

Malcolm Neal's Rowing Club Stories

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Introduction

I first became a member of Leicester Rowing Club in 1961. The club then bore very little resemblance to the present one and members, from time to time, have encouraged me to record my memories of those times. This, then, is a collection of stories from a bygone age of rowing in Leicester. I have described events as I remember them and memory tends to embellish what actually happened but I have tried my best to be true to the facts because to exaggerate a tale for the sake of producing a good story would be to deny our club a proper record of its history. The period covered is from 1961 to about 1974. I hope you enjoy reading my stories.

Malcolm Neal

Bridget Hull

To many, if not most, of our present members, the name Bridget Hull is no more than the name of an old boat. But Bridget was a real person and I thought it might be of interest if I were to share a few memories of the real Bridget Hull.

When I first came to Leicester Rowing Club, as a member of Gateway School Rowing Club, in 1961, I very soon became aware of a little Irish woman who would appear, as if from nowhere, on an old bicycle and demand (not ask!) that we all take books of raffle tickets to sell. These were produced from the large, seemingly bottomless, basket hanging from the handlebars of her bike. It was made very clear that returned tickets were not acceptable and that she would expect the stubs and the money by a certain date. We schoolboys dared not argue, nor, we noticed, did the most senior members of the club!

Bridget Teresa Hull was, to my knowledge, the greatest fund raiser our club has ever had and I am sure that without her efforts, the club would have folded before the 1960's were out. At the time, the boathouse was in a dreadful condition. Situated slightly forward of the present one and closer to the trees, it was made of wood and, when I knew it, leaned precariously towards the river. It had no windows and the only lighting was through glass skylights in the roof. The doors fitted badly, due to the angle of the structure and I remember that one of them had worn a groove in the gravel. The changing room was the original concrete row of changing cubicles from the swimming pool that used to occupy the site. Further along, towards the drive, was another building comprising two rooms. One was used as a blade store. The other was empty and derelict. Across the drive were more derelict buildings (We occupied the entire site up to the bridge at the time). Along the bank, between the bridge and the drive were dozens of huge concrete sewer pipes, about 1.5 metres in diameter. As can be imagined, membership was very poor. After all, we didn't have much to offer. All the boats were old and some of them had fixed pin riggers.

It was against this background that Bridget set about raising enough money to buy a new boathouse, new boats and blades, improve the changing facilities (At least, we got a hot water heater for the shower – and a door!) and build a bar in the derelict building near the drive. How did she do it? I have mentioned the raffles already. It isn't easy to sell raffle tickets, especially for a cause that few people have heard about and even fewer care. There has to be the incentive of good prizes – but who would donate them? Bridget had this covered! Her weapon was fear! She pestered the shopkeepers along Narborough Road and thereabouts until they gave her a prize “for the lovely boys at the Rowing Club” just to get rid of her!

It wasn't just raffles, though. Bridget decided she could make money by holding rummage sales. Not the usual, small sale that was common at the time, but big sales – enough to fill quite a large hall. She chose Holy Apostles Church Hall on Fosse Road South, not far from her home on the same road. She got on her bike and pestered everybody she could find to donate items of every description for her to sell for “the lovely boys”. We were not left out either! We were expected to donate and collect as much as we could and deliver it to the club, where it was stored wherever we could find a space. When we ran out of space she had a contingency plan. She owned a row of lock – up garages on Fosse Road South which she rented out. One by one her tenants were persuaded that it wouldn't be any great hardship to park their cars in the street for a couple of weeks so that she could store rummage in their garages. I believe she continued to collect the rent!

When the big day arrived we all got together to move a mountain of clothes, hats, books, records, furniture, kitchen equipment, etc., etc.....(You name it, we had it!) to the hall where Bridget had set out the tables. We then sorted it into different categories and piled it onto the tables ready to sell. I remember, at the first sale, the sense of shock when we looked outside just before the advertised opening time, to see a queue stretching halfway round the block! The door was opened and hundreds of middle aged women charged in, pushing and elbowing each other out of the way – just like the Harrod's January Sale! I don't know why, but I always got the Hat Stall. Dozens of women clawed at the hats and tried them on whilst I held a mirror up for them. It wasn't unusual for “tug – o – war” contests to break out over a hat. I worked out that, in these circumstances, the best policy was to grab the hat and hold a quick auction. During this, the price would go up considerably but, after all, it was obviously a very desirable hat! I can't remember exactly how many of these sales were held, probably three or four over a period of about three years. They came to an end after some customers in the waiting queue spotted a dealer creeping out of the back door carrying some items that Bridget had sold him before the sale had opened. She had reckoned that she would get a better price for them this way. Word went around the queue and the atmosphere became very tense with people shouting and banging on the doors and windows! I think Bridget was smuggled out of the back door as the front door was opened. The rest of us had to stand firm and take the flak!

After a suitable period of recuperation, some of it, I suspect, hiding from some angry former customers, Bridget came up with another idea. At the time, waste paper merchants were paying an unusually high price for old newspapers. For Bridget, this was an opportunity not to be missed! Once again, the changing room and every other available

space at the club was filled, this time with waste paper and her long suffering garage tenants were out on the streets again! This was an on-going scheme. Every now and again a man would arrive with a van, give her some money (it was never enough and he had a rough time!) and take the paper away so that we could start collecting all over again. I don't think I was alone in feeling grateful to the person who broke into the changing room one day and set fire to it! Someone passing by saw the smoke and called the Fire Service and the fire was put out before any serious damage was caused – not that there was much to damage! The good thing was that, after a lick of paint, we had our changing room back.

I never knew how old Bridget was. To me she was always an old lady, but by this time her health was starting to deteriorate and I think the waste paper scheme was her last. In the years that I knew her she raised thousands of pounds for the club, which was spent, as I have already mentioned, on replacing the wooden boathouse with a new one on a steel frame covered with asbestos sheet (Yes, I know!) which had about double the capacity of the old one, and several new boats and blades. We were also able to build a clubroom in one of the derelict buildings and open a bar which resulted in a thriving social membership who, in turn, raised more money for the club and travelled around with the crews to shout support from the banks.

