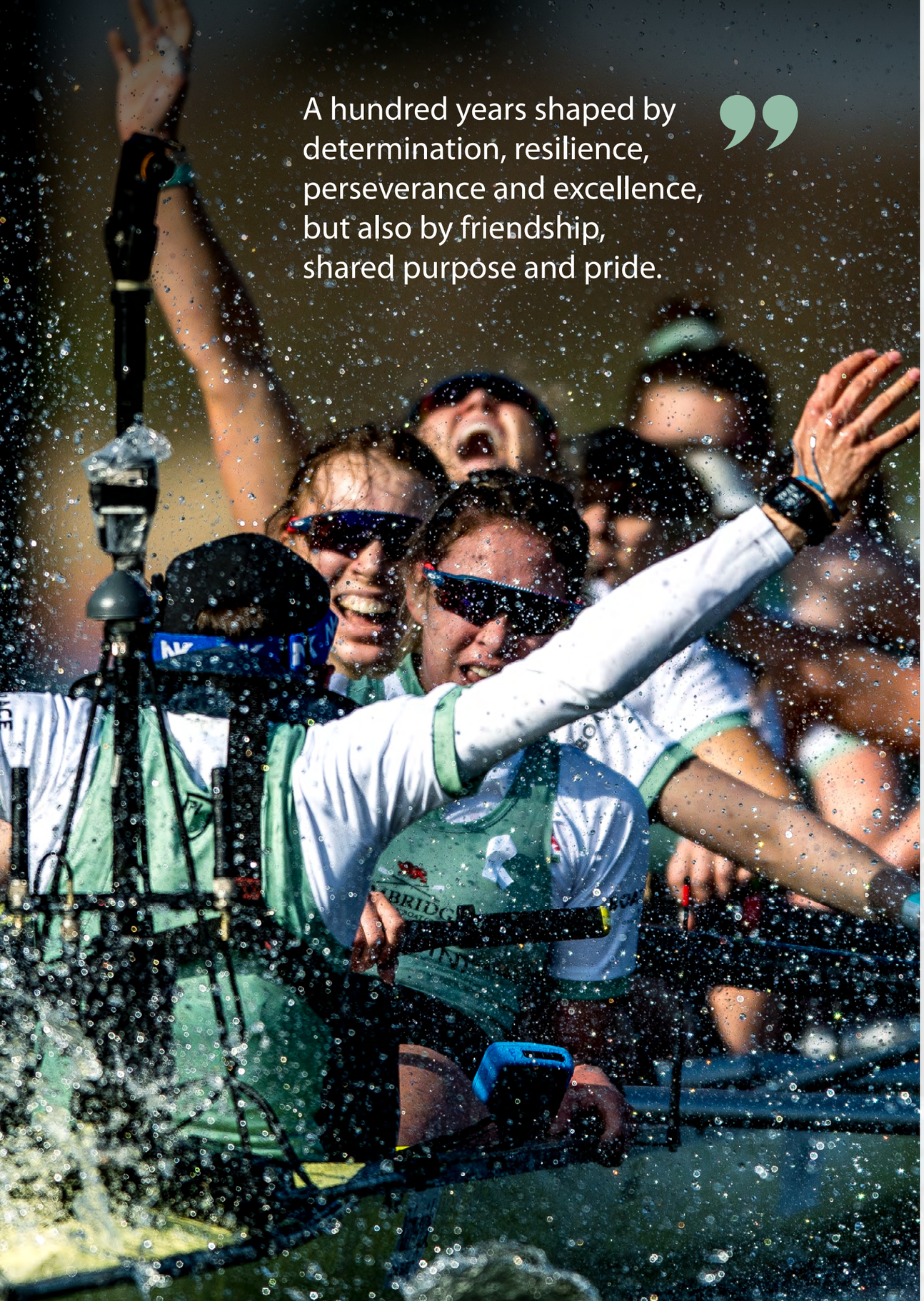
CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY BOAT CLUB



Against the *Stream*

Celebrating a Century of The Women's Boat Race
and Cambridge Women's Rowing

1927–2027



Dear fellow alumni,

Opportunities to mark truly significant milestones are rare. 1927-2027 represents a centenary of the Women's Boat Race: a hundred years shaped by determination, resilience, perseverance and excellence, but also by friendship, shared purpose and pride.

The experience of representing Cambridge is a unique one, and for many of the pioneering athletes who came before us, simply reaching the start line required extraordinary resolve. That legacy is something we carry forward together.

This milestone year offers a moment to celebrate, to reflect, and to reconnect. We hope you will join us back in Cambridge to renew old friendships, forge new ones, and take part in celebrating CUWBC's remarkable history, as well as the future we continue to build together.

Warmly,

Stephen and Sarah



Stephen Peel OLY,
CUBC Chair



Sarah Winckless MBE OLY,
CUBC Endowment Trustee

Acknowledgements

The Club extends its heartfelt thanks to our Archivists Steve Jones (Men's Lightweight 1980-83) and Kath Pocock (Blondie 1983; Women's Lightweight 1984), for their tireless efforts in supporting both the Centenary celebrations and this publication.

This magazine draws significantly on the decades of research undertaken by Jane Kingsbury (Women's 2nd IV 1970; Women's Blue Boat 1971-73) and Carol Williams (Women's Blue Boat 1972), authors of Cambridge University Women's Boat Club 1941–2014: The Struggle Against Inequality. We are deeply grateful to Jane and Carol for their dedication to preserving the history of CUWBC.

The Centenary celebrations have been made possible through a close collaboration between Cambridge University Boat Club and Newnham College, Cambridge. Our sincere thanks to Newnham Archivist Frieda Midgley for her partnership, advice, and encouragement.

We are also grateful to the many photographers who have contributed to the Club's archive and to this publication including Nordin Catic, Row360, AllMarkOne, Veronica in the Fens, Bankside Parent, The Cambridgeshire Collection, Dr. Rachel Nicholson, and Dr Brenda Thompson.

Our thanks also extend to the members of the Centenary Celebration Committee: Annamarie Phelps (Blondie 1987), Jane Kingsbury (Women's 2nd IV 1970; Women's Blue Boat 1971-73), Fiona Morrison (Women's Blue Boat 1977-79), Steve Jones (Men's Lightweight 1980-83), Freddie Markanday (Men's Lightweight 2019, 2022, 2024), Penny Vincent-Sweet (Blondie 1978; Women's Blue Boat 1979), Sophie Paine (Women's Blue Boat 2020-21), Joanna Burch (Blondie 1986; Women's Blue Boat 1987–88), Carol Williams (Women's Blue Boat 1972), Caroline Ng (Women's Blue Boat 1999-2000), Kath Pocock (Blondie 1983; Women's Lightweight 1984), and Cath Bishop (Women's Blue Boat 1991, 1993).

