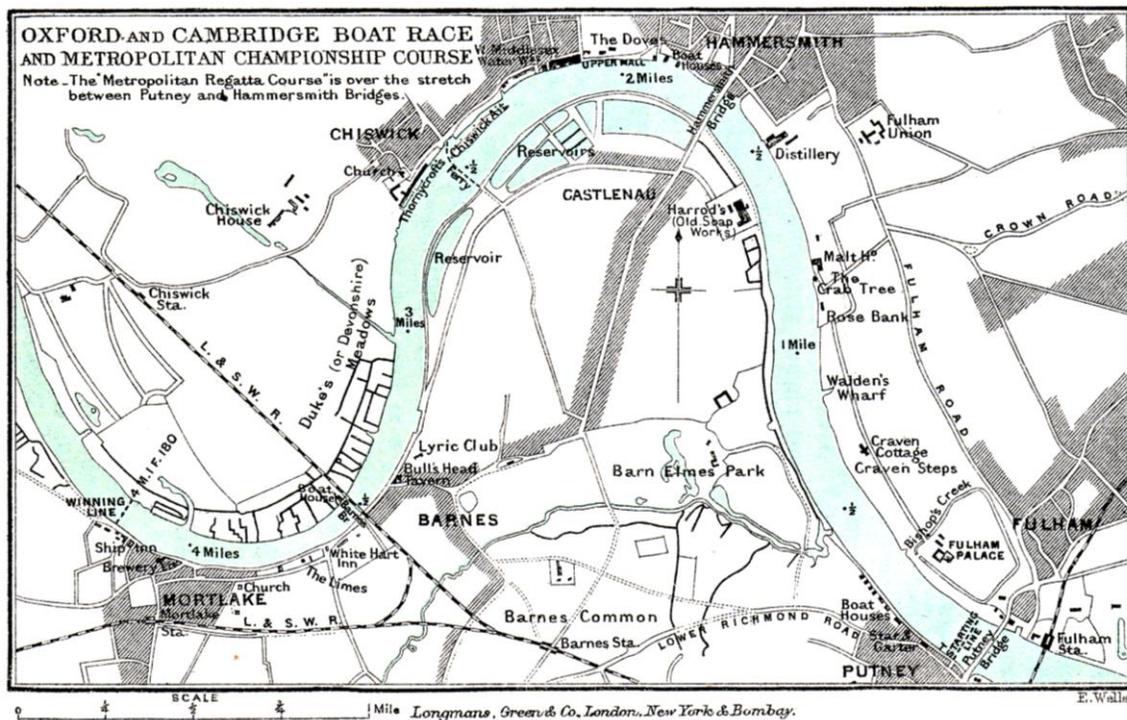
That first Boat Race had three Etonians in the Cambridge boat and three Westminster grads and one Etonian in the Oxford boat. Between 1829 and 1862, “slightly

¹⁹⁶ Rowe & Pitman, p. 177

¹⁹⁷ See Chapter 139.

¹⁹⁸ Stephen Kiesling, p. 85

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The Boat Race Course, from Putney to Mortlake on the Thames in London, 4m., 1 furlong, 154yds.

over five Etonians rowed on average in each pair of University crews.”¹⁹⁹

Charles Luckman: “The influence of both Eton and Westminster on Oxford and Cambridge rowing and thence eventually to London and Thames Rowing Clubs was huge. I believe the Cambridge crew in the first Boat Race rowed in pink, borrowed from Westminster.”²⁰⁰

Rowe & Pitman: “This large proportion of Etonians in a University eight is after all only natural, for years of teaching and practice at the best nursery of rowing in England have their value, and give the Eton eightman a long start on the freshman, who has all his rowing to learn.”²⁰¹

BBC documentary *The Thames*: “The annual ‘Battle of the Blues’ between Oxford and Cambridge Universities was from Victorian times the one major rowing event that attracted a national following.”²⁰²

Etonian, Olympic Champion, rowing journalist and historian, **Richard Burnell:**²⁰³ “My theory is that the Oxford and Cambridge Boat Race became so popular so quickly because it got a sort of head start on all the other major sporting events. Rowing, you see, became quite a popular amateur sport long before cricket and football and tennis and things like that were, and also after the first one took place at Henley, all the rest took place in the middle of London, and it was the first *big* public sporting event for which there was no charge to go in, so the ordinary every-day people all over Lon-

¹⁹⁹ Byrne & Churchill, p. 180

²⁰⁰ Luckman, personal correspondence, 2010

²⁰¹ Rowe & Pitman, p. 179

²⁰² *The Thames*, BBC, 1988

²⁰³ See Chapter 17.

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don regarded it as a day out and flocked down to the river.

“So really the Boat Race had become more or less a national institution before other things like the Cup Final [football, aka soccer] and the test matches [cricket] had really got going at all.

“As a Blue, it sets you up for life the way that no other event does. People rarely ask, ‘Did you ever row for the Admiral?’ ‘Did you row for Great Britain?’ but they do say, ‘Did you ever row for Oxford or Cambridge?’”²⁰⁴

In 1856, the Boat Race found its permanent home on the 4 miles 374 yards or 6,779m of Thames River Tideway from the University Stone in **Putney** upstream to the University Post in **Mortlake**, about ten miles or fifteen kilometers southwest of the Center of London. It is a rowing venue like no other in the world.

It begins just downstream of a row of boathouses on the Putney embankment. “On the North bank, opposite, are the steps of Fulham Wall, near Fulham Palace, the former home of the Bishops of London. Coxswains use the steps to measure the height of the tide and to determine how much water is flowing over the shoals and sandbars along the course. A good coxswain can also look at the gray of the water and tell where the tidal current is strongest.

“The Boat Race is started when the incoming tide is at its fastest, and if the wind is calm, the stream of the tidal current, barely the width of two eight-oared shells rowing abreast, is an extra push worth as many as ten boat lengths over the course. Race Day, however, is seldom calm. Driven by the westerly winds of late March, the Tideway usually becomes a sea of rollers rebounding in random patterns from Fulham Wall. If the wind shifts to northwesterly, directly against the tide, the rollers break

into white horses capable of swamping a shell.”²⁰⁵

The **Light Blues** are the Cantabridgians or “Cantabs” representing the Cambridge University Boat Club (C.U.B.C.), and the **Dark Blues** are Oxonians representing the Oxford University Boat Club (O.U.B.C.).

Not surprisingly, the origin of the University colors also goes back to Eton.

Eton Blue

Beginning no later than the early 19th Century, Eton sportsmen took to the river and the cricket field against other opponents dressed in what has come to be known as **Eton blue**.

At the very first appearance of an Eton boat in outside competition against Westminster in Putney on July 27, 1829, “the Etonians pulled up to the bridge in broad blue-striped Guernsey frocks and dark straw hats, with blue ribbon – true sailor fashion.”²⁰⁶

Eton blue²⁰⁷ is a light aquamarine coincidentally resembling “celeste,”²⁰⁸ the traditional color of 20th Century Bianchi racing bicycles.