The club showed it's gratitude by naming one of the new boats "Bridget Hull" and I can remember Bridget being embarrassed and saying that she didn't deserve it! She lived just long enough to launch one more boat, the Frank Noakes, and I have film of this event which shows Bridget pouring a bottle of champagne over the bows. She did this sitting in her wheelchair and needed help to lift the bottle.

Bridget died soon after. The news came, by phone, as we were holding a committee meeting. I can't remember a time when there was so much sadness in our club than on that evening.

I can't remember which church the funeral was held at but it was Catholic, so there was a Requiem Mass the evening before the burial. Some of us had volunteered to be pall bearers and carried Bridget on our shoulders into the church. Peter Julian (the club captain) had a friend who was a florist and he had constructed a coxed four made of flowers. This was carried behind the coffin and when Bridget's husband, Harry saw it he stood up and moved his own wreath to the foot of the coffin. "Put it on there lads" he said, "It would have meant a lot to her".

Bridget was buried the next day by "the lovely boys of the Rowing Club" at Saffron Hill Cemetery.

The Bar

In the never ending pursuit of money to buy boats and blades, somebody suggested that we should have a bar. It was the mid 1960's and I'm not sure that we had yet managed to obtain the freehold of the site from Leicester City Council, but we went ahead anyway.

There was a derelict room in the old buildings that extended to the drive and we set about converting this into the bar. The room was L-shaped with a door leading into a smaller room which was to become the store. It was decided that the bar counter should be from the outer wall to the corner of the store and, as if by magic, a ready made bar with a padded front, a brass foot rail, two bar stools and back display shelves appeared one day! And it fitted! In fact, all this was obtained by the Captain at the time, Peter Barnacle, who had spotted it in the storeroom of the department store where he worked and arranged for it to be donated to the club.

During the Second World War, council records were stored in this room and a night watchman kept guard. He was equipped with a pot bellied stove for heating and the hole for the flue pipe was still in the ceiling. The obvious thing to do was to fit another stove and so solve the problems of heating and the hole in the roof at the same time. I've no idea where it came from, but a pot bellied stove and flue pipe appeared and was fitted!

The walls were a mess of rough brickwork and not considered suitable for our posh new bar, so we decided to plaster them. This posed a problem. Nobody could plaster! We overcame this by "rough plastering" – quite fashionable at the time. This was the 1960's and artistic license ruled! Some bench seating, wrought iron bar tables and stools appeared – another mystery! A lot of painting was done and we were ready to open.

Over the years, many changes were made to our clubroom. The wall between the clubroom and the blade store was knocked through and double doors were fitted, so now we had two connecting rooms. In time, the entire wall was removed to make one big room. The windows were bricked up, with glass bricks at the top to let in some light, in an attempt to stop the frequent burglaries, and steel doors and frames were fitted. The next burglar knocked a hole through the wall to get in!

One (never-to-be-forgotten) development was the construction of a magnificent stone fireplace to replace the stove. This was not planned but was started late one Sunday afternoon. The rowing had finished and, as was the custom, was followed by ploughman's lunches, pork pies, pickled eggs and many pints of beer. It was cold and the fire had been lit. The stove pipe had never been fully up to the job and most of the air had been replaced with fumes, in addition to the haze of tobacco smoke that was normal in those days. Conversation turned to dissatisfaction with the atmosphere and it was decided to remove the stove and build a stone fireplace with a better chimney. The refreshment already consumed inspired an enthusiasm rarely seen. The fire was extinguished and the stove and drainpipe were outside before the bar had been wiped!

A stone, indeed, granite, fireplace might seem somewhat extravagant but we had a small mountain of the stuff which had been dumped at the far end of the site, I believe by the city council. A few days later, we mixed mortar and built the new fireplace, using the free granite. We left it to set and reconvened a few days later for a grand fire lighting ceremony. The fire was lit and – disaster! The room filled with smoke! After some consideration and a few beers, consumed outside, we concluded that the only thing to do was to rebuild the chimney section – with the fire still lit, so we could see where the smoke went! There then followed a scene that Laurel and Hardy would have been proud of. One after the other, we took it in turns to run into the smoke filled room to demolish the chimney and rebuild it! I can remember stuffing a handful of mortar into one of the last joints while others with blackened faces coughed and spluttered outside. Amazingly, it worked and was much admired.

Over the years, many changes were made and the bar was the focal point of a very active social membership who followed crews around the regattas, shouting support from the banks. In addition, the events held in the bar raised most of the money needed to buy new equipment.

The Regatta

The Quarts

Our regatta was known as Leicester Quarts Regatta. This was because the day was brought to an end with a series of races between scratch coxed fours competing to win quart (2 pints) tankards. These tankards were of exceptional quality, being made of gun metal and pot bellied in shape.

During the day, rowers, who had come to compete in all the usual events, entered for the Quarts races, giving their names and which side they preferred to row on. Coxes also entered, their prize being a small cup. Some competitors had travelled great distances, usually by public transport, especially to enter the Quarts races. There was, of course, an entrance fee but I can't remember what it was.

When all the entries were in, the names were put onto pieces of paper and divided between three boxes, strokeside, bowside and cox. Somebody of note was asked to draw the names from the boxes, two strokeside, two bowside and a cox to form each crew. In this way, a random mix of status and age in each crew was achieved. Novice oarsmen (there were no women, but Novices were known as Maidens in those days so perhaps that made up for it!) could find themselves rowing with Senior and Elite rowers and visa versa. Sometimes, the draw would produce an obvious winning crew but generally the crews seemed to be fairly even and some good racing was to be had. In any case, it was a very sociable way to end the day and friendships were made.

