



## Falcon Rowing and Canoeing Club – a 150-year history

Oxford is renowned as a centre for rowing especially within the University college community. The banks of the Isis house many college boathouses and University students have been taking boats out for a mixture of exercise and amusement since around the end of the 1700s. The major Oxford college rowing competition, 'Summer Eights', is thought to date from the summer of 1815, a few weeks prior to the battle of Waterloo. But rowing was by no means confined to the University.

The Falcon Boat Club as it was first called, was formed in the spring of 1869 by a group of young men who primarily wanted to form a social club for pleasure rowing for residents of Oxford. At the time there were several other town rowing clubs including Isis, Rose, Ariel and Neptune. All were familiar names at the time but none of these exist any longer. City of Oxford Rowing Club was formed in 1968 by the amalgamation of Neptune RC and Hannington RC. Falcon is the oldest surviving city rowing club.

Falcon originally had strong connections with St Cross Church, Holywell. The founders were N. Harrison, whose father was the miller at Holywell mill and a Church warden at St Cross, and G W Norton of 149 Woodstock Road, a young lawyer. A meeting was called on the 7th April 1869 at the Mill house and it was decided to form a Boat Club, a committee was formed which consisted of N Harrison, G W Norton, secretary and treasurer, W R Simms, F J Gadney, J H Castell, R Richmond, J Lumley, C Batchelor and A E Lockwood. The first general meeting of the Falcon Boat Club was held on the 1st June 1869.

The first year was occupied chiefly in organisation and pleasure rowing, and by the beginning of the boating season they had enrolled about 20 members.

It was determined to make some kind of a show at the Regatta of that first year, and two fours were entered; one for the "Never-Won" race, the crew being T. Lumley, G. W. Norton, A. S Lockwood and N. Harrison (str). They rowed in the final heat against Neptune and gave a good display, as far as Saunders Bridge, where they collapsed owing, it is rumoured, to the long beard of the stroke becoming entangled with his oar! A crew was also entered for the youths under 18. This consisted of K. Sayer, W.R. Simms (str) A. Harris, W.C. Hodges. They were beaten by Neptune also.

Remarkably for the era, Falcon admitted active women members. Some of them were the daughters of watermen and could handle an oar with great skill although they were somewhat hampered by their tight lacing and long skirts.

In those early years, the rowing clubs owned very little. Headquarters were in a pub and the boats and oars were hired by arrangement with the boat hirers, the main one being Salters. As the rowing clubs owned little property, they paid no rent or rates, no electricity or gas bills, no boat licences and perhaps best of all had no costly boats to buy and maintain.

One of the first things the committee had to do was to choose the club colours. W R Simms drew up some designs and from these turquoise, blue, black and amber were chosen.



The club colours were, and perhaps still are, very important to members of the club. They are the colours of our rowing vest, but they were also the hat ribbon for the felt bowler, the straw boater, the blazer badge and even the long stockings of the 1930s. They were the colours of the flag hoisted on the flag pole of the club barge (see later) and at the boathouse. The flag was flown on special occasions and lowered on the death of a member. When Falcon were presented with their first set of oars in 1937 the colours were painted on the blades and when the first boat was purchased the riggers were also painted in club colours.

Falcon's first headquarters were in the King's Arms hotel at the corner of Parks Road and Holywell Street, even in those days a well-known University watering hole. Over the years, various other pubs were used as headquarters including the New Inn in St Aldate's, the Maidenhead on Turl Street, the Clarendon on Cornmarket, the old Whitehouse Abingdon Road, the Old Anchor St Aldate's and the Fox and Hounds Abingdon Road. Although the club no longer has a pub as a headquarters, we still use them occasionally for meetings of various kinds especially in the winter.

When the club was formed the Isis looked very different to how it is today. There was a lock at Folly Bridge, the remains of which can still be seen today in the narrower of the two channels around the island. The wider northern channel was blocked by a weir. On the island itself stood The Boat House Tavern. There were no boathouses downstream, just 'King's Barge' moored alongside Christ Church meadow. This barge, owned by the boatbuilder Isaac King, served as the finishing post for bumping races and it became the custom to indicate the results of each day's racing by the order of flags raised on the barge flagpole, as shown on many contemporary pictures. This barge and the Tavern were also used as changing rooms by the oarsmen. Messrs. John and Stephen Salter took over the barge in 1852 for their own boatbuilding business, before eventually acquiring the Boat House Tavern, the current premises of Salters Steamers.