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Graphic Design: Matt Willatt Design Ltd

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A variety of acronyms are used throughout this publication including:

CUBC | Cambridge University Boat Club
CUWBC | Cambridge University Women's Boat Club
CUCBC | Cambridge University Combined Boat Clubs (governing college rowing)
CULRC | Cambridge University Lightweight Rowing Club
LMBC | Lady Margaret Boat Club (St John's College, Cambridge)
NCBC | Newnham College Boat Club
OLY | Olympian (post-nominal)
OUWBC | Oxford University Women's Boat Club





A Story of Struggles, Saviours and Survival

This extract, adapted from an article by Carol Williams, traces the remarkable journey of Cambridge University Women's Boat Club. It is a story not only of sporting achievement, but of persistence in the face of institutional barriers, financial uncertainty and repeated threats to the Club's existence. Time and again, when CUWBC stood at a crossroads, extraordinary individuals stepped forward to secure its future. Their determination ensured that generations of women rowers could continue to compete, thrive and ultimately transform the landscape of university rowing.

CUWBC

The history of women's rowing at Cambridge is not simply a story of races won and lost. It is a story of determination against resistance, of progress achieved in small increments, and of a club that repeatedly survived only because dedicated individuals refused to let it disappear.

For women at Cambridge, progress rarely came easily. More than six centuries passed before women were admitted to the University, and another eighty years before they were granted full membership and degrees. Sport reflected many of the same inequalities, and rowing presented particular challenges. Yet from these unpromising beginnings emerged a club whose survival would depend on the vision, commitment and courage of a succession of remarkable supporters.

Girton College, having founded a Rowing Society in 1906, tended to row in sculls, describing women rowing in eights as "most unladylike", leaving Newnham College Boat Club, founded in 1893, as the sole representation of university women's eights on the river.

Unlike many other sports, rowing could not be contained within closed boundaries. It took place on the river, in full public view. To ensure decorum was observed, college and University authorities imposed their own regulations, including rather strict rules about the nature and colour of the shorts female rowers could wear.

The rowers themselves, however, were left to organise equipment, training and competition. With little local opposition available, races were usually arranged against crews from outside Cambridge.

Boosted by early support and coaching from none other than Steve Fairbairn, Newnham challenged Somerville College, Oxford, to a race in 1919, though the challenge was not taken up. In 1926, the newly formed Oxford University Women's Boat Club issued a challenge to Newnham's women rowers, leading to the first Women's Boat Race between Oxford and Cambridge on the Isis on 15 March 1927.

The authorities insisted that the race should not be conducted as a side-by-side contest. Instead, it took the form of a timed processional row followed by a separate assessment of each crew's style. Oxford won. Between 1927 and the outbreak of the Second World War, eight Women's Boat Races were contested.

Throughout the 1930s, with only two colleges admitting women, the Women's Boat Race never achieved the same profile enjoyed by their male counterparts. Determined to give women rowers a stronger collective identity, NCBC President Iris Preston (1921-2012) championed the creation of a university-wide club. Her efforts led to the formation of CUWBC, which raced Oxford for the first time in 1941 and secured the award of Full Blues. It was a significant milestone, but recognition did not guarantee stability. The decades ahead would test the Club's resilience repeatedly.

> The authorities insisted that the race should not be conducted as a side-by-side contest.





With most male students away during the Second World War, women enjoyed more freedom to train on the river. The evacuation of several London colleges to Cambridge also created welcome local competition. Women's university races continued throughout the war years and into the post-war period, alternating between the Cam and the Isis until 1951.

Yet once again, the Club's future hung precariously in the balance. After the loss of their boat in an accident on the Isis, OUWBC found themselves unable to finance a replacement — nor, indeed, to raise a crew — for the next ten years. Without an opponent to race, CUWBC slipped quietly into inactivity. It might have disappeared altogether had two engineering undergraduates, Valerie Goldsbrough and Jean Anscombe, not stepped forward to revive it.

Learning that the few remaining items of CUWBC equipment — a clinker eight, a tub pair and several sets of oars — were about to be disposed of, Goldsbrough and Anscombe decided to save the Club. Starting as novices themselves, they learned to row, elected themselves President (Val) and Secretary (Jean), recruited rowers, organised training and re-established a Boat Race programme, which Cambridge duly won. Despite this achievement, the Blues Committee awarded only Half Blues, withholding full recognition from the crew.

The next great champion of the Club arrived by chance. Following a meeting with Jean Anscombe at the Cox's Society, Canon Noel Duckworth became one of CUWBC's most influential supporters. A three-time Boat Race winner and Olympian, Duckworth not only coached the women but also used his influence to challenge obstacles placed in their path by both CUBC and traditionalists within Cambridge rowing.

His interventions proved critical. During the early 1970s, when there were even public campaigns to remove women from the Cam altogether, Duckworth ensured that women continued rowing. Under his guidance, women gained entry to the Fairbairns, joined Division 8 of the May Bumps, and saw restrictions on the use of Macon blades lifted.

Equipment and funding remained persistent challenges. In 1966-67, when no suitable shell was available for the Women's Boat Race, another saviour emerged in the form of President Penny Squires' mother, who donated a restricted shell to the Club and enabled the race to go ahead.

The 1980s marked another turning point. Nonie Ray, President in 1983-84, recognised that long-term success required a stronger coaching structure and invited Roger Silk, LMBC boatman and highly respected coach, to become Head Coach of the Club.

Nonie also transformed recruitment by organising training camps and trials, creating a steady pipeline of athletes at a time when Cambridge's expansion and the gradual move towards mixed colleges significantly increased opportunities for women to row. Her presidency also oversaw the first Lightweight Women's Boat Race.

Roger Silk became another pivotal figure in CUWBC's development. He secured accommodation for CUWBC boats within the LMBC boathouse, providing facilities that had previously been unthinkable, including hot showers for women rowers. A few years later he was joined by another major contributor, GB international coach Ron Needs, who became Joint Head Coach.

Needs was a coaching pioneer whose approach combined technical expertise with emerging sports science and psychology. Together, Roger and Ron professionalised training, improved management structures and developed a culture of excellence. The impact was immediate: of the sixteen Boat Races contested between 1984 and 1999, Cambridge won thirteen.