Committee Boats

Until the age when most people either owned or had access to a car, rowers were not expected to provide their own boats at regattas. They arrived, usually, but not always, carrying their own blades and raced in boats provided by the regatta committee. Some, by prior arrangement, were also lent a set of blades. I can remember, on several occasions, walking from the club to London Road Station with my crew, each carrying a blade which was stowed in the guard's van of the train as we travelled to that weekend's regatta. There was another walk at the end of the train journey to the host club. I don't think anyone tried to catch a bus while carrying his blade!

It was expected that the boats provided by the regatta committee would provide neither advantage nor disadvantage to the crews and so they had to be identical. This, of course, meant that clubs were burdened with the expense of buying two matching boats at a time. This was good news for the builders but proved difficult for many smaller clubs such as ours and, inevitably, a lot of old boats were pressed into a day's service that they could no longer cope with. Breakages were frequent. Stretchers broke. Brass thumbscrews sheared off in the adjuster holes. Foot straps (no shoes) broke. Seat wheels either broke or came loose. All these, and more, required a small team of suitably able people to repair the damage between heats.

The need for several pairs of boats at a regatta relied on the good will of neighbouring clubs. We borrowed boats from Loughborough, Nottingham, Derby, Newark and Kettering (Yes, there was a Kettering R.C. on the boating lake in Wicksteed Park!) and they borrowed ours for their events. Of course, this led to the problem of finding a vehicle to transport them. We were fortunate in being given the use of a 3 ton tipper lorry by our president, Teddy Friesz but some clubs were not so lucky and resorted to all sorts of racks fitted to all sorts of vehicles. This, remember, was in an era before the M.O.T. test and other restrictions. It was a sometimes a matter of relief when our boats were safely returned to us!

Communications

In the 1960's, mobile phones were still a long way off. Policemen still communicated with each other via whistles and police box phones! Walkie-talkies had been invented but I seem to remember that it was illegal for ordinary mortals to use them.

We needed to communicate between the start and the finish, just as we do today. The solution for many years was to invite the Sea Scouts or the Army Cadets to provide the necessary service. Small boys, dressed as sailors or soldiers, would arrive on the morning of the regatta and lay a cable along the bank for the whole length of the course. A primitive looking telephone was then connected at each end and we were ready. I think the procedure was to wind a small handle on the side of the phone as fast as you could to generate enough electricity to ring a bell at the other end and allow a short conversation.

The system was prone to break down frequently and, when it did, someone had to walk along the bank to see if there was any damage to the cable, while the people at each end inspected the connections. One of these occasions led to an incident involving our club captain, Peter Julian, who has told this story many times and I'm sure he won't mind me repeating it. Peter set out to inspect the cable in the company of Dennis Southgate, a much respected and leading

member of the club. Somewhere along the bank they found the problem. The cable had been neatly cut. Standing a few feet away, grinning at them was a drunk. Peter asked, "Did you do that?" to which the drunk replied, "Yes". "Why?" asked Peter. "Because I felt like it" he replied. The drunk suddenly fell on his back, nursing a bloody nose. "Why did you do that?" he moaned. "Because I felt like it!" Peter replied! "Oh dear, Peter!" said Dennis, "For you, some problems have such a simple solution!"

The Boathouse Stomp

On the day before the regatta, the boathouse was completely emptied. Boats that were not needed were moored against the far bank of the basin and the racks were loosened and slid to the tops of the supports, out of the way. The resulting space was then divided into two halves by a canvas sheet. The space at the back was used as the changing room, whilst the area nearest the doors was fitted out with a bar and a refreshments area.

Someone had the idea of holding a Regatta Dance in the evening to make further use of the enormous room, complete with bar, that we had created by moving the boats out. It was the "Swinging Sixties" and rock groups were everywhere. We hired a group that was very popular in Leicester at the time and placed an advertisement in the Leicester Mercury in the hope of attracting a few more people to add to the rowers who might stay.

I think the dance, which had been advertised as "Boathouse Stomp", was due to start at 8 o'clock and continue until midnight. Shortly before opening time, someone ran into the boathouse and shouted, "Is there a football match tonight?" We all went outside and looked in amazement as a crowd advanced towards us over the Upperton Road Viaduct. The advertisement had worked! The event was an enormous success and late-comers had to be turned away because the boathouse was full and there were even people dancing outside.

One small hiccup occurred about halfway through the evening when the temporary outside lighting failed. People rushed to sort out the problem, which turned out to be a loose connection about 20 feet up a tree. "I can fix it!" said one of our lads called Peter and within a few minutes, he was up the tree. There was an enormous blue flash. "It's alright, I'm not earthed!" he shouted as the lights came back on again.

Following its initial success, The Boathouse Stomp was set to be an annual event and was held for, I think, three years. Sadly, it was abandoned, I think in 1965, after a group of hooligans attacked the policeman, who was trying to guard the takings at the gate, and attempted to steal our money. This resulted in the arrival of half of Leicester's Police and several arrests being made. I am happy to say that some of our members were called into the court by the magistrates and commended for "going to the aid of a police officer in distress". I was told afterwards by one of these members that he thought he was going to be prosecuted for assault on the jobs, who were a pitiful sight after their skirmish with a lot of angry rowers and policemen!

Preparations for the Regatta

Back in the 1960's the preparations for our annual regatta were a little different to those required for the current event although many of the basic requirements were the same. We were not required to make provision for a large number of competitors' boats because all but the Elite events used committee boats. We didn't even need to make provision for a large number of cars because many of the visitors came by public transport or shared a car, if they had one.

As far as the course was concerned, there was one very important task that befell the Regatta Secretary. He had to write a letter to the Superintendent of Leicester Power Station, which was on the site of the present Leicester City Football Club's Stadium, asking him if he would kindly turn off the outflow from the cooling towers! The water from these massive structures was piped to the canal and emerged just upstream of Walnut Street Bridge and would often cause a forceful cross current. This didn't bother our crews too much but visiting crews had been taken by surprise in previous years, as they approached the finish, and had either collided or crashed into the towpath, or both. This situation was made worse because, unlike the oars we use today, the oars were then made of wood and the ends of the blades would break off when they hit the towpath wall – expensive! The man at the power station was always very helpful and informed me that, as long as he was given a couple of weeks notice, he could divert the water into a lagoon for the day. So all was well!