In 1836, a similar color was also adopted by Cambridge University rowers. The story first appeared in 1883 in the *Record of the University Boat Race 1829-1888 and the Commemoration Dinner 1881*, by **G.G.T. Treherne** and **J.H.D. Goldie**:

“In 1836, the Oxford crew again rowed in white and blue striped jerseys, Cambridge wearing **light blue** for the first time. An amusing, and for all we know authentic sto-

²⁰⁴ Burnell, *The Thames*, BBC, 1988

²⁰⁵ Stephen Kiesling, p. 86

²⁰⁶ *Bell's Life*, qtd. by Bryne, p. 9

²⁰⁷ “The traditional colour is between 12 B 17 and 12 B 19 on British Standard BS5252.” per www.etoncollege.com

²⁰⁸ meaning a “celestial” light blue.

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ry will be found at pp. 134 and 135 [of Treherne & Goldie] . . . as to the origin of **light blue** being chosen as the colour of the C.U.B.C. The fact that **light blue** was then worn is sufficiently proved by the following letter from the Rev. Augustus K.B. Granville, the [1836] Cambridge President, and stroke of the year:

“St Edmund’s Vicarage, Durham: April 10 1882

“There can be no doubt that we rowed in 1836 in ‘**light blue**.’ The ribbon I wore has until quite lately been preserved by Mrs. Granville, and it has unfortunately been mislaid. We have all along trimmed our boys’ jerseys with the same colour, and do so still with few exceptions.”²⁰⁹

The above-mentioned reference to page 134 and 135 of Treherne & Goldie reads:

“It was in 1836 that Cambridge first adopted **light blue**, and that, so it seems, rather by hazard. They were on the point of pushing off from Searle’s²¹⁰ at Westminster, when somebody remarked that the boat had no colour in the bow. One person suggested one colour, and another. At the last moment the late Mr. **R.N. Phillips**, of Christ’s,²¹¹ a well-known oarsman in those days, ran over to a haberdasher’s close by, and asked for a piece of **Eton blue** ribbon or silk. This was produced, and the crew adopted it *con amore*. Since those days, Cambridge has stuck to **light blue**; while Oxford for the

sake of contrast, have rather deepened their shade of the same colour.”²¹²

Frank Grenfell: “*The Eton Book of the River* (p. 136) records that **Edmond S. Stanley**, [Eton] Captain of the Boats in 1835 and 3 for Cambridge in the 1836 race against Oxford, may have proposed **light blue** (sic) for the boat just before the start. R.N. Phillips was neither an old Etonian nor a member of the Cambridge crew.”²¹³

wc.rootsweb.ancestry.com: “A dispute has lasted for many years as to whether responsibility for the choice of colour rested with a man named Phillips who landed and bought the ribbon, or with Edmond, the only Old Etonian in the boat, who asked him to buy light blue ribbon.”²¹⁴

Grenfell: “On page 137 of the *Commemoration Dinner*, the record of the 1838 race also refers to the 1836 colours: ‘Cambridge had now taken to the **light-blue** colour, which had been so fortuitously introduced to them at the last minute by Mr. R.N. Phillips in 1836.’

“Of these nine references above, only one is to ‘Eton blue.’ The rest are to ‘light blue.’

“The first appearance of the phrase ‘Eton blue’ that I can find: *The Times* of 5 June 1856, records the costume of Victory in the Procession of Boats the previous day as:

Blue and white striped shirt, straw hat, Eton blue riband silver edged, and ‘Victory’ in silver, Eton blue silk necktie and belt.

“I suggest that the best explanation of the facts above is that the name ‘Eton blue’ originated at Eton in the 1850s. If it were in use earlier, and if R.N. Phillips really did ask for ‘a piece of Eton blue ribbon’ in 1836, it is barely credible that the phrase did

²⁰⁹ Treherne & Goldie, p. 126

²¹⁰ The Searle family of professional watermen had a number of business establishments up and down the Thames for the construction, maintenance and rental of rowing craft. The signs on their buildings can be clearly seen in 19th Century photos of the waterfronts of London, Eton/Windsor and Henley.

²¹¹ **Christ’s College**, one of the nineteen colleges that made up the University of Cambridge in the early 19th Century. There are now thirty-one colleges at Cambridge.

²¹² Treherne & Goldie, p. 135

²¹³ Grenfell, personal correspondence, 2008

²¹⁴ *wc.rootsweb.ancestry.com*

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not appear in print outside Eton for another twenty or more years.”²¹⁵

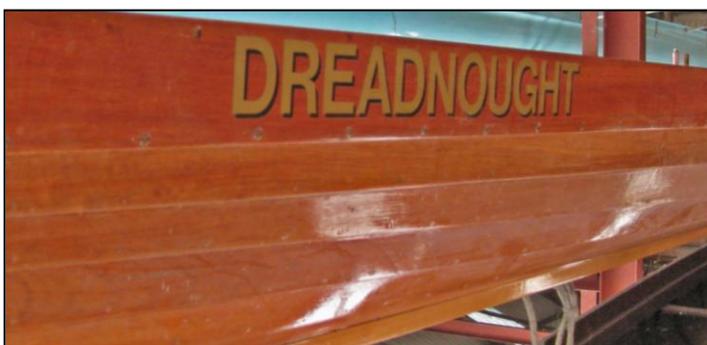
Nevertheless, for more than a century now Cambridge has been known as the **Light Blues** and Oxford the **Dark Blues**.

gunwales.²¹⁷ Originally developed for commerce, not competition, these boats had a central gangway with rowers sitting on either side on benches set well above their foot rests. With their **lap-strake**²¹⁸ hulls and **external keels**, to the modern eye they



Author

A thole pin mounted on a metal outrigger



Author

Lap-strake or Clinker Construction
(An Eton College Procession boat)

Equipment

Rowing boats initially available to public school, college and club crews in the early days of the 19th Century were heavy, sturdy craft with bench seats and oars pivoting against **thole**²¹⁶ **pins** mounted directly on the