The Club's growing success also brought international recognition, including invitations to compete at the Head of the Charles Regatta in Massachusetts, USA and the Opening Day Regatta in Seattle, USA.

Working alongside Roger and Ron was another crucial figure, John Marks, who served as Honorary Treasurer to both CUBC and CUWBC. Through this unique position, he worked tirelessly to improve relations between the clubs. He established Cambridge University Combined Boat Clubs (CUCBC), helping coordinate equipment sharing and river access, while also encouraging CUWBC to preserve its historical records. His daughter Jane later made a generous legacy gift to CUWBC.

The next major change came under President Aimee di Marco in 1999-2000. Ongoing disputes with CUBC over training times on the Cam led to the decision to relocate training to Ely. As Club Secretary, Siobhan Cassidy negotiated the rental of King's School Ely's modest boathouse for a peppercorn sum. This facility would serve the Club until the opening of the joint Ely boathouse in 2016.



The move brought new challenges. Disagreements continued over training arrangements, while the growing scale of the Club made it impossible for a single President to manage operations alone. Cassidy, assisted by Treasurer Jo Burch, became the Club's next great driving force by helping establish an Executive Committee. Cassidy also secured valuable commercial sponsorship from organisations including J.P. Morgan and Ashurst Morris Crisp, while strengthening support from CUWBC alumnae and their families.

The demands of the new millennium placed increasing strain on the Club. Afternoon outings made it difficult for Roger and Ron, both in full-time employment, to continue coaching. Transport and equipment costs escalated, and competition for athletes intensified through World Class Start, a "fast track" to international rowing which didn't require the subscriptions demanded by CUWBC.

At this critical moment, another saviour emerged. Pat Marsh, a former professional manager and longstanding committee member, stepped forward as Executive Chairman. Conditions remained challenging. The crews trained from a boathouse that lacked heating, hot water and adequate changing facilities, travelled from Cambridge to Ely by early morning train, and parted company with their coach during the 2002-03 season.

Pat responded with characteristic determination. She assembled a strong committee, secured funding, often contributing personally, and provided resources for winter training camps, new boats and blades for both Openweight and Lightweight squads. Most significantly, she persuaded Roger and Ron to return as coaches.

As the Women's Boat Race gained increasing public prominence, Pat ensured that Cambridge crews were equipped and presented as elite athletes. She brought together CUWBC, CUBC and senior University figures, including Vice-Chancellors Alison Richard and later Leszek Borysiewicz, helping build support for the future integration of the clubs. She also contributed substantially towards improvements at Goldie Boathouse and supported crew participation in the Head of the Charles Regatta.



Pat Marsh



Annamarie Phelps

Subsequent developments only strengthened the profile of women's rowing. Oxford successfully championed the inclusion of all four Openweight races (Men's Boat Race, Women's Boat Race, Women's Reserve Race and Men's Reserve Race) on a single Boat Race day schedule, while the Lightweight races moved to the Tideway in 2022, expanding the profile of every category of university rowing.

Since the opening of the joint boathouse in 2016, Cambridge crews have gone from strength to strength. Today's athletes train and perform at a professional standard, supported by world-class facilities, coaching and operational expertise. Their results speak for themselves, including multiple clean sweeps and eight consecutive victories for the Cambridge Women's Blue Boat between 2017 and 2025.

There is now national and international recognition of the contribution made by former CUWBC members. Sarah Winckless became the first woman to umpire the Men's Boat Race. Annamarie Phelps serves as Vice-President of World Rowing. Siobhan Cassidy is Chair of The Boat Race Company Ltd. Women who were once fighting simply for the right to row are now helping lead the sport itself.

The success enjoyed by Cambridge women rowers today did not arrive by chance. It was built over generations by athletes, coaches, volunteers, administrators and benefactors who refused to accept that the Club's story should end. Many times CUWBC stood on the brink of decline; many times a determined individual stepped forward to change its course. The Club's history is therefore more than a record of races and results. It is a testament to resilience, community and the remarkable "Saviours" whose commitment ensured that women's rowing at Cambridge not only survived, but flourished.



Siobhan Cassidy

The result was the historic Boat Race of 2015, when the women raced from Putney to Mortlake alongside the men and secured a level of visibility and recognition that generations of predecessors had fought to achieve.

The new millennium also delivered sporting success. At the 2004 Athens Olympics, Cath Bishop and Alison Mowbray won silver medals, while Sarah Winckless won bronze. These were the first Olympic medals earned by Club members since CUWBC athletes began competing at the Games in 1976.

Following Pat's retirement, Olympian Annamarie Phelps succeeded her in 2009. Around this time, the future of The Boat Race sponsorship required a new solution, bringing another transformative ally to the fore.

Cambridge alumna Helena Morrissey of Newton Investment Management had been closely involved in Newton's sponsorship of the Men's Boat Race. The eventual sponsorship agreement transformed the future of women's rowing. To comply with US gender equality requirements, support for CUBC could not be separated from support for CUWBC. Newton also insisted that the Women's Boat Race should be raced on the Tideway, on the same day as the men's event, with full media coverage.

The result was the historic Boat Race of 2015, when the women raced from Putney to Mortlake along with the men and secured a level of visibility and recognition that generations of predecessors had fought to achieve.

Yet challenges remained in Cambridge. Although the women had been sharing Goldie Boathouse for evening training since 2012, they continued to operate primarily from Ely. With Siobhan Cassidy still closely involved and executive committees now functioning in both clubs, the logic of unification became increasingly clear.

The University Vice-Chancellor, Professor Stephen Toope, strongly supported the proposal, arguing that Cambridge should have a single varsity rowing club and a unified funding structure.

The clubs officially merged in August 2020.



Not something for ladies to do…

Meet Tiffy Rhys, 1927 Cox

Margaret Teify Rhys, "Tiffy" recalls the early days of Cambridge women's rowing and the events leading up to the first race in 1927.

Tiffy was born in Aberdare, Glamorgan, Wales, on 12 October 1906. She attended Milton Mount College in Crawley, a boarding school for the daughters of Congregational ministers, before coming up to Newnham College in 1924. She secured her place in rowing history as the first cox of the Women's Boat Race, steering Cambridge's 1927 crew, made up entirely of Newnhamites, against Oxford on the Isis.

The 1920s witnessed a remarkable expansion of women's sport. Yet this progress often clashed with prevailing social attitudes, and many early female athletes found significant constraints and obstacles placed in their path. Rowing was no exception.

Tiffy relates how this shaped the first Boat Race.

'Rowing was considered a most inappropriate pastime for young ladies, and various obstacles were put in our way.

