

# UPPER THAMES ROWING CLUB

Upper Thames Rowing Club was the brainchild of Peter and Diane Sutherland.

Peter had rowed at Shrewsbury and after the war he went up to Cambridge University where he was captain of boats at St. Catharine's College and subsequently also at Maidenhead Rowing Club. Later he coached the Oxford Boat Race crew in the Jumbo Edwards era and took the Oxford/Leander crew to the Rome Olympics in 1960. He also coached the Molesey-based coxed four for the same Olympics and in following years Leander Club and London Rowing Club eights for the Grand Challenge Cup. He brought together England's leading rowing clubs to try to reorganise the A.R.A, advocating a professional administration and coaches, but in the early 1960s this professional approach was not always considered popular.

His primary concern however, was with the lack of success at the top level by clubs in the Upper Thames area; Leander was virtually the only exception. With this in mind he invited the captains of Henley, Reading, Eton Excelsior, Maidenhead and Marlow rowing clubs to a series of meetings from which evolved the idea of having a centre where the best oarsmen from the Upper Thames area could combine in crews which could take on the best from the Tideway and other regions.

The original concept was that just as in the University Boat Race people row for Oxford or Cambridge with the names of their colleges acknowledged, so could oarsmen and women row for a new Upper Thames club with the names of their original clubs similarly acknowledged.

The first meetings were held at the Sutherland's first married home at Oakfern Cottage, 46 New Street, Henley-on-Thames, and in April 1963 it was agreed that Upper Thames Rowing Club should be formed with its primary objective to be a centre of excellence for experienced oarsmen in the Upper Thames area who had national and international aspirations.

Outside of this group of local rowing club captains, it was considered virtually impossible in those days to start a new rowing club but a local artist, Ann Gordon, heard about the idea and introduced to the Sutherlands a local business man, George Robinson, the brother of the founder of Robinson College, Cambridge, who agreed to back the project.

There were few funds available but an old Salters coxed four was purchased for £15 and then an old Oxford VIII – and UTRC was off the ground and on the water with a total of two boats, eight oarsmen and a cox. There was no boathouse and so the coxed four had to be kept on the ground floor of Saragossa House, New Street, the Sutherland's new and much larger home. The french windows at one end of the living room had to be opened to accommodate the length of the boat while at the other end it was fed through the windows of this Queen Anne house on to New Street and the traffic stopped so that the boat could be carried down to the river.

While this was acceptable for a four, (just), the VIII had to be kept on trestles against Leander's wall in the Regatta fields because its length could not be accommodated in Saragossa House.

The sponsor, George Robinson, then rented on the Club's behalf the old Regatta boom shed next to Remenham Club as the first boathouse. There was no electricity, water, toilets or changing rooms but the spirit was there including that of the first Honorary Treasurer Leslie Tozer, the manager of the local branch of the National Westminster Bank who gave invaluable financial support with very little collateral. Difficult though it is to believe today within a few weeks boat racks were installed and a hard river frontage established from which the crews could boat.

Club colours had to be chosen. It was decided to use dark blue and white. These colours were selected for a number of reasons not least because they were easily obtainable and wearable and although they were also used by Henley Rowing Club, their oars, like Oxford University's, had plain dark blue spoons. So it was decided to have blades with white spoons. These were not used by any other English club, and they were easy to paint and to touch up when scratched.

The difficulty was to think of a crest for the club. Then one day Mrs Diane Sutherland noticed as she was going under Henley Bridge in a dinghy the carved stone faces of Thamesis and Isis on

the keystones to the bridge. They seemed immediately to be the most suitable, meaningful and obvious choice. The original designs by Lady Ann Damer were found above Marsh Lock in the boathouse of the sponsor George Robinson and used as the basis for the design on the Club's tie and rowing vest.

A coxless pair was obtained when a film called "Tamahine" starring Dennis Price was being made on the Henley Reach. Peter Sutherland coached Dennis Price while Diane steered. After filming, the Club was allowed to buy the pair which brought the Club's fleet of boats to a total of three.

## The first HRR crew competed in 1964

In the following year (1964) the club entered its first crew for Henley Royal Regatta in the Thames Cup.

Subsequently UTRC crews included visits to Esso House in their training schedule, to work with psychologists and management consultants to study what was then known as "systematic thinking and mental strength" – a system almost identical to that used by most of Britain's top sportsmen today.

Since then Upper Thames Rowing Club has never failed to enter at least one crew for Henley Royal Regatta each year and in one year in the late sixties had six crews entered – for the Thames Cup, the Wyfold Cup (semi-final), the Diamonds (semi-final) and the Silver Goblets.

## The Gibraltar Week of the Sea

Amongst many other bizarre events in the history of the club was the time in 1965 when we sent a crew to The Gibraltar Week of the Sea. The regatta was a small affair dominated by the British forces, with the RAF and the British Garrison represented, as well as the WRNS and the WRAF in the ladies events. UTRC competed for the Piccadilly Challenge cup against RAF Gibraltar Rowing Club and Societe Nautique de Casablanca (Where are they now – ed). Memory seems to recollect that the UTRC crew won, but more importantly had a great time and enjoyed some splendid hospitality.



During the 1970s Upper Thames provided rowing for a limited membership base in equipment that was by no means "cutting edge". The club had a couple of racing craft but mainly catered for a group of dedicated scullers and pair oared crews, including stalwart members Glynne Davies, Derek Thurgood and Sid Rand.

In 1982 Peter Sutherland negotiated the purchase of the land on which the old HRR boom shed, by now Upper Thames's main boathouse, stood. Stretching from the bridge just upstream of Remenham Club to Old Blades, this gave UTRC almost 400 metres of the most sought-after

frontage on to the most famous regatta course in the world – in fact, a longer frontage than the Stewards Enclosure.

By the end of the 1980s, top class ex-international oarsmen had moved to the area and Upper Thames began to rise up the rankings in Veteran and Elite rowing. Members included Charlie Wiggin, who won a bronze medal in the Moscow Olympics, Chris Drury and Paul Stuart Bennett, both ex-world champions in lightweight rowing and Beverly Jones, who stroked the Women's eight in Moscow and learned to row at the club.

By 1990 Alison Gill, the pre-eminent female athlete in the GB team, became a member and this drew in other women, including Juliet Machan and Naomi Ashcroft, who later won World titles in the lightweight pair. The club men reached the semi final of the Thames Cup in 1993 and again in the Britannia in 1995, beginning an era of higher performance at UTRC. In 2008 and 2013 UTRC crews reached the final at HRR, and in 2014 the club finally won it's first Henley trophy, the Britannia Challenge Cup. Another crew then won the Wyfolds an hour later to cap an extraordinary day in the club's history.

The club's footprint has been established in two main building phases, first in 1985 when the original clubhouse was built to the side of the boom shed, then in 2009 when the boom shed was replaced with a two tiered extension.



In October 2005 Boris Johnson, then Member of Parliament for Henley-on-Thames, relived his days as a 'wet bob' at Eton when he joined the President, Peter Sutherland, in a skiff on opening the new enlarged Boathouse.

Crews from UTRC compete regularly overseas in places as diverse as Australia, America, Russia and continental Europe and the membership is now truly international.

Members enjoy Henley regatta at the club, which becomes an oasis of rowing calm for a few days in early July each year and generates much needed income for the club.

Upper Thames also runs the Henley Masters Regatta the week after HRR and an Autumn Head in October.

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