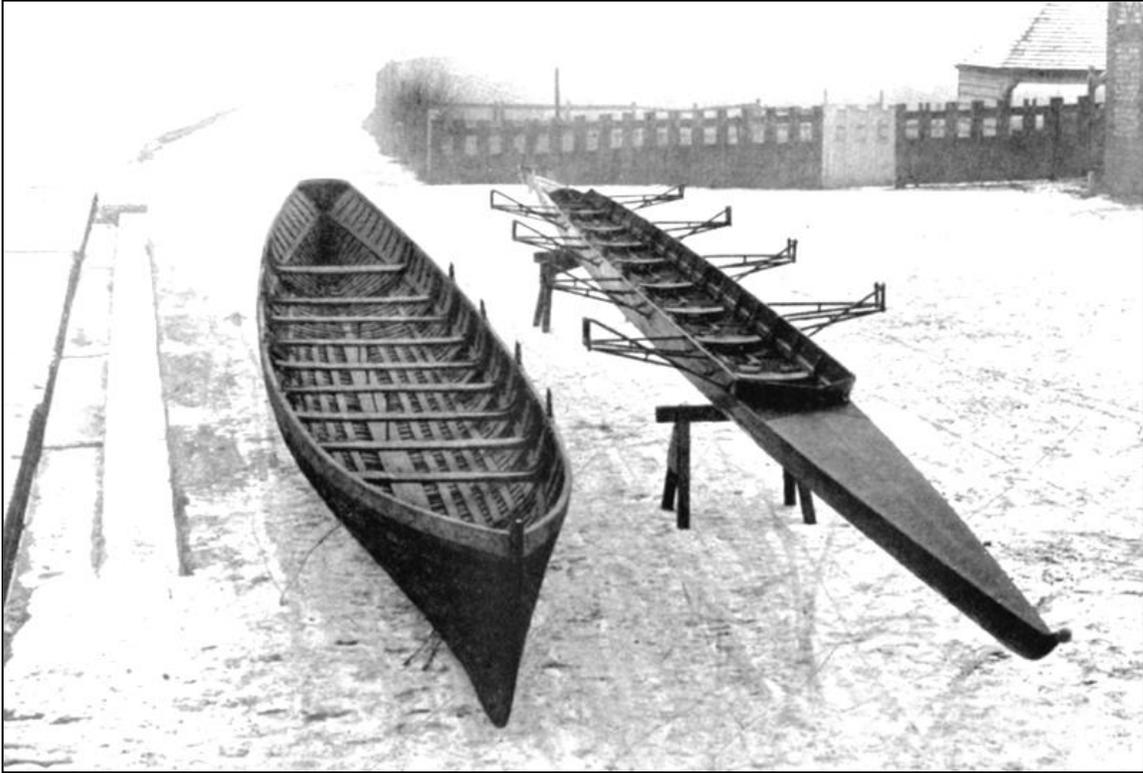
²¹⁷ pronounced “gunnel” on both sides of the Atlantic.

²¹⁸ Also called **clincher** or **clinker-built**. The lower edge of each hull timber or plank was riveted with copper “clinch nails” to the upper edge of the plank below it in an overlapping manner. The alternative was **caravel** or **carvel** build, from the caravels of Southern Europe, where the planks were layed flush to one another and made watertight by close jointing and varnish. See Woodgate, p. 143, Bryne & Churchill, p. 205.

²¹⁵ Grenfell, personal correspondence, 2008

²¹⁶ rhymes with “whole.”

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Gillman & Co., Oxford

Left: The original **1829 Oxford Boat Race eight**, 972 lb., bench seats and thole pins on gunwales.
Right: A **1929 Oxford eight**, 350 lb., sliding seats and thole pins mounted on outriggers.

looked very much like a lifeboat off the *Titanic* or a cutter launched from the deck of the *Pequod* in pursuit of Moby Dick.

It didn't take long at all for the competitive crews to begin to demand from boat-builders boats with improvements in speed, reduced weight and drag through the water, and every year became nothing less than a technological arms race.

Byrne & Churchill: "After experiments, not only with a ten-oar but also with a twelve, it was found that with the slow boats and the short, rapid stroke of those days, crews with more than eight oars were unable to clear their own wash."^{219,220} Ac-

²¹⁹ Having to place one's oar into the puddle or disturbance left by the previous stroke was inefficient, uncomfortable and increased the likely

occurrence of "catching a crab," being unable to extract one's blade at the end of the pull-through, often with catastrophic consequences.²²¹

Other innovations came thick and fast: **elimination of the central gangway** and **removal of the upper strakes** in the

occurrence of "catching a crab," being unable to extract one's blade at the end of the pull-through, often with catastrophic consequences.

An old waterman's term, "catching a crab" was already well established in 1851 when it was used by Herman Melville in *Moby Dick*, Chapter 81. "He would have proved the victor in this race, had not a righteous judgment descended upon him in a crab which caught the blade of his midship oarsman. While this clumsy lubber was striving to free his whiteash . . ."

²²⁰ Byrne & Churchill, p. 211

²²¹ Burnell, *Swing*, p. 5

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1830s,²²² and in the early 1840s the invention of **outriggers** eliminating the need to support the thole pins directly on the gunwales.²²³

“Instead of being built as short and broad as possible, with sides ‘flared’ – that is, sloped outwards so as to allow a maximum leverage to the oarsman – boats could be built with upright sides, as narrow as would hold the crew and as long as desirable for flotation.”²²⁴

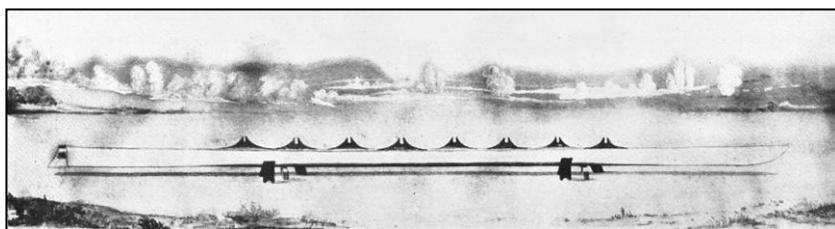
Prior to outriggers, **oars** “were of varying lengths because in the inrigged boats of

longest at 4 was 15ft. 3½in. overall, buttoned at 4ft. 2½in.”^{226,227}

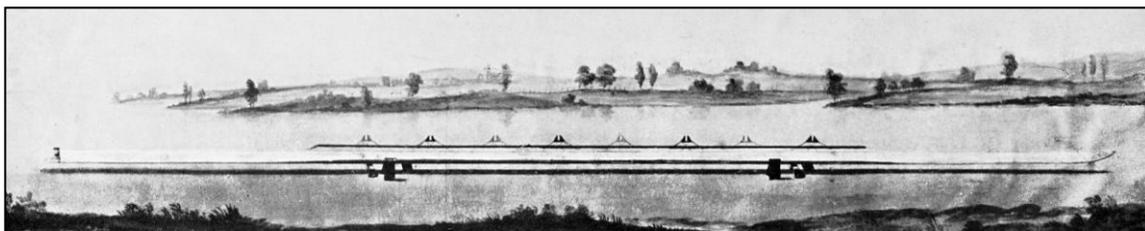
Shells

Towards the end of the 1850s came smooth skins and internal keels.²²⁸ Boats with these innovations were called **shells**.²²⁹

“The clinker-built boat goes through the water steadily but comparatively slowly. The smooth-skinned hull moves faster but is liable to roll. Unless this difference between clinker-built and carvel-built is thoroughly



The Etonian, 1843, thole pins mounted on the gunwales.