A vital element of each year's preparation concerned the provision of suitable toilet facilities. (Those of a delicate disposition should skip this paragraph and pick up the story further on!). The club had a toilet! It was a very small room at the end of the buildings, with a door that opened onto the drive. There was no plumbing and the toilet was of the chemical variety. In other words, it was a big bucket with a seat on it which started the day with some sort of disinfectant in it and finished the day.....well, it wasn't really big enough! This was the best we had, so it became the "Ladies" for the day. On reflection, the men fared better because the "Gents" was a trench, dug at the back of the normal changing rooms, surrounded by a canvas screen and accessed via duck boards. At least it was in the open air! The "posh" toilet always got locked at the end of the regatta and remained locked until a few days before the next one. Each year, there came the awful realisation that someone had to enter this squalid little room and empty the previous year's contents into the cess pit (Yes, we had one!) and clean everything, ready for use again. Straws would

be drawn and the lucky winner would unlock the door and throw it open, retreating swiftly to give it half an hour. He would then return with an old oar which he would hook under the handle, in order to carry the beast to the cess pit at a reasonable distance from it. After tipping the contents, a rope would be tied to the handle and it would be thrown into the river, tied to the chains, and left there for several days. When it was recovered, it was surprisingly fresh!

Umpires

As may have already been gathered, regattas in the 1960's and 70's were much more of a social event than the present ones. Crews raced each other and then expected to have fun together, unlike today when many of them pack up and go as soon as they have finished their races. Maybe it was easier then because they had very little equipment to return to their own clubs.

Umpires had only themselves to take home and seemed to spend most of the day chatting to each other, reminiscing and getting more and more lubricated from the bar. This fine body of men (they were highly respected) would, of course, make their way onto the towpath, after some persuasion, and officiate. Nobody would dare to question their decisions, although I recall many staggered starts, collisions on the course and myopic rulings at the finish. It must be said, though, that the Rules of Racing were a lot different then and so were the attitudes of many of the crews taking part. For example, the starter would instruct the crews, "I will ask you once if you are ready and if I receive no reply I will say GO". When he actually started the race, there was sometimes a little hissing noise between the words "Are you ready? And "Go". This was the sound of cigarettes being thrown out of the boats! On the course, it was perfectly legal for a cox to steer his boat towards the other crew in the hope of intimidating the other cox. The ultimate aim of this was to cause the opposition to run into the bank or the towpath wall. It was all part of the fun! The aggressor would, of course, be disqualified if he actually collided with the opposition, so the skill of the cox under attack would be to hold his course and hope for a clash of blades, or, if he thought the umpire wouldn't notice, move slightly towards the attacking boat and cause a collision that would disqualify the attacker!

Benny's Teeth

One of our regular umpires in the 1960's was a lovely old man who I will just call Benny. He was a member of one of the many clubs along the River Thames in London and, every year, would catch a train for Leicester to officiate at our regatta. Benny was a very tall, lean man who had a partly paralysed face, of the type seen with stroke victims. This caused one side of his mouth to drop and it was sometimes difficult to understand what he was saying. He had quite a ruddy complexion, which didn't seem to fit his slender frame, and I noticed a few thread like veins on his nose. This was evidence that Benny liked a drink! He was a very capable umpire, scrupulously fair and with an encyclopaedic knowledge of the rules – for the first half of the regatta! Towards the end, he couldn't be shifted from the bar.

When we were clearing away, the day after one regatta, we found a complete set of false teeth on the changing room window ledge. Of course, nobody would touch them, let alone move them to a safe place until they were claimed. So, there they stayed, gathering a thick layer of dust and cobwebs, until the following regatta. Benny duly arrived for his annual umpiring stint and went into the changing room. "There they are!" he exclaimed, picked them up and put them in his pocket! It seems that, after consuming far too many beers, he had put them on the window ledge so that he wouldn't lose them when he went round the back of the building to be sick and had completely forgotten to retrieve them!

The Fire

Sunday, September 8th 1974. The last time I was Regatta Secretary and all was going according to plan. The racing was keeping to the timetable and everyone was having a good day. I think it was just after the lunchtime break that we became aware of a thick cloud of black smoke rising from the scrap metal yard on the other side of Upperton Road (where the new houses are now). We could hear sirens, but the fire was obviously too far away to affect us – or so we thought!

"We've got a problem!" Not a message to Houston Control from the moon, but words to that effect from the mid course umpire to the finish. "There's a big pipe blocking the towpath lane!" Racing had stopped with some of the boats in the marshalling area at Castle Gardens. I ran down the towpath to see what was happening and discovered that there was, indeed, an aluminium pipe hanging from a manhole in Mill Lane Bridge and on the bridge was a fire engine.

I climbed the steps up onto the bridge and found a very bored looking fireman looking at a row of gauges at the back of the fire engine and asked him if it would be possible to bend the pipe so that it was against the towpath to allow us to carry on racing. He told me that, although the pipe was constructed in short sections to allow it to concertina to a fraction of its length so it could be stowed away, it was impossible to bend it! I then asked him how long he expected it to be there and he replied, "About three days!"

It was clear to everyone that nothing could be done about this obstruction. The firemen obviously needed water and the manhole was in the bridge exactly for that purpose. It was also obvious that the fire was massive. In fact, at its centre was an entire train of scrap railway carriages. With the co-operation of the crews affected, we shortened the course so that the start was at Mill Lane, next to the pipe, and we moved the finish up to the turn into the club.

The racing was completed and everyone was happy. In fact, many of the competitors congratulated us on our handling of the situation. A couple of weeks later we received a letter from the A.R.A. which criticised us for altering the course without first getting their approval!

