



TALES OF THE RIVERMAN 51



Boat hiring



3 photos showing Bennies hiring station at Glasgow Humane Society wharfage Glasgow Green



Photo on left shows Bennies boat hiring steps at foot on Moffat Street south bank

One of the privileges that went with being officer of the Glasgow Humane Society was that you were given the right to be a boathirer on the river Clyde. The Officer had his own shed/boathouse. During the 19th Century there were several Boathiring stations on the river on the south bank opposite Glasgow Green (McWhirters Aquatic Saloon, McGruers, McNeil, Rankins, Wallace, McQueen, and Carroll's) with the Society officer being the only one on the north bank. Pleasure craft, canoes and racing boats were all kept in the Boathiring stations. There were dozens of rowing clubs for both men and women mostly boating from the Glasgow Humane Society wharfage. Although there was no weir, only rocks and rapids, hiring was still an upriver pleasure at high tide as during half or low tides the mud flats showed and the smell was terrible. In order to make a living boats were hired at all times and there appears to have been little thought on safety. Many accidents occurred. People washed their clothes in the river; swam in the river; and drowned in the river; so many, that the Humane Society and the City Council agreed that a swimming pool should be build next to Glasgow Green and thus the Greenhead Baths came into being. At the turn of the 20th Century there were only two boat hirers left on the river and in the late 1920's the Society officer Ben Parsonage took over the last remaining hiring station on the south bank at the foot of Moffat Street.



Bennie only hired boats when it was safe to do so and there were no accidents.



In case he got “called away” on an emergency, Bennie employed one or two persons to run the hiring business for him. It made only a very slight profit; we always said that it put the cakes on the table, and Bennie really worked hard for these cakes. They were good days at the “boats”; I made so many friends who came along to help and thus get “free” trips. We were up early in the morning baling out any overnight rain, washing boats, bringing oars, rowlocks and footspars from the shed and getting the boats ready. We sold Coca Cola, Charlie Moore’s ginger and Polycrisps. The Sea Rangers came down every Friday night. Bennie taught us how to hold a boat steady with one foot over the edge of the barge on the gunnel of the boat and a boathook held in the left hand under the seat and up against the foot. He wiped away any dirt from the stern seat with his bunnet if a lady was going to sit there. You learned to have the oars placed blades to the bow to prevent river water going onto the stern seat.

But things were changing. People were travelling further afield for their enjoyment on buses and motor cars, rowing clubs were again increasing their memberships and even running Sunday Regattas (Sundays used to be the busiest day for Boathiring). New racing boats were on the river, long fast sleek craft that found difficulty in manoeuvring around hiring boats. The old short Jollyboats had been able to dodge around, but not the new craft. Then there were some people who were not prepared to look after the boats and equipment and more and more craft were being returned damaged; boats were being rowed miles upriver and just left on the banking by people too lazy to row back or who did not wish to pay for the extra time they had been out. Members of Glasgow Gangs hired the boats and started fights on the water. Boats were smashed up, or left unattended for children to get to, oars were broken and engines stolen.

By the early 1970’s the last boat was being hired. It was sad; we gave many people in Glasgow (and visitors) great enjoyment. New racing craft were on the river and because they found it difficult to manoeuvre round the hiring boats there were collisions. People also used to be able to hire boats at Hogganfield Loch, Bingham’s Pond and small paddle boats on many of our Park Ponds. Sadly they too are all gone. If people wish to row on the river now they can join one of our excellent rowing clubs.



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