Byrne & Churchill

The Etonian, 1847, thole pins mounted on outriggers. (Illustrations reproduced at same scale.)

Introduction of **outriggers** led immediately to longer, shallower, thinner hulls.

those days, the leverage varied with the width of the boat at each thwart.²²⁵ [In the case of the 1829 Oxford boat shown on the previous page] the shortest at bow was 13ft. 6in. overall, buttoned at 3ft. 7in., and the

grasped, it is difficult to understand why the introduction of smooth-skinned boats came so late.”²³⁰

²²² Rowe & Pitman, p. 14

²²³ Lehmann, p. 21

²²⁴ Byrne & Churchill, p. 214

²²⁵ seat

²²⁶ 411.5 cm, 109 cm inboard versus 466 cm, 128 cm inboard. This is up to 20% longer than oars in use today.

²²⁷ Burnell, *Swing*, p. 5

²²⁸ Rowe & Pitman, p. 16

²²⁹ No boat is *ever* properly called a scull. A scull is an oar used in sculling.

²³⁰ Byrne & Churchill, p. 205

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Even so, in only twenty-five or so years emerged craft nearly identical to the racing shells of today, lacking only sliding seats, swivel oarlocks and advanced building materials.

Technique Becomes Important

The introduction of outriggers, or **riggers** as they are now commonly called, was the most significant and far-reaching innovation in rowing history. It was intended to make boats faster, but it also had three major unintended consequences.

1. Boats became so **delicate** that “‘jostling,’ or as we now would call it, fouling, became too destructive and dangerous to be retained.”²³¹
2. “The narrower boats still had to carry the same weight, and so they had to be built longer in order to make up for the lost buoyancy. The oarsmen could now get an **uninterrupted swing forward**, without coming up against the back of the man in front. It was not very long before they discovered that by inching forward on their seats they could actually get a longer stroke.
3. Narrower boats were harder to balance, “making an immediate demand for a neater, more skillful style of rowing.”²³²

Rudie Lehmann: “The big, roomy cutters [formerly] used by the oarsmen no doubt precluded them from those niceties of form and watermanship so important to those who propel the frail pieces of refined cabinet-work that do duty as racing ships at the present day [1908].”²³³

Turn-of-the-century University of Pennsylvania oarsman and later rowing historian **Samuel Crowther:**²³⁴ “As yet there had not been much attention paid to style; the object

was to get there, and so long as a man was in time, it did not much matter what he was doing inside the [boat].

“With the introduction of shells, rather more attention was given to body form because of the difficulties of ‘setting up’ the shell, but no one crew had any settled stroke. It was merely a question of power, and the biggest men were the favorites.”²³⁵

Advice on Technique

When it was discovered that shells seemed to respond positively to better rowing technique, even if the concept was not yet well understood, the experts to whom gentleman rowers could turn were all around them.

Remember, rowing had already been a licensed artisan profession in England for centuries, and watermen were no strangers to competition. The **Doggett’s Coat and Badge**,²³⁶ a formal race between apprentice Thames watermen, had already been held continuously for more than a hundred years by this time.

Those who made their livings with oars were omnipresent in cities and towns throughout the country. Watermen had been employed at Eton College to look after the safety of student swimmers for centuries, and the early boats rowed at Eton, Oxford and Cambridge were built on site by watermen, rented to students by watermen, maintained by watermen and in the early years even stroked by watermen.

Lehmann: “The advice of men of their class, living as they did upon the water, was naturally sought by the amateurs, and for many years, the professional exercised a great influence as trainer or coxswain or

²³¹ Byrne & Churchill, p. 214

²³² Mendenhall, *Harvard-Yale*, p. 47

²³³ Lehmann, p. 24

²³⁴ See Chapter 36.

²³⁵ Crowther, pp. 31-2

²³⁶ See Chapter 2.

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Wikipedia

Matt Taylor with his keelless shell in 1855

trusted adviser upon the gentlemen who followed the sport.²³⁷

The earliest schoolboy, college and club crews employed watermen to teach them, but effective as the original waterman's technique might have been for rowing a slow-moving, cargo-laden Thames wherry (or a lifeguard dory today), as the gentleman crews moved from four- to six- to eight-oared boats, and from wide lap-strake cutters innovation-by-innovation progressively toward narrow, smooth-skinned shells, picking up speed potential year-by-year, any

technique derived from the original waterman's stroke soon came to be perceived as more and more of a limiting factor.

Woodgate: "The old-fashioned boats went steadily along without any spring to the first touch of the oars in the water. The stroke was rapid forward [on the recovery], but became a slow drag from the first dash of the oar into the water until recovered.²³⁸ Now [1888] the boats leap to the catch."²³⁹

As an example, prior to the 1857 Boat Race, Oxford purchased the latest revolutionary new form of boat, a keelless shell, from the boat-builder **Matthew Taylor** of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, a hotbed of boatbuilding innovation during the 19th Century. When they had trouble adapting to the craft, Taylor was "engaged to attend to

Oxford's practice, and was now and then put in at stroke to teach the art of catching hold of the beginning of the stroke, which was not at all part of the old style, but which was imperative for the new light boat which otherwise slipped away before the work could be got on."²⁴⁰

Oxford beat Cambridge that year by thirty-two seconds, having rowed over the course in practice in a time "which stood until after the introduction of slides."²⁴¹

²³⁷ Lehmann, p. 10

²³⁸ In this instance, the British rowing term "recover" is equivalent to the American rowing term "release."

²³⁹ Woodgate, p. 213

²⁴⁰ Byrne & Churchill, p. 215

²⁴¹ Byrne & Churchill, p. 215

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5. Henley-on-Thames

Henley Royal Regatta – Amateurism in Sport

For two centuries, rowers in particular have been at the forefront of society in England. The best and the brightest. They have also been in the forefront of the development of many other modern sports. One member of the Thames Rowing Club helped found the **Amateur Boxing Association**,²⁴² and when Thames R.C. organized some cross country runs in the 1860s, the activity developed into the **Thames Hares and Hounds**. The **Amateur Athletics Association**, one of the world's first track and field federations, was the ultimate result.²⁴³

"Hares and Hounds," also known as "Hashing," has become a sport of sorts that survives into the 21st Century.

Interestingly, during the 19th Century the sport of rowing actually changed the face of *all* sport worldwide.

The trouble was that those crude, uneducated, unsavory and possibly criminal Thames watermen had bodies hardened and coarsened by many years of the most strenuous manual labor. They were men "to whom the sun, rough seas and strong winds were familiar, and whose physiques and faces reflected their continuing battles with the elements."²⁴⁴ No member of the British leisure class could hope to compete head-to-head with them in an athletic contest, and it was considered patently unfair to ask him to do so.

In fact, working that hard at *anything* at all seemed "ungentlemanly" to the English aristocracy, and certainly not in the spirit of fair athletic competition.