Social Activities

It is quite remarkable that during the 1960's and 1970's Leicester Rowing Club had a very strong social membership. We had built a bar, but that in itself can't have been the reason for the support we had from non rowing members. Our crews, such as we had, were not very good and regatta successes were rare. This was not for the want of trying, but coaching was non-existent because anyone good enough to coach was needed in a crew. The first social members were wives and girlfriends and then it kind of "snowballed" as their friends, and friends of friends, joined in.

I think the most likely reason for non rowers joining us was that there was such a great atmosphere and sense of ambition in the club at the time. We had little, but it wasn't going to stay that way, seemed to be the attitude. People would come to the club for the first time and be given a paint brush or a screwdriver – and they came back! Everyone did their bit to try and improve what we had.

Sometime in the 1970's, Tony Green brought some of his pupils from Beaumont Leys School to the club and they went on to great success around the regattas. With the rowers, came their families and friends and the social membership became stronger than ever. Non rowing members took over the day to day running of the club whilst the rowers could finally get down to the business of rowing and coaching and, when we went to regattas, our "supporters club" came too!

Social Activities

Whenever the club was active, the bar was open. It was run by a small committee who took it in turns to ensure that refreshment was always available to those who wanted it. When we were expecting a good number of members we sold filled cobs, pork pies and ploughman's lunches complete with a good range of pickles in addition to the usual beer and crisps. I remember an old childhood friend of mine who regularly called in for a chat and his Sunday dinner! The rowers considered themselves' athletes, of course, and often wouldn't drink the beer. Instead, the most popular drinks for them were the "Batman" and the "Robin". "Batman" was a pint of orange cordial and lemonade and the "Robin" was half a pint of the same stuff!

Special Events

In addition to the usual gatherings in the clubroom, we frequently held parties and "themed" events. The parties need no real explanation except to say they used the usual excuses of birthdays, weddings and even the occasional rowing success to have a good time together. The themed events were a bit more organised. One, very popular theme was a Victorian Gentlemen's Evening where the members and their wives and girlfriends dressed in Victorian costumes and, on occasions, slipped into a strange, upper class way of talking, don't y'know! Another, similar theme was the Edwardian Smoking Evening. This was similar to the Victorian one but at about midway through the evening the ladies were required to withdraw to the drawing room (what used to be the blade store, but was now an annex to the main clubroom). This was necessary in order that the gentlemen could smoke without causing offence to the ladies! It might be supposed that the ladies would feel aggrieved at this imposition, but in actual fact the move to the other room was quite popular because it contained a Pianola. For those unfamiliar with this instrument, it is a sort of piano which works by pumping two foot pedals up and down. This pumps air through a perforated roll of thick paper which passes over a rotating metal drum which, in turn, causes the hammers to hit the strings. With a little practice, even the least musical of people could appear to be an accomplished pianist! The only drawback was that we could only play the rolls that had come with it. There were a lot, but they were somewhat dated! The most popular were the songs from a musical called The White Horse Inn. This may have been appropriate for the theme of the evening but it seemed a little strange to hear young men singing the words to these long forgotten songs in the days that followed!

Strippers

Much has been said over the years about a form of entertainment that was staged a few times in the club bar. I am, of course, referring to another type of "Gentleman's Evening" which usually involved two strippers and a dodgy comedian. Most of the stories and opinions have been expressed by people who were not involved and, in some cases, not even born at the time. As one of the members who actually helped to organise these events, I think the time has come to tell the story as it was.

The time was, again, the early 1970's and the club was still desperately short of money and struggling to survive. It was also a time when many other organisations were experiencing similar problems and all were looking for ways to make money. During the previous ten years, or so, the laws governing obscenity, nudity and entertainment with a sexual content had been steadily relaxed following the acquittal of Penguin Books on charges of obscenity for publishing D.H.Lawrence's "Lady Chatterley's Lover". The producers of entertainment in all areas of the media, including radio, television, the cinema and the theatre all behaved like little boys in a sweet shop and tested the new

freedoms to the limit. Others, on the edge of the entertainment industry were not slow in joining in and the result was a thriving industry in providing strip shows for small organisations. A phone call to one of the agents was all that was needed to arrange a show and the most popular venues in Leicester were city centre pubs. I would estimate that roughly half of the pubs in Leicester city centre had "lunchtime strippers" every weekday and some had topless barmaids as well! In the evenings, the same performers moved to the pubs on the outskirts of the city and to the sporting clubs, rugby and soccer being the most popular. The strippers were then accompanied by a "blue" comedian who often doubled as a bodyguard for the women.

The Rowing Club was a little slow in jumping on the bandwagon but, hearing how much money was being taken elsewhere, decided to give it a go. A show was booked, tickets were sold and the event took more money than we had ever taken before. I can remember the bar being packed to capacity but I remember nothing of the show itself, after all, two girls taking their clothes off and a scruffy part time comedian telling dirty jokes is not something to stick in the mind for 40 years! 42nd Street at Drury Lane, it was not!

I think there were two more evenings of this type and one evening when someone showed a grainy porn film called, if I remember right, "The Sex Olympics". He probably thought this was an appropriate choice for a rowing club! I don't remember the film at all because I was too busy serving at the bar but I do remember that he wasn't much good with his projector because the film kept breaking and I don't think anyone saw the end!

The last strip show was one that nobody who was there would ever forget! Parts of it are forever planted in my mind but before I describe the show, I should outline the events preceding it. As usual, the phone call was made and two strippers and a comedian were booked. Tickets sold out fast and everything was set for another profitable evening. Then it all went wrong! During the week before the planned event, a phone call was received to say that only the comedian could come because the two girls were in police custody for performing a "lewd act" in Newark! This was no good – nobody came for the comedian! Furthermore, we were informed that no other strippers were available.

After a period of panic, someone had the bright idea of phoning a theatrical agent. This provided a solution to the problem, but at a cost. The agent didn't manage "strippers" but could arrange for an "exotic dancer". What's the difference? An exotic dancer is paid twice as much because she is classically trained and holds an Equity Card! We could only afford one of these, so we made do with her and the comedian.