'The negotiations that went on were quite horrific but very amusing in retrospect. I was in touch with a college doctor, who happened also to be the champion shotputter at the Olympics that year, Dr. Salisbury Woods[1]. He was consulted by the then principal of Newnham, Miss (Pernel) Strachey of the Bloomsbury Set, as well as the Principal of Somerville College, Oxford, and her colleagues. Their problem was - was it going to be bad for women's insides? So he sort of chatted to me, and I said, well, I didn't know much about women's insides, and mine wasn't being affected, because I was the cox anyway, so there was no problem for me!

'The Principal of Somerville College, Oxford, was very keen on keeping everything very private and hush-hush, and so when finally permission was granted (to hold the race) it was with very specific conditions. One was there was to be no publicity, and nobody was to know about it. If we wished to do this up-and-down of the river, it would need to be in private.'

So the race was planned to go ahead. Leading up to the event, the Cambridge women arranged some matches with other women's crews on the Tideway. They stayed in Barnes, very close to where the Cambridge Men's Blue Boat were staying, and the crews met for tea.

'We were staying in Barnes, and in another boarding house just up the road, was the Almighty Eight, THE Eight, that is the Pale Blue Lords of Creation, who were in training, because their boat race was about to come on the following Saturday, and one Sunday afternoon, we invited them to tea. This was a great moment, because as I say, they were the Lords of Creation, these elegant young men, but at any rate, they came to tea, and were very fatherly and nice to us.'

Quotations taken from a recording of Tiffy speaking about her experiences in 1989, by kind permission of her great-nephew, musician and author Richard Rhys O'Brien.

1. Dr Rex Salisbury-Woods (Downing) four-time Athletics Blue, represented Great Britain at Shot-Put in the 1924 and 1928 Olympics.

Oxford celebrate their victory with cigarettes.



Tiffy remembers, however, her initial meeting with the Men's Blue Boat as markedly less convivial.

'I had blotted my copy book long ago, in Cambridge on the river Cam, in a very early outing of mine. Of course, it was really like Piccadilly Circus on the river then, because, you can imagine, a lot of colleges in Cambridge, each with their own boats, some with two or three boats out on an outing on an afternoon. To steer your way through them really took a bit of doing.

'I certainly was by no means an expert, and one afternoon we were coming in or going out and there was a crew coming down. I didn't realise what it was till it was on us, and it was THE Eight, with their pale blue oars and their blazers in the background somewhere, and I crashed them. I crashed them, and I broke an oar - I steered so badly that one of THE crew broke an oar, and you would think the world had come to an end, with this little woman, in the women's eight, breaking an oar!'

On 15 March 1927, the Newnham crew reached Oxford to represent Cambridge in the inaugural Women's Boat Race, but, mirroring their earlier experience, they were met with yet another round of imposed conditions and constraints.

'Yes, it was to be a contest, but we mustn't race up and down, putting in all our energies. I suppose the phantom of women's insides came against this, but what we were to do - and what we were to be allowed to do - was a mile on the Oxford River, the Isis. Just a mile, and we were to go up for style, to hell with the speed. And then come back for speed, to hell with the style, and on that, we would be marked and judged, so those were the conditions under which the event was allowed to take place.'

Also, having been told that the race was to be over three-quarters of a mile, on arriving at Oxford, they were advised that it had been decided that the course would actually be raced over just a half-mile to avoid steering through the tight S-bend of "The Gut." But it was another last-minute race-day change which revealed, yet again, the era's doubts about women's ability to cope with the stresses of competition — doubts that, here, materially hindered the crew's performance.

'There is a very nasty little story about that. We had, as a proper boat club should, a coach, a male coach, of course, and the story goes that when we were already sitting in our eight on the water in Oxford, the coaches, in their wisdom, decided to change things around, so that when we were rowing up, we thought for style, doing it very carefully and beautifully, to hell with the speed, we were being judged on speed, and vice versa, and this is the fantastic story, which gives an insight into their idea of women. Anyway, they thought - and we were already sitting in the boat, I may say, when they changed their minds - that we would get all hysterical and worked up - women's nerves would go to pieces - if we had the sudden shock of a change of plan. So they didn't tell us, so of course we lost that race.'

Beyond the reservations around women's physical and mental suitability for competitive sport, they were also expected to conform to the social behavioural norms of the day in other ways.

'I remember being very puritanical, because of the coarse language on the towpath, with these men rushing up and down with the other boats from the other colleges. The language was almost electric, certainly inflammatory, but I was determined not to swear. But I do remember getting so worked up at the end of one race on the London Tideway, that I yelled out - and they were all exhausted, they flopped on their oars, like the men doing the whatnot - and I said, "Blooming well rowed chaps!," and that's about the nearest I got, because my father was on the towpath, and I know if he heard me swearing, I'd never hear the end of it!'

These expectations extended to what Cambridge women wore when they were rowing.

'Our uniform was brown, a hideous brown, with orangey sort of facings, and on the pocket, there was a resplendent golden griffin, because that was in the coat of arms of Newnham College. And we had little brown, I suppose they'd be serge in these days, horrible thick stuff, little trouser things, coming to above the knee, and then of course, thick black stockings, and thick black shoes. It was not a thing of beauty. I may tell you, at no time is there any sort of feminine attraction in the art of rowing for women, whether they're going full out or whether they're just standing for their photograph to be taken.'

For all her role in this pioneering era of University rowing, Tiffy remains disarmingly modest. Asked many years on what guidance she would give to Boat Race coxes, she offered this: 'I'm about the last person to give advice. I could advise them how to lose races, perhaps not how to win them!'

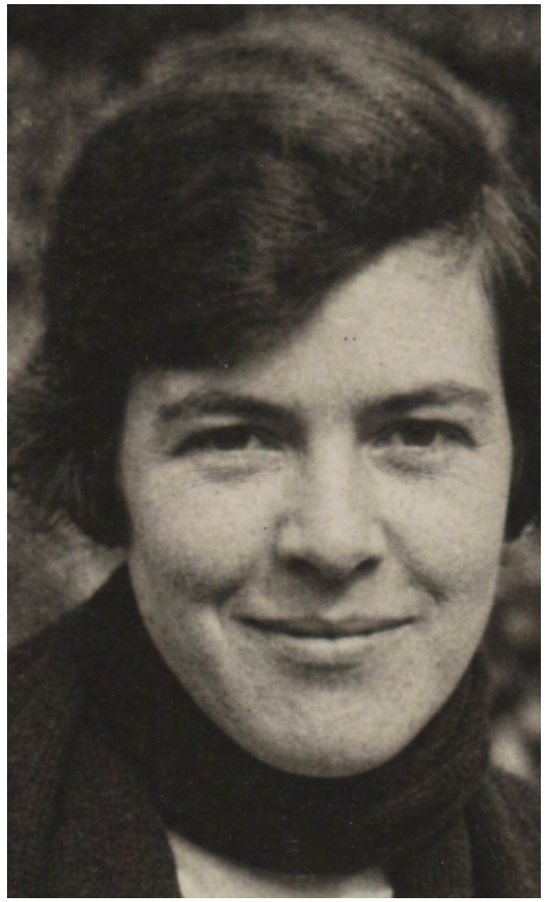
Tiffy died in Islington, London on 1 June 2001, aged 95 years. Her perseverance, humour, and pioneering role ensures her name remains firmly etched in the story of Cambridge University, The Boat Race, and women's rowing.