But it was far more than that. The gap in social class was wide and deep, and the distinction was profoundly felt and personal. Rowing historian **John Hall-Craggs**, Shrewsbury School and St. John's College,²⁴⁵ Cambridge, a member of the victorious 1956 Light Blue Boat, is a champion rower from a long line of champion rowers, and he is uncomfortable with contemporary observers and historians (such as myself) applying 21st Century values to 19th Century Britain.

Hall-Craggs: "[The modern ethics of] sport did not exist in the very early days. It had to evolve. I know this sounds obvious, but present day study can easily ignore the conditions of those early times.

"As an example, one interesting extract from the Durham Regatta on the 18th of June, 1860 involved one of my forebears:

In the Scurry Stakes, there were five entries: **M. Craggs**, in *Little Agness*, **G.D. Newby** in *Phantom*, **L.H. Clasper**²⁴⁶ in *Tat*, **T. Robinson** in *Never Despair*, and **J. Bone** in *Isis*. The cutters were to start from

²⁴² Page, p. 10

²⁴³ Ibid, p. 6

²⁴⁴ King, www.rowingcanada.org

²⁴⁵ They row with navy blue blades.

²⁴⁶ **L.H. (Harry) Clasper** (1812-1870) was a famous professional rower and boatbuilder from Newcastle-on-Tyne. He is credited with many innovations, including the invention of the metal outrigger.

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Count's Corner, and row through Elvet Bridge and back.

"On the firing of the pistol for the start, a very exciting scene took place. It appears several competitors entertained a bad feeling towards Clasper because they considered that he, being one of the best rowers of the day, should not have entered to deprive an amateur of the prize; therefore they determined at any cost to deprive him of it. On the boats starting, Robinson endeavoured to pull right into Clasper's boat, but missing it, the oars became entangled, when the former jumped out of his boat and tried to pull the latter out of his. Clasper, seeing that all chance of winning the race was gone, and that his boat was likely to be capsized in the struggle, hit Robinson on the head with his fist, and was just on the point of striking him with his oar when he found that his boat was fast filling with water and going down bow foremost, and to save himself, he had to jump out and swim to shore.

"On arriving at Bow Corner, Bone placed his boat across the river for the purpose of fouling Newby. Succeeding in his object, both boats became entangled and immediately afterwards Newby's boat was upset and, in tumbling out, its occupant seized hold of Bone's boat and upset it. Both parties, after a good ducking, succeeded in reaching shore.

"The race was ultimately won by Craggs."²⁴⁷

"That day, the fours race was also stopped due to stoning of a boat of professionals by the crowd, so this was not a gentleman/professional dispute but a case of the professionals overplaying their hand."²⁴⁸

Nearly a century and a half has now passed since that Durham Regatta, but the 19th Century mindset and the passion endure in the person of John Hall-Craggs:

"Dare I say it? 'Americans' will never understand! They have a fetish concerning

the old amateur/professional class situation."²⁴⁹

Watermen made a living at rowing. They rowed because they were *paid* to. Gentlemen believed that sports should be done for the *love* ("amare" in Latin) of the activity, and so the concept of "**amateur**" was specifically created by and for the sport of rowing, and all competition with "professional" oarsmen was soon banned.

Michael Poliakoff, author of *Combat Sport in the Ancient World*, has described great injustices suffered by athletes like 1912 Olympic Decathlon Champion **Jim Thorpe**, "all of it done in the name of some kind of fantasy about a world of amateur athletes which really was the sinister working of a group of elites who did not like the idea of tradesmen and people of lower economic status mixing into their world of sport."²⁵⁰

American Olympic rowing coach and historian **Richard Glendon**:²⁵¹ "In England, rowing is purely a gentleman's game, and the blooded crews are not allowed to compete against laborers, as such classes, by making a business of muscular toil, have an advantage for muscular development over gentlemen amateurs, whose more sedentary vocations give them less opportunity for developing muscle."²⁵²

David W. Zang, head of the Sports Studies Program at Towson University in the U.S.: "Rowing was, in fact, the first sport that upper crust Brits singled out for testing amateurism's exclusionary principle, whereby gents shunned any competitor who made his living with his hands. Eventually the claims of amateurism grew to include the grander assertion that participation in

²⁴⁷ Macfarlane-Grieve, pp. 35-6. The quote is a contemporary account in the *Durham Advertiser*.

²⁴⁸ Hall-Craggs, personal correspondence, 2008

²⁴⁹ Ibid

²⁵⁰ Qtd. by *The Real Olympics*, Anthony Thomas Director, Carlton Television, 2004

²⁵¹ See Chapter 51.

²⁵² Glendon, p. 27

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Rowe & Pitman

The First Boat Race, June 10, 1829
Oxford leads Cambridge approaching Henley Bridge

sport without recompense was a building block of good character.²⁵³

All this talk of amateurism soon became identified with the village of Henley-on-Thames, 22 miles or 35k up the river from Eton.

Henley-on-Thames

Henley was an important ford of the Thames in Roman times. Today it is a “picturesque malting town and former port that straddles the Thames about [63 miles or 100 km upstream²⁵⁴] from London.”²⁵⁵ Its modern skyline is dominated by the 16th Century tower of the **Church of St. Mary**

the Virgin and by **Brakspear’s**²⁵⁶ **Brewery**, which was founded in 1779.

Over land or by water, Henley is about midway between Eton and Oxford, and to the steadily growing fraternity of serious rowers in the 19th Century, what separated Henley from all the other river towns along the Thames was that it boasted the longest naturally straight stretch of river in all of Britain. Oxford and Cambridge first met in competition there on June 10, 1829 before a crowd of twenty thousand cheering spectators.²⁵⁷

Rowing historian **Richard Burnell**: “In 1829, Oxford and Cambridge had their very first Boat Race on this reach at Henley, and

²⁵³ Zang, p. 2

²⁵⁴ about 40 miles 65 km by car.

²⁵⁵ Ross, pp. 44-5

²⁵⁶ rhymes with Shakespeare’s.