The opposite bank sloped gently down to the river. There were no boathouses and the towpath between Folly and Iffley Locks was blocked by a dozen gates at various fences and bridges. Punts were then, as now, a nuisance, although, instead of tourists, the problem then was the large number of professional ferrymen plying their trade across the river, and their general disregard for other river users. Originally a large number of sailboats were also kept near Folly Bridge, eventually moving upstream to Port Meadow to make way for more college barges.



One of the first things to be done after Falcon's first AGM in June 1869 was to hire a college barge for July and August complete with waterman. The waterman, who was a college servant, looked after the barge keeping it clean and tidy, pumped out the bilge water, fetched the coal and drinking water and moved the barge when required. Having acquired a barge, a piano was installed, and the barge was moored along the Christchurch meadow bank. The barge was used as a grandstand for viewing the

various regattas during the season. It was also used as a changing room. They were quite spacious and a coal burning stove kept it warm inside. It was not unusual for over two hundred visitors to be entertained on board during a regatta.

Over time several barges were moored along Christchurch meadow. On some of the larger barges it was possible to have a dance on the top deck. For special occasions the barges would be illuminated



at night with dozens of little oil lamps. These would be placed along the outline of the barge and would be quite a sight on a still summer night before the days of electric lighting when the sky above Oxford could be very dark.

The rowing season was by today's standards very short, little more than two months, July and August. Sometimes there was a little pre-season rowing when the first four would try and get a flying start by having a few outings in late June.

Old and new members would meet on Salters slipway at Folly bridge in the evening on Monday of the first week in July and the captain would divide them up into crews and the short but hectic rowing season would be under way.

One reason for the short season was that the town clubs could not spread their wings until the University rowers were off the river and this meant waiting until the colleges had gone down and Henley regatta was over. Many of the college barges were taken down to Henley for the regatta. After Henley there was no longer a need to compete with the colleges for hired racing boats. There were complaints that the season was too short, and crews could not prepare for rowing when the regattas came upon them. It was not until after the First World War that the rowing season was extended. There was not much enthusiasm for rowing in the winter; it wasn't until the evenings had lengthened out and the warm weather had come that members started to think of boating.

During its 150 years of existence Falcon has had its highs and lows, but for sustained success the decade 1888-1897 was one of the most remarkable in its history. During these years it won the Grand Challenge Cup once, the District Cup twice, The Town Cup five times, the "Never-Won" Cup five times, the Prince of Wales Cup twice, the Gigs Pairs four times, the Senior Sculls six times, and the Whiffs three times, besides going Head of the River in the bumping races of 1894.

The next 38 years could be described as lean ones, the Club was more successful socially than on the river, the dances, smoking concerts and annual dinners between 1900 and 1914 were usually described as unqualified successes. In the 1920s there were times when the club could, only with difficulty scrape together enough rowing members to boat one IV. However, there was always a good committee that kept things going in the darkest times and about 1933 the tide turned. In 1935, '36, '37 and '38 Falcon were the Head of the River in the City Bumping Races. In 1938 and '39 they won the Grand Challenge Cup for Senior Eights, which they had last won on 1897.

From 1945 to 1955, the club had another run of successes. Falcon was Head of the River in the City Bumping races every year but one from 1946 to 1955. Their successes at regattas all over the Midlands were too numerous to mention, club spirit and enthusiasm were at a high level, one crew won seven senior events in a single year and all members spent their free weekends working on farms, erecting pig-sties and picking potatoes to raise enough money to buy a faster boat. They called it the Falcon and in it continued to win more races.

In 1958 Falcon became the first Oxford Club to own their own boathouse, which they built themselves near Donnington Bridge. This long felt ambition was achieved on the 23rd August 1958, when it was opened by the City Architect, Mr E. G. Chandler.

In the early 1970s there was another lean period and by the summer of 1977 the Falcon committee became very dispirited with the way things were going. They had tried for years to get new members and make Falcon a thriving and successful club but all in vain. Each year a few new members would arrive but by the end of the year most of them had gone. The responsibility of running the club fell



on the same people year after year and they felt that they had done their duty and it was time to wind the club up.