In this publication, we celebrate the resilience, determination and spirit of the women who formed the earliest Cambridge crews. Although a pioneering rower, Ada Ethelreda Mary – known as Ethelreda – Wamsley's true devotion lay in her studies. Her fascination with the Middle Ages, though not her formal discipline, permeated her life, reflected even in her insistence on being addressed by her full name, "Ethelreda," after a Saxon saint. Everything she undertook was marked by wholehearted enthusiasm: she could become so absorbed in her work that mealtimes passed unnoticed, and she was regarded by her peers as an authority on the University Library. Beyond her academic pursuits, as well as rowing with distinction, she served on numerous committees, cooked with flair, danced with verve, and spoke fluent French. Such energy and commitment made her a natural member of the groundbreaking Cambridge crew that first raced Oxford, yet the same resilience and resolve would define her life far beyond the river — as her granddaughter, Rachel Nicholson née Sansbury, herself a Newnhamite and member of the victorious Cambridge University Women's Boat Club Lightweight crew of 1997, shares below.

Meet Ethelreda Wamsley, 1927 Bow:

Ethelreda Mary Wamsley, pictured on Boat Race day 1927



A Life Lived Wholeheartedly

by Rachel Sansbury

Ada Ethelreda Mary Wamsley was born in 1906 in Westow. Always known as Ethelreda, she was the third child of Philip Broster Wamsley and Ada Blanche Illingworth. Philip, who was a merchant navy captain, died young of 'tropical fever' in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in 1913. Ethelreda was only 7. Philip was one of nine children. His siblings included a medical missionary (William Bunting Wamsley,) a suffragette (Sarah Maydew Wamsley,) and Margaret Ward Wamsley the sculptress, who married Alphaeus Cole the American painter.

Ethelreda's childhood was spent in Yorkshire and Northumberland, being brought up on stories of the northern saints Cuthbert, Aiden, Hilda and Bede. Alongside an interest in travel, Ethelreda found the idea of mission very appealing. She wondered if this was because her father was a sea captain and she associated him with voyages and the sea. She liked the idea of voyaging to India because of Rudyard Kipling's stories.

Ethelreda was accepted at Newnham to study archaeology and anthropology. She reminisced that as she and her peers were among the early generations of women undergraduates, the feeling was that they should not marry but instead concentrate on their careers. The paradox of course was that unmarried women were expected to put their families first!

Ethelreda remembers a student from the year above her having to take a year out to help at home when her mother was ill. However, when her future husband was a student and his father was seriously ill nobody suggested that he should leave Cambridge to help. She also recalls a brilliant science student who married a dentist and had three children so, in Ethelreda's words, 'that was that.' The said husband did have the grace to feel guilty at having potentially deprived the nation of a distinguished biochemist. If she hadn't married, Ethelreda thought she would have liked to become an archaeologist. However, her marriage to Cyril Kenneth (known as Kenneth) Sansbury whom she met at a missionary breakfast, did give her opportunities to travel and meet all sorts of interesting people.

> Such energy and commitment made her a natural member of the groundbreaking Cambridge crew that first raced Oxford, yet the same resilience and resolve would define her life far beyond the river

Ethelreda and Kenneth became engaged while still at Cambridge, and they already knew that their destination once married was going to be Japan. They were married in July 1931 and eventually set sail on the SS Naldera calling at sixteen ports between London and Yokohama and taking six and a half weeks to complete the journey.

The first two years were to be spent learning Japanese while living in Numazu before moving to Tokyo. Numazu was far from the centre of political or military activity and was very much the 'old Japan' of kimonos, rickshaws, wooden houses, elaborate ceremonial traditions about everyday matters, constant reminders of a picturesque history and a highly developed civilisation. Toward the end of their stay in Numazu, Ethelreda and Kenneth had their first child. Ethelreda was inadvertently in the height of fashion as the Empress of Japan was also expecting and the whole nation was hoping for a son and heir (there were already four daughters.) Ethelreda's son Christopher John Sansbury arrived safely on 6 January 1934.

In the summer of 1937 the family, by now expanded to four with the arrival of Audrey and a third child (Helen) on the way, set off for England on furlough. The route was land and sea via America. Despite increasing political unrest and Japan's war with China, the family of five returned to Japan in 1938. Global political unrest was accelerating and as war broke out in Europe, as well as the ongoing 'China Incident,' Christian missionaries were treated with increasing suspicion. Gradually, many of Ethelreda and Kenneth's contemporaries left. Eventually they also left Japan, sailing for Seattle and Vancouver on the Hie Maru, the last Japanese ship to cross the Pacific in the summer of 1941.

Ethelreda with her husband and children in Japan



While Ethelreda and the children remained in Canada, Kenneth served the remainder of the war as a chaplain in the Canadian Air Force. Contemporaries of Ethelreda in Toronto included Florence Liddell, wife of Eric Liddell, the Olympic athlete and missionary in China, and their daughters. One afternoon in 1945, while on the bus to have tea with Florence and her girls, Ethelreda asked her children to be especially considerate, as Florence had just heard that her husband had died. He had been held as a prisoner of the Japanese at Weihsen in China.

After the war, the family returned to England where they lived first in Lincoln where Kenneth was principal of the Bishop's Hostel, renamed Lincoln Theological College and subsequently St Augustine's College in Canterbury. During Ethelreda and Kenneth's time in Canterbury Tiffy Rhys, the coxswain of Cambridge's first Women's Boat Race crew, also spent time living there.

