**The Development of Canoeing and Kayaking at Falcon**

**Peter Travis (Club President 1995-2016)**

The Falcon Boat Club traces its roots back to 1869 when it was established as a rowing club primarily for the staff of Oxford University colleges. Its inaugural committee meeting convened in April of that year. Its early membership comprised individuals from Holywell Church who sought recreational boating opportunities. During this period, the club did not possess any boats or dedicated facilities, and it often convened in local pubs or, during a brief teetotalism phase, rented rooms.

In the club's early days, activities on the river were limited to summer rowing, using rented college boats. While boating clubs at the time often accommodated various watercraft, there is no historical record of canoes or canoeing at Falcon. The closest semblance to canoeing involved Dongola racing, where crews of six paddled an Oxford punt, an endeavour championed by R.T. Rivington, a later club chairman.

Name changes and club colours have been a part of Falcon's history. Initially known as Falcon Boat Club, it underwent subsequent name changes, becoming The Falcon Rowing Club and later Falcon Rowing and Canoe Club. Today, it has reverted to its original name, Falcon Boat Club, with canoeing/kayaking and rowing operating as self-organized sports within its structure. The club's distinctive colours, turquoise-blue, amber, and black on white, have remained consistent throughout its history.

A significant turning point for Falcon Boat Club occurred in May 1977 when the club faced dwindling rowing membership and financial difficulties. Despite efforts to attract rowers, none were joining, and a meeting was convened to discuss closing the club. During this crisis, a group of elite kayak paddlers from The Riverside Centre, located adjacent to Falcon, sought a new training base. Learning of Falcon's situation, David Holmes MBE, the warden of The Riverside Centre, attended Falcon's Extraordinary General Meeting (EGM) and proposed that the kayak paddlers relocate to Falcon. The Falcon committee accepted the proposal, and thus, Falcon's canoe and kayak section was born, ultimately saving the club.

The first documented mention of paddlers at Falcon appeared in the Oxford Mail in 1982, featuring Robert Doman, a British national team paddler. In the following year there was also mention of Nicholas Porucznik, another British team member and a local resident, who later became Club president. I (Peter Travis) joined Falcon in 1987 and later became club president for a period of 25 years.

Prominent figures in Falcon's early kayaking community included Dr. Rhod Kinch, a world-class marathon racer, and Paul Lanigan, a key member of the squad. Richard and Dan Golder, who initially came from Banbury canoe club, also contributed to the club as capable paddlers, with Dan later returning as Falcon's first paid coach.

Falcon canoeists aspired to broaden their focus beyond elite racing and aimed to become a diverse flat-water club. They sought to attract local enthusiasts to flat-water kayaking and adopted the slogan "gaining and retaining" members. Falcon embarked on a grant-finding mission to acquire suitable boats for novice paddlers. Oxford City Council provided the initial financial support, and the club received additional assistance from local donors. Having Jon Bolton, a canoeist and coach, as the council’s Sports Development Manager at the time was a help.

One significant area of development was addressing gender parity within the club. Initially, women and girls were underrepresented in kayaking, mirroring a broader trend in the sport. Falcon implemented programs to encourage female participation, including outreach to junior girls, pop-up changing facilities for away races, women's-only sessions, and coaching opportunities. Philip Sowden, a coach of long standing, also arranged women’s open canoeing sessions. As a result of these initiatives, the canoe and kayak club witnessed increased female participation across all activities and roles, including coaching and club administration.

Coaching played a pivotal role in the club's growth, and Falcon prioritized coach training. Newcomers and experienced members were offered coaching opportunities, and an annual weekend training course was established. Coaches were recognized for their contributions at an annual kayak club coaches' supper. We remain indebted to all our volunteer coaches who give up so much of their time to the club.

Falcon's engagement with local schools was crucial to expanding the sport. The club collaborated with state schools to introduce kayaking, with a particular emphasis on encouraging girls' participation. British Canoeing grants were secured to support these initiatives. The first significant break-though was with Cheney School. Discussions were held with staff, and particularly with the head of sports, making sure they were onside. The discussions included transportation arrangements, child protection measures, and certification requirements for club members in contact with children. We gained permission to have an after school round table discussion with parents and staff. Stuart MacCarroll, kayak captain at the time, arranged for the children to have early morning weights sessions at Oxford Brookes University gym. At around the same time Jo Bates joined Falcon bringing a wealth of experience from her involvement in flat water paddling at Elmbridge canoe club. The growth of the junior section was significantly impacted by contributions from a few dedicated parents including Cath Greehy and Jayne Rose, who immersed themselves in the club and committee. They were still members of the club when their children went on to compete nationally and internationally years later.

Over the years, Falcon Boat Club ventured into unique endeavours, such as organizing triathlons, (replacing swimming with kayaking) and participating in the Sella River Race in Spain. The club also undertook various publicity stunts to promote kayaking in the local community, challenging the perception that the river was exclusively for rowing. For instance, Falcon responded creatively when local youths caused disturbances on the riverbank, leading to positive press coverage and community engagement. The club also extended invitations to numerous outside groups to engage in kayaking and canoeing activities, fostering a sense of community and collaboration. We continue with regular outreach activities extending this to a wide selection of groups from the local community.

Nick Barnett took over as kayak captain in 2010. At that time there were 150 canoe/kayak members. That has increased to over 300 members in 2023. Nick moved on to club chairman in 2019 with the position of kayak captain moving to Anna Railton then Dave Long.

Throughout its history, Falcon has faced challenges and undergone transformations. It has eventually realized a longstanding goal by constructing a new boathouse, made possible through the collective efforts of its members and donors. Falcon's journey from modest beginnings to a thriving organization underscores its commitment to fostering a diverse and inclusive community of kayakers and canoeists. The club's dedication to coaching, outreach, and innovation has contributed to its enduring success and impact on the local and broader paddling community.

Peter Travis 2023