²⁵⁷ Caroline Antrobus, *History Lesson*, *Blades Magazine*, 2008, p. 6

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in the following ten years there were two or three other big one-off events which attracted *enormous* crowds. The townfolk of Henley realized that there was a scope for a great deal of trade here. They called a public meeting in March of 1839 and decided to have a regatta for that purpose.”²⁵⁸

The Henley Regatta

The annual **Henley Regatta** was established in 1839 with the following Town Hall resolution:

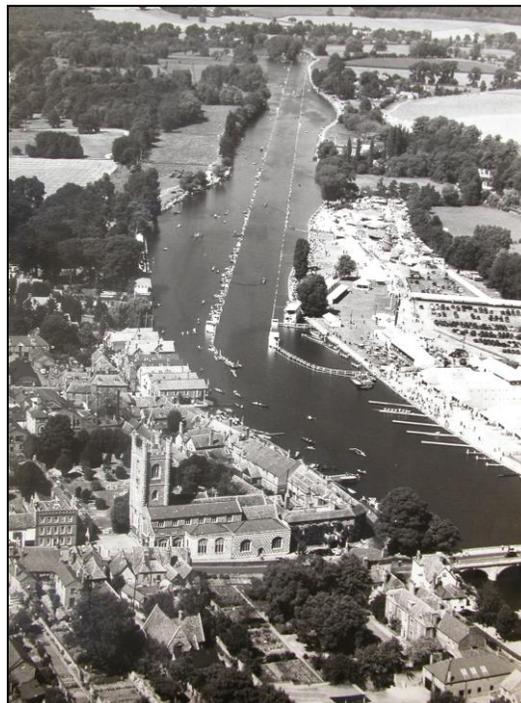
That from the lively interest which has been manifested at the various boat races which have taken place on the Henley Reach during the last few years, and the great influx of visitors on such occasions, this meeting is of the opinion that the establishing of an annual regatta, under judicious and respectable management, would not only be productive of the most beneficial results to the town of Henley, but from its peculiar attractions would also be a source of amusement and gratification to the neighborhood, and to the public in general.

Burnell: “There were no rowing people involved in running Henley at all in the early years. It was purely a town matter.”²⁵⁹

The Henley Royal Regatta

“In 1851, His Royal Highness Prince Albert became the first Royal Patron of the Regatta, since then it has been properly referred to as the ‘**Henley Royal Regatta**.’”²⁶⁰

Burnell: “In the late Victorian era²⁶¹ and even more so in the Edwardian era,²⁶² it



Geo. Bushnell & Son, Henley-on-Thames

The Henley Reach

also became an enormous social attraction because [starting in 1899] the trains were running fast and regularly from Paddington [Station in London]. People flocked in the thousands, and it became one of the big items in the social calendar.”²⁶³

Jack Grinold, Northeastern University USA: “A small town that boasts eighty-nine pubs and one and five-sixteenths straight miles of water bordered by long reaches of lush green grass dotted with ancient oaks and weeping willows, Henley is a movie producer’s dream of old England. On the **Buckinghamshire side** of the river is **Phyllis Court**, once a Roman encampment and now an ultra-exclusive club. On the

²⁵⁸ Richard Burnell, *The Thames*, BBC 1988

²⁵⁹ Ibid.

²⁶⁰ Henley Royal Regatta, *Official Programme*, 1954

²⁶¹ The reign of Queen Victoria was from 1837 to 1901.

²⁶² The reign of King Edward was from 1901 to 1910.

²⁶³ Richard Burnell, *The Thames*, BBC 1988

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Berkshire²⁶⁴ side is the almost-as-exclusive **Stewards' Enclosure**, which holds ten thousand of England's upper crust during regatta.

"On race days, the 'old oars,' in their tattered bright blazers and school caps of decades long past, crowd the space, their elegant ladies in long skirts and floppy Victorian hats by their sides. The assembled will eat pounds and pounds of strawberries and thick cream and wash it down with gallons and gallons of **Pimm's**²⁶⁵ and champagne."²⁶⁶

Robert Lipsyte, *The New York Times*: "The Henley Royal Regatta, four days of caste reunions, cheap carnival and classic crew racing.

"As they like to say here, great crews row and go, but the Thames flows on forever, and so it did today [June 30, 1965], two miles of its narrow, green serenity choked with motorboats and punts and kayaks, both sides of its bank filled with picnickers, penny slot machines and dabs of glorious heritage: Eton College blue,

Westminster pink and Leander Club cerise, the oldest colors on the river."²⁶⁷

The Henley Regatta Course



Author

The Hole in the Wall

271 meters to go

"In between the two shores lies an eighty-foot-wide course upon which it is the dream of every oarsman worldwide to row.

"Henley's two-lane straightaway course, complete with log booms on either side utterly changed the nature of racing in boats. In essence, it was the first modern artificial rowing venue."²⁶⁸

It was indeed the first site in Great Britain to allow unimpeded head-to-head racing for two crews under relatively fair and even conditions. As the course was gradually narrowed from 150 feet in 1886 to 80 feet in 1914, it limited and finally prevented the London habit of wandering the river in search of favorable currents and winds, and the distance of "one

²⁶⁴ Pronounced "Barksha." For a colonial, it seems that British pronunciation is virtually impossible to follow unless you are already in on the joke.

"England and America are two countries separated by a common language." – George Bernard Shaw

²⁶⁵ According to the label: "Pimm's No. 1, The Original Mixer, Made since the year 1840, from a closely guarded secret recipe" which presumably includes various fruit juice extracts along with plenty of gin(?). One favorite recipe: one part Pimm's, three parts lemonade, served over ice with pieces of fruit added.

²⁶⁶ Jack Grinold, Cinderella Squad, www.neu.edu/numag

²⁶⁷ Robert Lipsyte, Henley Starts to Separate Flotsam From the Fleet, *The New York Times*, July 1, 1965

²⁶⁸ Jack Grinold, op cit.

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mile two furlongs twenty poles²⁶⁹ turned out to be long enough to discourage the kind of mad sprinting seen in the Bumps and short enough to encourage relatively spirited racing from start to finish.

Today the crews race north to south against the current from the east side of **Temple Island** toward the town bridge. The port lane is identified as 1, the **Berks Station**, on the eastern or Berkshire side, and the starboard lane as 2, the **Bucks Station**, on the western or Buckinghamshire side. (Just to keep things simple, the town of Henley is actually in Oxfordshire.)

According to four-time Olympic Champion **Matthew Pinsent**,²⁷⁰ a member of **Leander Club**, situated just past the finish line at Henley, “the course is divided by landmarks and waypoints that are traditional rather than metric. ‘**The Barrier**’²⁷¹ is about a third of the distance. There is no half-way mark, just a point called ‘**Fawley**,’²⁷² and the final charge is



Author

Crews passing by the **Progress Boards**
122 meters to go

punctuated by ‘**the Hole in the Wall**’²⁷³ and ‘**the Progress Boards**.’²⁷⁴ The only logic is that it has always been like this, and is all the better for it.’²⁷⁵

“At Henley, the time of the losing crew is never given, only the distance or, if that is embarrassing, then the term ‘**easily**.’”²⁷⁶ To be any more specific would be ungentlemanly.

The New York Times described the Henley scene during a typical race, circa mid-20th Century: “This was more than a day for mere muscle and mind on the river. It was a day for strawberries and cream, of women in pink and aqua and yellow, a day

²⁶⁹ Maclaren, p. 164 (a mile and five-sixteenths, 6,930 feet or 2,112 meters.)

²⁷⁰ See Chapter 136.

²⁷¹ a sheep gate on the tow path along the Berks shore at the northern boundary of Remenham Farm, where the first official intermediate time is taken. It is 2,089 feet or 637 meters from the start and 4,841 feet or 1,475 meters from the finish.