Ethelreda and Kenneth had the opportunity to return to Japan in 1959. The Nippon Sei Ko Kai was celebrating the centenary of the arrival in Japan of the first protestant missionaries, and Archbishop Geoffrey Fisher asked Kenneth to accompany him as chaplain. On 22 March they embarked on a twenty thousand mile journey through Pakistan, India, Singapore, Hong Kong to Japan and Korea. The destruction of the war had been great, but there were signs of recovery and as Bishop Yashiro said, 'Be thankful. Today I am still alive.'

Ethelreda and Kenneth returned to life in the Far East in 1961 when Kenneth was appointed as the last English Bishop of Singapore and Malaya. They could again visit Japan to meet friends and Kenneth's former students. They returned to England in 1966.

In 1993 Ethelreda was interviewed for the centenary celebrations of Newnham College Boat Club. Although unfortunately not well enough to attend in person she recounted tales of the 1927 crew and first Oxford and Cambridge Boat Race in detail. She died peacefully in Norwich in 1994.

Iris Preston pictured in 1942



Meet Iris Preston, one of CUWBC's founding members

By Frieda Midgley, Archivist at Newnham College, Cambridge

'The question has been asked occasionally, why do women row? …Certainly in my time there were some critics who found the sight of women rowing unattractive, and therefore could not imagine why we did it; they were apparently unable to grasp the idea that we rowed for our pleasure, not theirs. Women who choose to row do so for the necessary and sufficient reason that they like rowing.' (Iris Preston, in her Preface to *From Newnham College Boat Club to CUWBC,* 1992)

Iris Preston certainly liked rowing. The sport she discovered when she came to Newnham in 1939 became a lifelong passion, and she channelled her enthusiasm into both shaping and recording the history of women's rowing at Cambridge.

Iris hailed from Hartford, Cheshire, where her father was works manager for a subsidiary of ICI. Schooled at Malvern Girls' College and Cheltenham Ladies' College, she came to Newnham College to read Natural Sciences in 1939 and immediately joined the Boat Club and the Bridge Club.

She was a member of Newnham College Boat Club for all three of the years she was in Cambridge, a period over which the club underwent a significant transformation. Its fortunes had been fading through the late 1930s, and on Iris's arrival, the club had just nine members. This 'enabled it to get out an VIII,' which was fortunate, as at that time it did not own a IV,' she quips with characteristic humour. In her first year, a planned fixture against OUWBC fell through, so NCBC's only race that season was against Bedford College, who had been evacuated to Cambridge and were sharing the facilities at Banham's Boathouse with Newnham.

In 1941, however, the NCBC committee was determined not only that the race against Oxford should go ahead, but that the crew should be awarded blues just as their opponents would be. This required a crew drawn from both women's colleges in Cambridge, but Girton did not at that time have a boat club, so a workaround was found by which Girton students who wished to row could share NCBC facilities and coaching. Despite this, the Chairman of the Blues Committee initially informed the NCBC Captain that her crew could not be awarded blues, but after some skilled negotiation from a seasoned member of the College, it was eventually agreed that they could. The light blue blazer Iris wore was borrowed, but it took fewer clothing coupons to buy a scarf; Iris bought one jointly with the Treasurer and they split it lengthwise.

Iris describes how food rationing made a special diet difficult, but the crew was required to abstain from smoking, alcoholic drinks, and snacks between meals. They honed their physical fitness with short walks or skipping before breakfast, climbing ladders with sandbags on their shoulders, and getting to bed by 11pm (where air raids and fire watching duties allowed). If this were not enough, the crew suffered the misfortune of being swept over the sluice at Bait's Bite Lock while training in adverse conditions in the February, resulting in the loss of their boat, though thankfully no significant harm to any of the crew. That race was rowed with the Cam in flood due to thawing snow, and it was not discovered until afterwards that men's crews had been forbidden to go out.

NCBC had been racing in eights for over twenty years, but Iris and her contemporaries still had to contend with barracking when they went out on the river:

'We went out at lunch-time, because several of our members were scientists and had to be in laboratories in the afternoons, but even so there were usually a few bystanders, wolf-whistlers and chi-ikers on the towpath, to say nothing of the soldiery practising on an assault course near Ditton. We grew so accustomed to this barrage that when I was coaching two freshers and one said, 'There's a man on the towpath shouting at us, I replied without looking, "There often is; pay no attention." In that instance it turned out to be our coach, who wanted a lift across the river and was somewhat hurt at not getting it.'

Nevertheless, women's rowing was in the ascendant and in Michaelmas 1941, the boat clubs of Newnham and Girton collectively attracted enough members to have a first and second VIII, thus CUWBC was formed. As Iris observed:

'…in the short space of three years Newnham College Boat Club passed through minimal membership, no major fixtures and considerable money trouble to two victorious crews, a reduced debt, the promise of a rival club at Girton, Blues, and a First Eight which according to veteran boatmen was one of the best women's crews ever seen. And we had enormous fun with it.'

Women were still not full members of the University of Cambridge when Iris completed her studies in 1942, so she was not awarded a full degree. However, she received her MA in person in November 1948, just as soon as that became possible, and a glance at her professional career illustrates why she might have felt it was important to be first in the queue.

On leaving Newnham, Iris joined the ATS and from 1944 was based at the School of Tank Technology, Military College of Science. Following the war, she worked as a chemist for various industrial and research organisations, including Monsanto, where she registered patents relating to the formulation of liquid detergents and the preservation of fruit. She then taught at Wycombe Abbey School for a period before going back into industry as Scientific Assistant to the Marketing Information Officer at Ames (Miles Laboratories Ltd), where she spent the rest of her working life, finishing up as Applicational Development Chemist. She must have been as undeterred by the undoubted challenges of her professional environment as she was by the hecklers on the tow path.

Iris is also the only reason we know as much as we do about the history of Newnham College Boat Club. During her time as Secretary of NCBC, Iris started the process of reading and making notes from the historical records kept by the club in anticipation of its Golden Jubilee in 1943. Many of the records she consulted had disappeared by the time she started working on her published history *From Newnham College Boat Club to CUWBC* (1992), having never made it as far as the College Archive. Iris's notes themselves are therefore the main record of much of this history, and her publication is invaluable.

Her enthusiasm for rowing stayed with her; she stayed in touch with many CUWBC friends throughout her life, and gave the address at the NCBC 100th anniversary dinner in 1993. Her nephew recalls that 'She always rowed at number five, and when she left, she was presented with her oar, suitably inscribed with the crew names for 1940, 1941, and 1942. This oar stayed with her for life, and each time she moved, there had to be a wall large enough to accommodate it.' Shortly before her death, NCBC named its new IV 'Iris,' and she was by all accounts very proud and extremely honoured.









