

# TALES OF THE RIVERMAN 56



Glasgow Humane Society Officers were always good scullers; they had to be as often someone's life depended on that ability.

Occasionally an Officer would enter a race especially 150 years ago when there was professional sculling, in fixed seat boats, with cash prizes. Officer George Geddes beat the Champion of Scotland in a race for £200 on Kilbirnie Loch.



Bennie Parsonage arrived on the scene after professional sculling had died out. He won a couple of races as an amateur but as soon as he became an Officer he was a "professional" (although there were by then, no professional races).



One of the things I liked as a youngster was coxing in Jollyboat races. Going down to Greenock on the train, I passed Fort Matilda and places that I had heard my Dad talking about (as they each had their own rowing club in his day); Inchgreen, Murrayshore, Old Quayhead, Ladyburn, Davyshore, Newark. To me there was nothing like the fixed seat Jollyboat rowing. There was a special feeling to the boat, even when coxing; the surge, the roll, the creaking of the greased leathers as

they moved back and forwards or were turned in the thole pins. The oars were mostly single or double girdered. Often there was the smell of tallow which was rubbed into any hairline cracks on the hull of the vee sectioned single skinned craft.



6 boats would line up, each with a coloured flag on their bow that matched a coloured flag on the buoy around which they had to turn. On a day when there were waves in the Firth the surging of the boat was accentuated. As a cox it was our job to steer a straight course about one boat length to the left of the appropriate buoy, then as we approached the buoy the cox turned the boat so that it was heading at a 45-degree angle to the buoy while shouting as loud as he could, “prepare for buoy” (pronounced “boo”). You had to get the cry right, absolutely perfect, and as the bow of the boat passed (on the correct side) of the buoy, you shouted “next stroke, dip” and the bowside rowers jammed their oars into their bodies, reached forward and caught hold of, and held onto, a bar that was across the boat. This allowed them to hold their blades rock steady as the strokeside rowers pulled the boat round and you shouted “Away” and came out of the turn again at a 45 degree angle. A really top-class crew could turn a buoy in two strokes; magnificent. As you came out of the buoy shouting “away” the crew would shorten their stroke and increase their rating, lifting the boat again onto the top of the waves, surging forward as they ploughed their way to the finish.

Another wonderful thing about jollyboat racing was that a spectator could see the start and the finish due to the turning of buoys.

As the years passed I learned to row these boats and take part in races mostly at the Royal West of Scotland; though there were one or two at Portobello, sometimes winning; sometimes not. In the single fixed seat jollyboat sculling races I was never defeated at Greenock.

In my early days Bennie (Dad) hired boats at Glasgow Green, and we always had a group of lads about who helped with the baling of the rainwater from the boats, giving them a wash down and getting them ready in the morning for the days hiring. We would put the oars and rowlocks into the boats, lay out the boathooks and do all the tasks that

were necessary to prepare. We carried out the same procedure in reverse at night. One of the other tasks we performed was to chase after hired boats that were heading too near the weir or to row upriver and ensure all were behaving themselves. We also had to be able to assist the “Gaffer”, Bennie, in his role as saviour on the waterways and sometimes had to row with him to rescues or for recoveries. So, we all became very skilful boat handlers. We had a number of single rowing boats called “punts” or “skiffs” and we would race them against each other. Saturday and Sunday mornings were especially enjoyable as all the lads who were working, and could not come down during the week, were there. After we had made the boats ready for hiring, we lined up sometimes 6 abreast and raced over 150yds between the St Andrews Bridge and Moffat Street. After the racing we would light an open fire and cook our breakfast, eggs, Lorne (Flat) sausages and bacon usually on rolls, still hot, freshly baked in the Co-operative bakery in McNeill Street exactly opposite us. Great days, but these “friendly” races encouraged us to become extremely fast scullers. We all had our favourite punts and our favourite oars and the rivalry was terrific. Oh, that racing could always be that friendly and enjoyable. Thanks to Willie, Henry, Tam, Kenny, Eddie, George, Billy, Gus and the others



Of course it is still fixed seat craft that we use at the Glasgow Humane Society. We use them in our everyday work, and many tasks on a river can only be carried out in a rowing boat. We still occasionally set out the buoys and have fixed seat lifeboat races in front of the Society wharfage.



They were and are, good days.