²⁷² named after Fawley Court, a red-brick country home designed by Sir Christopher Wren and set back from the river on the Bucks side. Until the early 20th Century, the Fawley Court Boathouse was a prominent riverbank landmark. Today this point on the course is identified only by a white canvas booth where the second official intermediate time is taken. It is 3,435

feet or 1,047 meters from the start and 3,495 feet or 1,065 meters from the finish.

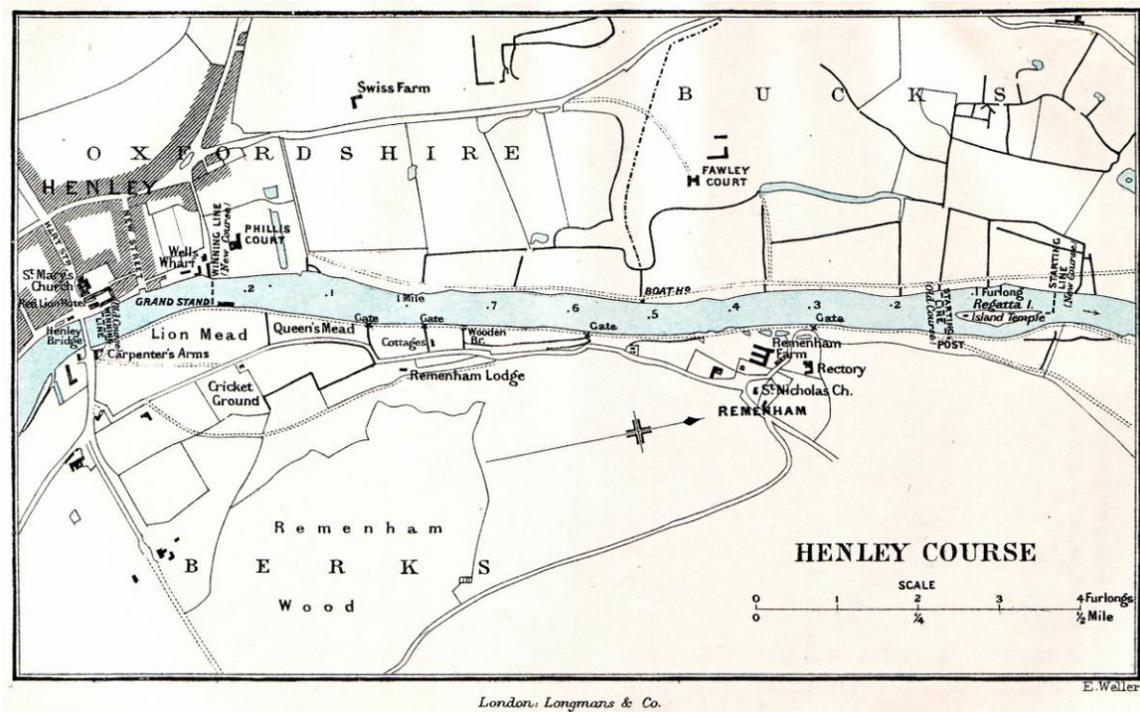
²⁷³ a break in the shoreline retaining wall on the Bucks side at the north end of the grounds of Phyllis Court and spanned by an arched wooden footbridge. It is approximately 890 feet or 271 meters from the finish.

²⁷⁴ in front of the reserved-seat grandstand within the Stewards’ Enclosure. Intermediate results are posted there. It is approximately 400 feet or 122 meters from the finish.

²⁷⁵ Pinsent, pp. 207-8

²⁷⁶ Jack Grinold, op cit.

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Woodgate

The Henley Course, c. 1888

Visible on the Bucks side (above) are Phillis Court, Fawley Court and its boathouse.

Visible on the Berks side (below) are the Grand Stands and Remenham Farm.

The gate that marks the Barrier is the one just below the notation for “.3” miles gone.

On this map, the “old course” started above Temple Island and finished just before the Henley Bridge.

The “new course” started at the bottom of the island and finished just past the grandstands.

The present-day course is similar to the “new course” but begins on the Berks side of Temple Island.

for men with tales of crews that burst their hearts on the rougher waters of the past.

“The day had broken bright and warm over this little brick and Tudor town some forty miles west of London, and the big cars that had snarled up the M4 choked Henley-on-Thames’ narrow, twisting streets. Out poured elderly men in beanies and blazers of their youth, men in the cerise socks of the Leander Club, women in cocktail dresses and pastel and straw hats.”²⁷⁷

²⁷⁷ Robert Lipsyte, Vesper Eight Beats Harvard by Two-Thirds of a Length in Henley Regatta, *The New York Times*, July 2, 1965

“The course begins down river, just after a bend in the Thames that splits cattle-grazing meadows and fields sprouting with summer crop. It is tranquil here until two shells move nervously into place, and the umpire leans forward in the power launch and roars, ‘Are you ready?’

“Two little coxswains snarl at their beefy crews through megaphones or microphones or sometimes in deep grammar-school voices that can suddenly turn shrill.

“Go!”

“The shells jerk forward. Along the concrete path that runs along one side of the shore, the two coaches pedal furiously on

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skinny, black bicycles, fingering stop watches, yelling at their crews and dodging old men with walrus mustaches wearing scarlet beanies and women sitting on the grass in yellow organdy dresses.

“On move the shells, past eight men in wheelchairs who were just rolling down the ramp of a battered blue bus bearing the sign ‘Lest We Forget, Association for War Disabled.’

“Then past lounging couples listening to the Wimbledon matches on portable radios, past the enclosed pavilions of boating clubs, past a ferris wheel, past a fun house (‘America’s latest craze, the Rib Tickler’).

“And past young men and women lounging easily in punts poled along the shallow river, past a shabby man promising doom (‘The world will be burnt up,’ he said.) to a youngster from grammar school (‘You don’t mean flames, do you, sir?’), past Albert’s Electric Bingo and past strawberries and cream in the Stewards’ Enclosure, and finally over the finish line where sixteen young men fell on their oars.

“‘Hip, hip for London City School, croaked a coxswain, and weakly the crew answered, ‘Hurrah.’”²⁷⁸

Amateurism Defined

Very quickly the Henley Regatta became the epitome of upper class sport in Great Britain, but the town itself was hardly upper class. Professional watermen maintained boat maintenance and rental businesses in the shadow of Brakspear’s



Robert Lipsyte, *The New York Times*

Coaches follow their crews on bicycles along the banks of the Thames during the regatta, calling out encouragement. **Temple Island** can be seen at right rear.

Brewery, and by the time that Leander Club relocated to Henley from London toward the end of the 19th Century, there were already several rowing clubs there that catered to local tradesmen and factory workers on their time off from work.

However, those who worked with their hands could organize their own events. The Henley Royal Regatta was not for them.