Timeline of CUWBC and the Women's Boat Race

Significant Milestones | Kit and equipment | Milestones | Race locations and events | Interesting facts

1890

1893
Newnham College Boat Club formed

1906
Girton College Boat Club formed

1920

1919
Newnham College Boat Club challenged Somerville College Boat Club, Oxford but no race took place

1927
First Oxford v Cambridge boat race, only Newnham women

1927 - Post race cigarettes and tea with Oxford

1927 – Raced in a clinker boat with toothpick blades

1937 – ½ mile race in Oxford, judged for style as well as time, not rowed side by side

1930

1929
First race on the Tideway, but only rowed sequentially not side by side

1936
First side by side Women's Boat Race at Oxford over ½ mile

1940

1941
First race of CUWBC v OUWBC at Cambridge over 1000 yards

CUWBC formed of women from Newnham and Girton

1941 - Women awarded Full Blues but wartime rationing meant they could not afford blazers, so bought or shared scarves

1948 - Women awarded full degrees at Cambridge

1953 - Women row with pale blue blades as they are not allowed to use Cambridge blue blades

1956 - 1963 - Oxford did not row due to lack of funds to replace their boat lost over the weir

1955
No Boat Race as Oxford go over the weir the day before the race

1954
Murray Edwards (formerly New Hall) College founded

1960

1964
Re-starting of CUWBC v OUWBC races

1969 – First set of Macon blades, previously women not allowed to use Macon blades, in case they damage themselves \down below?

1967 - First women's club to start proper circuit training at all-male Fenners

1968 - First non-clinker boat, a restricted shell that could be sectioned and transported on a trailer

1970

1972
Churchill, Clare and Kings Colleges admit women

1974 - First year of a Women's division in May Bumps, raced in fours

1975 - 19 trialist oarswomen raced in tub pairs for 16 places

1976 - First year of a Women's division in Lent Bumps, raced in eights

1977
CUWBC v OUWBC races move to Henley

1977 - CUWBC bought a second hand shell VIII

1976
First year the Women's Second Eight was called Blondie, but not named after the pop-rock group Blondie as they were named before Blondie became famous!

1978 - Dr John Marks (Fellow in Medicine at Girton) becomes CUWBC Senior Treasurer

1978
First CUWBC male cox, Mark Mills

1980

1980
First CUWBC members (Nicola Boyes 1974, 1975 and Penny Sweet 1978, 1979) row in Olympic Games in Moscow

1981 - new shell VIII bought with loans, named Rusalka after a Slavic water nymph

1983
Roger Silk (LMBC boatman) appointed Head Coach of CUWBC and also looked after their boats

1983 - CUWBC allowed to change at Leander, but if wearing shorts, had to make their way quickly outside as it contravened the house dress code!

1984
First CUWBC v OUWBC Lightweight races

1984 - Applied Research of Cambridge (ARC) donated money for CUWBC's first Janousek fibreglass VIII, it was named "ARC"

1984 - Lightweights sponsored by British Sugar who donated a set of blades. Silver Spoon logo painted on each blade, the first British crew to race with a sponsorship logo on their hardware

1985 - The Cambridge Nutrition Company enabled the Lightweights to buy a new Carbocraft VIII, named "The Cambridge Diet"

1986
Development Squad camps introduced to encourage 2nd year college oarswomen to enter trials for CUWBC

1988
All Cambridge colleges admit women

1988
Ergo tests first start to be used as part of the selection process

1988 - First Henley Women's Regatta

1990

1989
Henley Boat Race Committee formed

1989
Ron Needs appointed Joint Head Coach with Roger Silk

1990 - Women row in Mays in eights rather than fours

1990 - CUWBC first row in the Windermere Cup in Seattle, USA

1993
Cambridge win all 6 races against Oxford for the first time

1993 - CUWBC have their first set of cleaver blades

1993 - Henley Royal Regatta has the first women's event, for single sculls

2000

1994 - Ron Needs introduces training programmes for the whole of the coaching team, rowing videos to analyse technique and sports physiology

1994
CUWBC start training at Ely from Bridges Boatyard, Roger Silk designed and built a catamaran for following training sessions

1996 - CUWBC have 4 ergos and a set of weights

1996 - CUWBC Executive Committee set up

1998
CUWBC train at Ely from King's School Ely boathouse

2001 - George Maitre was the first salaried CUWBC coach

2001 - Due to Foot and Mouth the towpath at Henley was closed, the race took place at Holme Pierrepont near Nottingham

1999 - CUWBC received a generous donation from the estate of Jane Marks, daughter of Dr John Marks, which was used to buy boats and a trailer

2003 - Pat Marsh (of the Patricia Marsh Lavatory in the Ladies toilets at Goldie Boathouse!) becomes chair of the CUWBC Executive Committee and is a very generous benefactor to the club

2003 - Blondie blue and gold striped blazer first appears

2004
First CUWBC Olympic medals; Cath Bishop and Alison Mowbray (silver), Sarah Winkless (bronze)

2010
A gender equality policy was introduced under vice-chancellor Leszek Borysiewicz and support for oarswomen at Cambridge was now on an equal footing with oarsmen

2006
CUWBC qualify for Henley Royal Regatta for the first time

2011 – The Osiris boat was the first women's crew to be disqualified at the Henley Boat Races

2012
Goldie Boathouse altered to accommodate a women's changing room

Land purchased at Ely for a combined CUBC, CUWBC and CULRC boathouse

2013 - Due to flooding at Henley, the race was at the 2000m course at Eton Dorney

2015
First year the women's Openweight crews race on the Tideway

2015 – Turf cutting ceremony at the combined Ely boathouse

2014 - Last year the women's Openweight crews race at the Henley Boat Races

2016 - Cambridge boat was swamped by waves and dramatically nearly sank, finishing 24 lengths behind Oxford

2020

2020
CUBC, CUWBC and CULRC Combine to form one Cambridge University Boat Club

2021 - Due to Covid, the race was at Ely where isolating the crews was simpler and the risk of attracting a large crowd could be avoided

2020
The Openweight Boat Races were cancelled due to Covid

2022
The Lightweight race joins the Blue Boat and Blondie races on the Tideway

2024
First Olympic Champion (Imogen Grant)

2025
The Women's Boat Race is stopped and restarted due to a clash of blades after Oxford are repeatedly warned

In 100 years Women's Boat Race has come a long way from a single college crew rowing in a processional race, to a multi-college crew racing side by side on the Tideway with equal support to the Men's Boat Race

The Blondie Story

(that's the crew, not the band…)– from 2nd IVs to 2nd VIIIs



The first such crew formally recorded for CUWBC was a Second IV in 1965, which raced Oxford over a 1500m course on the Cam, finishing at the Pike and Eel, but with Cambridge actually stopping shortly after the start.