The evening arrived, the comic had done his first turn and now it was time for the "exotic dancer"! She had agreed to do two routines and appeared for the first wearing a leopard skin bikini and leather thigh boots and carrying a bullwhip and a large sports bag which she placed on the floor behind where she was going to perform – all very mysterious! The music started and she began to gyrate around the room cracking the whip over the heads of the audience. It was immediately apparent that this girl could actually dance! Articles of clothing fell to the floor or were draped over the heads of some of the audience (Actually, there was not much to arrange!) but the attention of the audience was wandering. The sports bag was moving. Yes, it wasn't the beer, the bag was moving! Noticing the inattention of the audience, the young lady put down her whip and unzipped the bag to reveal a 5 foot long python! This became an integral part of her act for the next few minutes until she put it back in the bag and carried on without it. All was well until the python found that she had not fully zipped up the bag and made its escape whilst she was at the far end of the room. It headed straight for one of the rowing club's finest, a powerful man standing over 6ft in height. On this occasion, he was in a crouching position, backing away from the snake along the bench seating and using the discarded whip to defend himself! Of course, everyone else was enjoying his discomfort which finally came to an end when the performer rushed across the room shouting, "Don't hurt my snake!" and put it back in its bag.

For her second performance, she did a very proficient fire eating act using two flaming torches. At this point, I should describe a feature of the construction of the clubroom. For its entire length, the roof was supported by a large concrete beam. We had made a feature of this by fixing a sheet of plywood under its bottom edge with a vertical lip on either side. Inside this were strip lights which projected a warm, reflected light off the ceiling. Back to the action! – As a final flourish to her act, she waved the torches over her head in two spectacular arcs. What nobody was to know was that the lighting channels had collected a considerable amount of dust, cobwebs, crisp packets, etc. and as the flames reached the ceiling, all this caught fire and, accompanied by a strange humming noise, a flame shot the entire length of the room. "Bloody hell!" she exclaimed, "It ain't never done that before!"

As far as I remember, no more evenings of that nature were organised. It was very much a thing of its time and people were beginning to look for different forms of entertainment. To the critics I can only say that I make no apology for helping to raise hundreds of pounds to keep rowing alive in Leicester.

Mutiny!

When I joined the club, part of the building that was later to become the clubroom was called the Blade Store. As its name suggests, it contained blades but not the ones that were for the use of ordinary members. These were special and only to be used by the most senior members of the club when they came for their Sunday morning row. These senior members were the old men who were running the club and who had long since given up any form of competition. In addition, there was a “shell” four in the boathouse which was also reserved for the seniors, as were two matching “clinker” hulled boats with canvas decks, named “Welland” and “Wreake”.

We young members, who were trying to form crews to represent the club at regattas, had to make do with two older, open decked clinker fours, named “Wyvern” and “Windsor” and old, worn out blades. Whilst the boats we were allowed out in were in fairly good condition, they were heavier than the newer ones and the lack of decks made them liable to take on a lot of water when the weather or water conditions were bad. The blades we had were worn out on the leather sleeves and the gates rocked on their pins, which didn't help with squaring and feathering so “crabs” were fairly common even among the best of us. There was another boat which was even older and was so wide that the seats were offset to stroke and bow sides and was known as the “tub four”. It was fitted with fixed pins (no swivel gates) and consequently required fixed pin blades to go with it. I took some of my first strokes in this boat, so I remember the art of fixed pin rowing well. The buttons were in the form of a screw which extended about $\frac{3}{4}$ of the way round the loom. If you kept this firmly pressed against the gate, the blade would square itself as you moved forward to the next stroke – automatic squaring! At least, it did when it was new. Ours were so worn, we had automatic $\frac{1}{2}$ squaring! (and more crabs!)

One very enthusiastic member was Peter Barnacle. I think he held the position of Vice Captain at the time and he took on the responsibility of coaching us novices (or “maidens”, as we were called then). Frustrated with the quality of the equipment that we were allowed to use, he checked in the committee minutes and discovered that the new blades and the better boats had been purchased with club funds with no restriction as to who would be allowed to use them. With this in mind, he produced a crowbar at the next training session and forced entry into the blade store! From that day on, good use was made of the new blades and the better boats. Clearly, the older members were not happy that “their” kit was being used by the youngsters but their assertions that the kit belonged to them had been disproved and there was nothing they could do about it. I believe that it was this incident that released the club from the stranglehold of old men and transferred power to the young ones who wanted to take the club forward to rowing success. It was to take a long time and much more had to be done, but there was a new enthusiasm in the club.

Now that I am an “old man”, I still firmly believe that the club should be run by the younger members. They will keep repeating the same old mistakes but the enthusiasm is still there and it is for them to decide on their club's future. When they make bad decisions, they can correct them in time for the next generation and, in the meantime, the oldies can grumble and say, “We told you so!”

Barges

Sometime around 1962 we encountered a new threat to our activities. Somebody at Gimson's woodyard (where the new Barratt development now stands) decided that it would be a good idea to use barges to deliver their timber. The idea was to bring the barges into “our” basin and unload them directly into their premises by a crane sited in the area now occupied by Mawby and King's glassworks. This was, obviously, not good news for us.

The city council sanctioned the use of the area where The Watershed now stands but, thankfully for us, refused planning permission for a permanent crane on the far bank. The company went ahead with the scheme, I think while an appeal against the refusal of planning permission was lodged, and used a small mobile crane on our side of the river to unload the cargoes onto lorries. The lorries then made the short journey via Upperton Road and over the bridge where they were unloaded by another crane. This was clearly practically and economically unsustainable and the whole idea was abandoned when, I suppose, the appeal was rejected.