An extraordinary general meeting was held at the boathouse on the 13th June 1977 with the project of closing the club. 42 people attended the meeting, mostly former Falcon oarsmen. The chairman and warden from the neighbouring Riverside Centre also attended. They suggested that, as they had lots of young people doing elementary canoe courses, these people should be channelled towards the Falcon to do a second course in rowing. The meeting accepted this proposal and agreed to give it a three-month trial. After the meeting there was a great feeling of relief and hope for the future.

In the event these proposals came to nothing as no youngsters came over from the Riverside Centre. However, there were two developments that changed things for the better. Firstly, in 1987, Oxford Polytechnic formed a rowing club and wanted somewhere to store their boats and equipment and somewhere to row from. After somewhat prolonged negotiations they came to Falcon joining as ordinary Falcon members and entering competitions as a composite Polytechnic/Falcon crew. This arrangement was relatively short-lived but from those early beginnings Oxford Brookes Rowing Club has grown significantly, owns a boathouse complex in Wallingford, and now claims to have the strongest undergraduate rowing program in the UK



The second significant development was that a small group of senior canoeists at the Riverside Centre decided to start using the Falcon boathouse for a base for sprint and marathon kayaking. Although the numbers of kayakers were small their presence helped keep Falcon going.

The small group of kayakers progressed with their paddling to a very high level. In 1983, Rhod Kinch and Paul Lanighan competed at the International Kayak Marathon World Cup in Copenhagen. They came an impressive second place in the Men's K2 category. The following year, when the World Cup was held in Shannon, Ireland, Rhod Kinch became Marathon World Champion in the Men's K1 category.

At about the same time Peter Travis joined Falcon and by 1994 he was elected as club President. Peter worked tirelessly to strengthen Falcon's links with the local community.

Peter helped to establish strong links with OXSRAD (Oxford & District Sports and Recreation Association for the Disabled) and organised rowing and kayaking for disabled groups. He was also pivotal in inviting members of Oxford's Asian Community to Falcon's boathouse and meadow to picnic and try boating. Over time this led to the formation of the Oxfordshire Bangladeshi Boat Club and the Annual Bangladeshi Boat Race which was held on the river at Donnington Bridge using traditional Bangladeshi Nowka Bais boats and supported by members of Falcon.

In 2008 Peter led another initiative, this time to form satellite clubs with local schools. The strongest link was with Cheney School with the foundation of Cheney Falcon Rowing Club, the county's only state school rowing club at the time, and Cheney Falcon kayaking club. Links with





other local schools have also been made with various levels of success.

At about the same time several new canoe/kayak members joined Falcon bringing new strengths and enthusiasm. Jo Bates, a former national marathon kayak champion, took on the role of Lead Coach, and assisted by a team of coaches, helped the club grow and have increased racing success. Under Jo's guidance several junior Falcon paddlers have reached a level where they have represented Great Britain at international regattas. Nick Barnett took on the role of Kayak Captain in 2009. Since that time canoe/kayak membership has increased to approximately 240 members.

The rowing section of the club has steadily grown.....

As well as having racing success Falcon is a very inclusive community club. Links with local schools, Scout troops, Sea Cadets, disability groups such as KEEN Oxford, the Dyspraxia Foundation and Oxfordshire Association for the Blind are an important part of the club. Over the years, the club has also managed to keep links to Oxford Brookes University and to establish new links with Oxford University.

In 2012 the work by Falcon members was recognised by the club being presented with the Queen's Award for Volunteering Groups by the Lord Lieutenant of Oxfordshire, Tim Stevenson.

Looking back over the 150-year history it's clear to see the importance of Falcon in the boating life of Oxford. It has been a place for thousands of Oxford residents to access and enjoy the river whether for recreation or competition. The future of the club looks very promising. Membership numbers are at an all time high with over 400 club members including a large proportion of juniors. Our plans are to build a new boathouse offering better facilities to our members and visitors such as disability and school groups. Larger changing rooms, with better toilet and shower facilities, a larger gym area and a social space will all enable the club to continue to inspire more people to be active outdoors; connecting people with their environment and promoting the benefits on mental and physical well-being.