Here is the definition of amateur as set out during the 1890s in the regatta rules:

No person shall be considered an amateur oarsman, sculler, or coxswain:

1. who has ever competed in an open competition for a stake, money, or entrance fee;
2. who has ever competed with or against a professional for any prize;
3. who has ever taught, pursued, or assisted in the practice of athletic exercises of any kind as a means of gaining a livelihood;²⁷⁹
4. who has been employed in or about boats for money or wages;

²⁷⁸ Robert Lipsyte, Henley Starts to Separate Flotsam From the Fleet, *The New York Times*, July 1, 1965

²⁷⁹ This section would force the earliest authors of rowing manuals to write anonymously. They might have stood accused of “assisting in the practice of athletic exercises.” See Chapters 6 and 8.

OUR ANCESTORS

5. who is, or has been by trade or employment for wages a mechanic, artisan, or laborer, or engaged in any menial duty;
6. who is disqualified as an amateur in any other branch of sport.²⁸⁰

Artisans

The portion of the definition which excluded anyone who worked *any* trade whatsoever was controversial almost from the outset. The **Amateur Rowing Association** (ARA), a direct offspring of London's Metropolitan Rowing Association,²⁸¹ was formed in 1882, and the definition of amateur that they espoused also excluded artisans. This caused the **National Amateur Rowing Association** to be formed in 1890. They adopted a similar definition except the tradesman clause was excluded.

Separate federations. Separate competitions.

According to the 1988 BBC program, *The Thames*: "The rules of the Amateur Rowing Association applied not only at Henley but at all regattas that excluded manual workers, tradesmen and watermen. It was a distinction steeped in Victorian snobbery.

"Some of the Victorian class distinctions were beginning to break down in the 1920s and '30s, but a strange and persistent snobbery had arisen with the sport of rowing. Among oarsmen, there was an apartheid, as George Kenyon discovered when he took up rowing at the Vickers works in Weybridge in 1935:

"The other apprentices said to me, 'Well, how about coming down to the rowing club on Sunday? We've got a visitors' day.'

"I didn't realize at that time what a peculiar structure the rowing world had. I became quite active and thoroughly enjoyed

it, but at that time there was a virtual ban on artisans taking part in amateur regattas. You had this division between the white collar workers and the blue collars, you might say, and this was rather ironical at Vickers because, you see, you had people ranging from the clerical grades right through to mathematicians, draftsmen and designers on the white collar side who were able to join the Amateur Rowing Association. In the works, you had people ranging from unskilled people, laborers right through to the higher skilled toolmakers, instrument makers, people of that sort who because of the fact that they worked with their hands were excluded from the amateur rowing field. This caused a little bit of friction between the two sides."²⁸²

In 1905, a member of the University of Pennsylvania Crew that competed at Henley in 1901²⁸³ was quoted in *The Century Magazine* as saying: "Their ideas of caste in sport can't be transplanted to our side of the water. This is rowing for 'gentlemen,' and the rules bar anyone who ever earned honest money by the sweat of his brow, even in order to work his way through college.

"It made me hot to talk to a couple of men belonging to the Henley Boat Club here in town. One is a postman who has won dozens of prizes as a sculler, and has never rowed for money. But he can't compete in the regatta because his calling is under the ban. The other is a drug-clerk, and a mighty nice fellow, but he can't get his entry past the stewards because he is in trade.

"Give me democracy in sport as long as a man is clean and honest."²⁸⁴

Burnell: "It finally came to a head in 1936 when the Australians came over to row in the Berlin Olympic Games, and their crew wanted to come to Henley as part of its

²⁸⁰ Rowe & Pitman, p. 151

²⁸¹ Page, p. ix

²⁸² *The Thames*, BBC 1988

²⁸³ See Chapter 37.

²⁸⁴ qtd. by Paine, *American*, p. 496

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buildup practice, and their entry at Henley was rejected because they were policemen,²⁸⁵ and for some extraordinary reason policemen at that time were classed as manual laborers. That, of course, was too ridiculous for anyone to stomach, that a Commonwealth crew on its way to the Olympic Games was not admissible at Henley. That was the last straw, and the rules were changed in the following year.”²⁸⁶

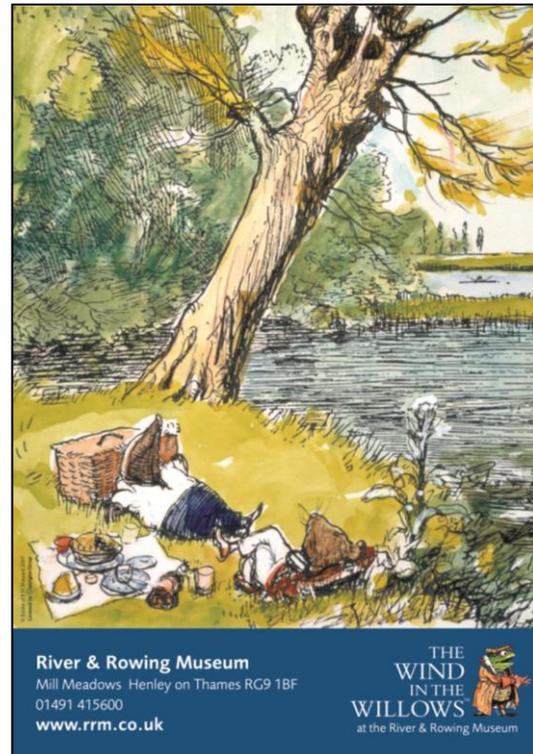
Nevertheless, only in 1956 did the two federations merge into the unified ARA as it exists today.

Henley Today

The town, the regatta, the experience are as magical today as they ever have been. The trophies, the Pimm’s, the boaters and blazers and the dress code for men and women in the Stewards’ Enclosure all remain. Although the ferris wheel is gone, the pubs are full, and parties along the course still go on late into the night. You can still occasionally find a copy of Fairbairn’s *Notes on Rowing*²⁸⁷ at Richard Way Booksellers, and Leander Club still guards the upstream approach to the regatta tents.

But make no mistakes. The 21st Century has reached Henley-on-Thames. Women have their own regatta a week before and masters a week or so after. And only a short walk upstream from the Henley Bridge is the magnificent **River and Rowing Museum**, with exhibits that trace the history of the Thames watershed back to Neolithic times and the history of rowing back to the Classical Era.

Do you have a clear understanding of how a Greek trireme was configured? The



www.rrm.co.uk

museum has a mockup of the three levels of rowers that makes clear what a stunning piece of engineering they must have been. There are historic boats and oars, films, art works, temporary exhibitions, even a *Wind in the Willows* Gallery.

There is nothing – absolutely nothing – half so much worth doing as simply messing about in boats.

- *The Wind in the Willows*

There is nowhere on Earth where that immortal quote is more relevant than in Henley-on-Thames.

²⁸⁵ A member if this crew was Merv Wood. See Chapter 86.

²⁸⁶ Richard Burnell, *The Thames*, BBC 1988

²⁸⁷ See Chapter 14 ff.