An amusing incident befell the first barge to attempt a delivery. I had gone to the club to repair a boat that someone had used as a step when breaking into the boathouse through one of the skylights. It was going to be quite a long job, so I had taken some lunch with me. It was a lovely day, so I took my lunch and sat on the bank by the landing stage to eat it. After a short time I heard the sound of a narrow boat as it began to manoeuvre into the basin. It was a very long boat and the bargee had to go backwards and forwards a few times before he could make the turn. Eventually he was on course and headed into the basin. Now, written in large letters along the far wall was “WATER 8 FEET DEEP. FOR SWIMMERS ONLY” (a legacy from the old swimming pool). I had seen scullers fall out of their boats at this point and sit on the bottom with their knees out of the water, so I knew that the sign was somewhat misleading. Being a helpful little lad, I shouted across to the bargee that he needed to move across a bit or he would run aground.

This suggestion was dismissed with an account of how long he had worked the canals accompanied with a suggestion that my parent's were unmarried and that I was not of sound mind! (Or words to that effect).

Moments later, the barge tilted and slewed across the river. The bow was firmly in the mud and the stern was very close to our bank. I thought it best not to comment and continued to eat my sandwich. I think it took about an hour before the boat was free again but I enjoyed watching the process without another word being exchanged!

A New Boathouse

With the young men now running the club came a new optimism. The confidence of youth made us believe that we were capable of achieving great things and we started to look at the state of the old boathouse. As I have already said, it was made of wood and leaned precariously to one side. It was also very insecure and the target of frequent break-ins. We started to dream of a new, larger and more permanent structure, capable of storing the new fleet of boats that we also dreamed of.

The driving force behind this new adventure was, again, Peter Barnacle. He had an arrogance and a confidence that seemed to drive him on against seemingly impossible odds. We had almost no money in the bank but he didn't see that as a reason for not getting started. A design for the boathouse appeared. I don't actually know who drew it up, but I seem to remember that an architect turned up now and again for a row, so maybe it was him. Sometime later, a lorry load of girders arrived. These had been produced in Frank Noake's engineering works, which I think was in the Dysart Way area of Leicester. I'm almost certain that Frank was never paid for this and, after threatening to take us to court, abandoned all hope of getting anything from our empty bank account for the sake of the club.

Having the girders was a good start but we couldn't begin the construction without some footings to plant them in. As we all know, our site is, like most river banks, on a gentle slope so all that was needed on the higher side was a series of concrete blocks poured straight into holes in the ground. We were all capable of doing this but the river side of the site would need footings which extended about 18 inches above ground level with a retaining brick wall between them to hold back the hardcore that was to form the base for the floor.

Peter had a plan! We collected all the bricks, sand, cement, etc. and, one Sunday morning, lay in wait for Peter Price to turn up for his weekly scull. Peter was a master bricklayer who had spent the whole week building houses and was looking forward to a couple of hours on the river. As soon as he arrived, he was handed a trowel (which he said was a load of f..... rubbish!) and politely asked if he would mind building our wall! What he said would have embarrassed Gordon Ramsey but a couple of hours later we had a 60 foot long wall. It would have been quicker if the rest of us had been able to mix the mortar fast enough for him!

After that, we erected the steel framework. I think it took us about two weeks of hard work whenever we could get together. In those days, we were not troubled by Health and Safety people and, although a couple of us fell from the roof supports (me included!) the only injuries were minor scrapes and bruises which seemed to add to the atmosphere of adventure that prevailed. I must admit, though, that as I reflect on the methods that we used to move the girders into place, we were very lucky and I would, in no way, recommend them!

The cladding for the building was corrugated asbestos and this was fitted by an outside contractor. I don't know how we found the money for this but we must have because, for a change, I don't remember any trouble! In fact, I went away to college at this time, so maybe I was spared the usual hassle!

When I returned from college, the new boathouse was complete. The walls and roof, the slab floor, the doors and even the lights were there. I remember standing by the doors, looking inside. Someone said, "We did it, Malc!" and a feeling of pride washed over me.

Soon after, we emptied the old boathouse for the last time and put the boats on their new racks. There was so much empty space! – but we were unstoppable now and were sure that we would soon have a new fleet of boats to fill the racks! It took a lot longer than our optimism allowed for but we filled them in the end.

There was one last job to do. The old boathouse had to be demolished. In a way, this was a sad occasion. It had served the club for many years and we were mindful of our predecessors who had built it and who were probably just as proud of their achievement as we were of ours.

As I have mentioned before, it leaned dramatically to one side and we thought that it would collapse fairly easily, given a good shove. Once again, Peter Barnacle took charge. At the time, he worked for one of the first television rental firms, "Rentaset" and he had a small company van. We fixed a rope between the boathouse and the back axle of the van and he drove away expecting the boathouse to fall down in pieces. It didn't! The van stopped and its wheels spun uselessly on the gravel. The old boathouse was stronger than we had thought and put up a final fight but after it had been weakened by sawing through some supports it finally succumbed and gave way to a new era for the club.

The Day “Blue Peter” Came

Sometime, during the 1970's, the newly formed Leicester Civic Society decided that it would be a good idea to tidy up the canal towpath and the surrounding banks. They approached us and asked if we would be willing to help. We said we would and a date was fixed. In the meantime somebody had decided that the effort would benefit from some publicity and informed the media. I have no idea how it happened, but word reached the children's TV programme “Blue Peter” and they thought it would make an interesting topic for the programme.

It was agreed that the best place to base the clean up would be at the rowing club and, I seem to remember, as arrangements progressed it became obvious that the rowing club would be doing nearly all the work as the Civic Society had been unable to get much help from anywhere else! It has to be realised that, at the time, the riverside was in an appalling state and only frequented by hundreds of anglers, a few rowers and many of the city's undesirables. The towpath was a rubble-strewn track, full of potholes and quite dangerous for cyclists and pedestrians. Normally, it would be lined with anglers, one about every 10 feet, who would think nothing about dumping their rubbish all over the place. The banks were completely overgrown and filled with all sorts of rubbish and assorted debris would be floating in the water, including unwanted dogs that had been tied to car tyres and thrown in to drown! Couple this with the surrounding area of scrap metal yards and railway sidings and it's easy to see why most of the population of Leicester turned a blind eye to the area and just didn't want to know.

