Recollections from 1955 – 1958

Just prior to my becoming a member, the club was given the use of the former motor launch boathouse on a loop in the River Soar by the owner and boat club patron, the 4th Lord Crawshaw of Whatton House, who at the time was much the same age as many of the undergraduates at Sutton B. The loop and Tongue Island were created when Jimmy Gadd’s Cut was dug in 1826 to make it easier for commercial barges to navigate the Devil’s Elbow on the river Soar. The campus Surveyor, O.D. Maguire, organised the flooring over of the boat wharf and racks to store the boats.

Thereafter it was up to the club members, all first year students bar three second years, to develop the site though O.D. was extremely helpful in sourcing materials and allowing us the use of his workshops.

In addition we had to teach ourselves to the skills of rowing and racing as none of the first years had any prior experience. In this respect second-year student and Captain of Boats, Des Lindley, was an excellent coach and taught us the rudiments. It was unfortunate, therefore, that he dropped out of College just prior to the end of the first term. Many working parties were needed to clear the overgrown site around the boathouse and pulling debris from the backwater to allow access for the boats and the fitting of secure wooden-framed corrugated-steel-covered doors. We used to launch from the slippery slopes of the bank, a somewhat hazardous process, so a high priority DIY job was to build three concrete steps long enough to accommodate the four crew members at launch.

We inherited three clinker fours, which we named Faith, Hope and Charity, that were presumably designed for school boys and extremely difficult for heavier crews to sit. This was a distinct advantage when we loaned them out for local rowing events as if we drew them we were on home territory and if another club drew them we knew they would have problems! From the proceeds of Christmas draws, generously supported by Players and Wills cigarette companies, we purchased a dilapidated tub pairs training boat, appropriately named Maid of Deadwood, new sets of blades in the club colours of blue, yellow and green (I still have one shortened oar in my bathroom), and two clinker single sculls. These we named Chaota after the wife of the club’s president, J Boris Brown a GB oarsman in the double sculls event.
at the New Zealand Empire Games in 1949, who had a marquee hire business on the river at Normanton, and Pamela after the nude pin-up of the day (Pamela Green 1929-2010).

The river Soar regularly burst its banks leaving the boat house isolated in a flooded landscape. However, provided we could actually reach the boat house and launch, the floods did not seriously curtail our training. It just meant that the coxes had to skillfully avoid floating debris in the fast flowing flood waters and also to be able to remember where the course of the river was to avoid being grounded in a field.

The racing programme included many of the early summer Midlands regattas including: - Burton, Boston, Newark, Chester, Stourport, Nottingham and the winter 6 km. Head-of-the-Trent together with friendly matches against other clubs. Unfortunately, each season just as all crews were getting into their stride the academic year ended and we went down otherwise we might just have had that elusive regatta win. As it was our record included a sixth in the Head-of-the-Trent (35 seconds behind the winners having started 26th) and the following year starting sixth and finishing third (just 11 seconds behind the winners), wins in the Loughborough Boat Club Spring Scratch Fours and the Nottingham University Yule Scratch Fours and the beaten finalists at the Midlands Universities Championships, Nottingham University Faculty Fours, and Boston and Newark Regattas; the latter might have been our first win if the four crew members had not also elected to row in the pairs and sculls on the same day!

We were somewhat fit in those days with river outings on Wednesday, Saturday and Sunday; circuit training in the OTC Drill Hall on Tuesdays, road running on Thursdays, two hours of Scottish country dancing on Wednesdays followed by the Student Hop in the JCR and not to mention the pedal cycling to and fro from the boathouse.

Coaching was a problem as the tow path was on the opposite side of the river to the boathouse and inaccessible. We, therefore, relied upon the more experienced acting as coxswains and coaches for the less experienced crew with no shortage of volunteers to cox the ladies four, a ladies section having been inaugurated in 1956. In addition the President coached the crews for the Head-of-the-Trent as he single-sculled ahead of the four!

Transporting ourselves and the blades to regatta was a problem and we were grateful to the Vicar of Ashby de la Zouch for the loan of a converted ambulance and the Economics Department for the use of their Ford Popular. In my
second year I bought an ex-WD converted Hillman pick-up from a scrap yard in Carlton, Nottingham, and after a complete overhaul, rebuild and a Ferguson Grey paint job in the campus workshop at the dead of night (with the connivance of John Chatterton DFC and Jack Jarram) we were able to use that for transport.

Other memories include the frequent flooding of the boat house and surrounds and the hours spent shoveling mud; each Burton Regatta where the effluent from the brewery discharged into the river at the start and you couldn’t see the water for foam; the borrowing of an eight from the Loughborough College Boat Club, taking it through a lock (on the return journey we carried the boat round the lock!) and rowing much further than we wanted in order to find a place on the River Soar wide enough to enable us to turn around; being attacked by an angry swan defending her signets; having fishermen flick their lines at us as we interrupted their sport and taking the Midland Agricultural College Old Students Association (MACOSA) tie with its crossed pitchforks and carefully sowing a gold thread across the ends of all of the pitchforks so that they looked like oars and using it as our club tie.

From memory those competing during my watch were:

**A crew:** Colin Small (Bow), Brian Hardaker (Bow), Rodney Durrant, Graham Suggett, Reg Squires (Stroke), Graham Jones (Cox), Paul Freeman (Cox)

**B and C crews:** John Alford, E.W. Black, R.H. Brown, Dave Bullock, Brian Hill, John Maskell (Mac), Peter Morris, Gordon Platford (Stroke), T.W. Robinson, Albert Smith, Chris Southall, John Ranger, Dave Thirkell, Colin Wells, John Davidson (Cox), Mike Daw (Cox), John Roberts (Cox)

**Ladies crews:** Mavis Foster, Pat Grant, Pat Howe (Stroke), Shirley Keer, Anita Larcher, Margaret Lyon, Marti Volkov, Judith Walker, Judith Whewell, Pat Womersley.

*Apologies for my memory for any errors or omissions in the above list.*

In the fifties, rolls of film and their processing were expensive and used sparingly. We tended to make black and white contact prints and enlargements ourselves as members of the photographic society. As a consequence, the accompanying pictures have not kept very well over the 65 years but I hope that they, together with my ramblings, give a feeling of the early days of NUSARC. *(A fuller selection of photographs can be accessed at [www.devilselbowrowing.co.uk](http://www.devilselbowrowing.co.uk) – why not send your photographs to that site?)*

With greetings and best wishes to all with whom I shared a memorable three years at Sutton B. Prof. R H Graham Suggett OBE JP DL HonDSc, Captain of Boats 1956 —58.

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