The day approached and we were informed that the BBC would be sending a film crew along with the legendary John Noakes to cover the event. We didn't know it at the time but John Noakes is a canal enthusiast and was very keen to do the job. He duly arrived, at the wheel of a sports car that he had built on the programme. I think it was a Caterham kit car and everyone gathered around it for a good look and, for a time, lost interest in the clean up day!

Eventually, we got started. People set about collecting rubbish from the banks under the puzzled gaze of the assembled anglers and I took my place as one of the rowers in the “Tub Pair”. This was our basic training boat and was easily large enough for extra bodies who could pull rubbish from the river with grappling hooks. Soon after we had started, we were called to the bank by the Blue Peter film crew and asked to take John Noakes with us so they could film him pulling rubbish out of the water into our boat. Obviously, this was thought to be “better television” than collecting it from the bank and putting it into bin bags. Everything was going well until he pulled out a bike frame “the wrong way”! The director shouted that that was no good and could he do it again, please? So that the bike wasn't lost forever, we tied it to the grapple before throwing it back in. I saw the same bike dragged from the river at least half a dozen times before he got it right! How the finished version was any different from the first (true) version, I will never know but it wasted a lot of time for us.

Later in the day, the film crew left but John Noakes stayed behind and helped us tidy the area behind our changing rooms. He turned out to be a really nice bloke who was genuinely happy to muck in with the lads and, when we had finished, he joined us in the bar for a drink. After the hours of filming and the disruption to our activities, the finished item filled less than 10 minutes of the programme!

Because of the delays caused by the filming, we didn't get as much done as we had hoped and decided to have another go a few weeks later. One benefit of having a TV crew on the first clean up was that the Leicester Mercury felt moved to cover the event and maybe this led to the Civic Society being able to get more volunteers and the clean ups became quite a regular event. I don't know who eventually paid for it, but I'm sure the clean ups led to the towpath being given a proper surface and the banks being properly cleared and grassed.

Rowing

Those who have read my previous accounts of the activities of Leicester Rowing Club in the 1960s and 70s could be forgiven for wondering if there was any actual rowing going on! The truth is that there wasn't much going on at all! The few regular members were far too busy building up the infrastructure of the club to get out on the water regularly and many of the outings that were achieved were dedicated to teaching any new members the basics.

Despite this, we did manage to cobble together the occasional crew and go to a few regattas. Wins were infrequent but did happen occasionally and when they did we all celebrated to the full. All the time, the membership was growing – painfully slowly – but we were getting there.

During this period, I went away to college for three years, returning each vacation when I hoped to get a row (There was no rowing at the college I attended). Because Leicester had already established a crew in my absence or was doing nothing, the best chance I had to get a row was to go to whichever regatta was on and walk about asking if anyone had failed to arrive! In the days of committee boats rowers sometimes got lost on the way and I managed to get a seat on several occasions and rowed for various clubs in the process. I don't suppose this would be allowed now but things were much more relaxed then and the clubs seemed happier if nobody had to pull out because somebody had failed to arrive. Anyway, it seemed to make no difference to the results because I can't remember winning on any of these occasions and the clubs were duly grateful, keeping me well supplied with beer afterwards!

The Ambulance

Eventually, we were entering more and more races and the need for some form of transport became evident. As I have mentioned in a previous story, we often went to events by train, taking the blades with us in the guard's van, and used committee boats. But times were changing and we were being obliged to take our own boats as well, so a suitable vehicle had to be obtained.

Once again, Peter Barnacle had an idea! I don't know where he found it, but he managed to obtain an old ambulance! This was an impressive vehicle, made by Bedford, it sported front mudguards that swept back as running boards to form steps for the front doors. On top of the mudguards, either side of the huge bonnet were a pair of large headlights. The lean burn engine had not even been thought of so it was equipped with two enormous petrol tanks, one on each side.

We fitted a boat rack along the roof from the back to two poles attached to the front bumper. Inside, we constructed wooden bench seats along each side. We were now ready for action; boat on the roof, blades in the middle of the floor and crew on the benches.

The only journey I remember well was to the Head of the River Race. We took an eight and, although I wasn't in the crew, I went along for the ride with several other supporters. I don't think the result was anything to shout about but we all had a good day and eventually had everything loaded up and we set off back to Leicester. It was beginning to get dark and we had rigged up a red light to the stern of the boat which extended a considerable distance behind the vehicle because, in those days, eights didn't break down into manageable sections and had to be transported in one 60 foot length.

As dusk settled, Peter, who was driving, turned on the lights but forgot that the light on the stern of the boat was connected to the interior light in the back. He remembered when he stopped at some traffic lights and the furniture van following pushed us forward a few feet! "Quick!" he shouted, "Turn the light on!" He jumped out of the cab and shouted to the unfortunate lorry driver, "Didn't you see that light?" The only damage was to the front of the furniture van which sustained a dent with two holes, where the rudder pin loops had gone through. Oh, and the driver's pride was a bit dented too!

Our adventures with the ambulance were fairly brief. If I remember right, it came to an end when it was vandalised and we sold it for scrap. A sad end, but fun while it lasted.

Teddy's Lorry

Our president, Teddy Friesz, was the owner of an aluminium foundry and had a 3 ton tipper lorry. He allowed us to use this at weekends to transport the boats and we constructed a rack to make this possible.

My first rides in this were in the back with the blades. It was not the most comfortable way to travel and I suspect the insurance company wouldn't allow it now but we took it as being all part of the fun. We travelled to places like Nottingham and Burton and rigged up a cover when it rained. Roundabouts are a bit of a challenge when you are in the back of a lorry – you tend to roll about a bit!

Eventually, I was promoted to driver and quite enjoyed it. When we took the eight, I had to be particularly careful to miss the lampposts on small roundabouts and tight turns. On one occasion, a police motorcyclist pulled alongside by the Jury Wall and asked where we were going. When I told him, "Nottingham" he said, "Follow me!" and he went ahead, stopping the traffic at the junctions and waving us through red lights until we were safely on Melton Road!

Thank goodness for sectional boats!