Averil Wootton, stroke, recalls:

'I was so determined to make a good start, I put absolutely everything I'd got into those first few strokes. And I must have completely exhausted myself. I could hardly breathe. I don't know if it affected my heart, but I just doubled up over my oar. I couldn't go on. But it happened right at the start and we stopped for some time and then we pulled ourselves together, I got myself together, and off we went again. But we lost that, sadly.'

A 2nd VIII raced the following year, which again included Averil:

'That was over at Oxford. On the Cherwell. We won, I did think they were a bit of a scratch crew, Oxford. There were some much older ladies, my gosh, even some with grey hair! Ooh, I don't know who they were. They may just have been ash blondes but they were distinctly older. But we won easily at that time. I was just relieved.'

The 2nd VIII were awarded Club Colours, and the Blue Boat, who also won, were awarded Half-Blues.

Second IVs and VIIIs appeared intermittently over the following years until 1971, when only the Blue Boat raced – and then only in a IV. No second-crew race took place again until 1975, when Cambridge defeated Oxford on the Cam.

In 1976, the 2nd VIII adopted the name Blondie, and in a difficult year for the Club they were the only Cambridge crew to win their race. Blondie has raced every year since.

The origin of the name "Blondie" has long been the subject of speculation. A popular theory linked it to the band of the same name, whose rise to fame coincided with the late 1970s. However, conversations with those involved at the time show this to be incorrect, although the band's fame may well have helped the name endure.

Nerys Jones, who rowed in the first Blondie crew (and later represented GBR at lightweight level and became a long-standing CUWBC coach), recalls that she did not actually realise hers was the first crew to bear the name – and that there was no association with the band Blondie, who did not appear in the UK charts until a few years later.

Kathy Brayshaw, who rowed in the last pre-Blondie 2nd VIII and in the two subsequent Blue Boats, remembers that Oxford already had names for their reserve crew, and CUWBC felt they needed one too.

Oxford's choices were, in retrospect, rather eccentric: the men's 2nd VIII was named Isis – after the river, though also a female goddess –while the women's 2nd VIII was named Osiris, after a male god.

Seeking a parallel with the Cambridge men's 2nd VIII, CUWBC considered what might be done with Goldie, named after J. H. D. Goldie. His wives, Grace Miriam and Ethel Maude, were briefly contemplated. Then someone, half joking, suggested Blondie as a kind of feminine echo of "Goldie." The crew liked it, and the name stuck.

Whether it was intended to endure beyond that season is unclear. But the following year, John Hartley, a Blondie coach from LMBC, came across some promotional badges for a new band, "Blondie" with the name printed on a red-and-white striped background. He bought nine and gave them to the crew. That small gesture effectively cemented the name within the Club's identity.

In 2015 the Blondie-Osiris race moved, with the Blue Boat, from Henley to the Tideway and now forms part of the two-day programme of top-class Varsity racing over the Championship Course from Putney to Mortlake.











Depth is a defining strength of any sporting squad, and for The Boat Race the introduction of reserve crews has been central to raising performance standards.



Meet Kath Pocock, CUWBC's first Lightweight captain



By Kath Pocock neé Langsford



At the start of the Michaelmas Term in 1983 I was asked by Nonie Ray, President of CUWBC, if I would like to help set up the first CUWBC Lightweight crew to race against Oxford. My reply was 'Yes, if I am light enough!' Luckily, I was.

In the days before email and mobile phones, I posted the outing times and crew lists on my college room door and just before Christmas I posted the final crew list plus reserves in the window of Ryder and Amies. During the Lent term we continued to row with our colleges and only rowed together on the Cam twice a week. We also had a tea party each Wednesday afternoon.

We borrowed a white plastic boat from New Hall (now Murray Edwards). However, we did have our own blades, and very special blades they were too! We wrote to numerous companies to seek sponsorship and were lucky enough to secure £1,000 from British Sugar to buy a set of blades. The stipulation of the deal was that we were to have the Silver Spoon logo painted on to the spoon of the blades. We were the first crew in the UK to have our sponsor's logo on our equipment!

Our kit was not very elaborate. We had Cambridge blue cotton rowing vests, edged in white ribbon round the neck and we each had to sew on our own CUWBC badge. I designed our scarf which was white with two Cambridge blue and one mustard-yellow stripes. I remember going to a tailor in a small workshop and getting him to make a prototype and being very excited that, for a few days, my scarf was unique!

We had four excellent coaches; Roger Silk from LMBC, Hamish McCallum who rowed at Clare College, Chris Harris from CULRC and Ewan Pearson from CUBC. Each coached us for two weeks and their complementary coaching methods developed us into a fine racing crew. After the Lent Bumps where the crew members competed against each other, we moved to our training camp in Henley.

On race day the weather was miserable; cold, wet and windy. Unfortunately we hit Henley Bridge on the way to the start! Not too hard, but my rigger was slightly bent and my blade was washing out a little. We had no replacement rigger, but I knew it would be alright, there was no danger of getting stuck in or catching a crab. Although we were ahead of Oxford all the way, I only really believed we were going to win when we came to the island and I knew there were only 10 strokes left. My first thought when crossing the finishing line was relief, we had won!

I am very pleased that the Lightweight races have continued and feel very privileged to have been in the first crew. I just wish I was still a lightweight!



What did past CUWBC rowers take away from their time rowing for the University?



As part of an ongoing effort to preserve the Club's shared history, the CU(W)BC archive team is conducting a growing series of oral history interviews. These conversations give former rowers the opportunity to reflect, in their own words, on their experiences of representing the University, both on and off the water. **Each interview concludes with a simple question: what have your years of rowing for Cambridge given you, beyond the racing and the results?**

Below is a selection of these reflections and "takeaways," drawn from rowers whose Cambridge experiences span eight decades.

Ruth Simpson née Bonney (1955)

'My mind goes round things like keep well, don't over-strain yourself. I think it's very important to look after your physique, your system. And I'm very, very lucky. I'm very fit. I can go for walks. And I do every day. And people are surprised at what I can do. I can even pick up my heels and run!'

Averil Wootton (1965)

'I left Cambridge thinking, perhaps what I did with CUWBC was the most important thing. There was a lot of enjoyment, as well as the suffering.'

Helen McFie Simone (1971, 1972)

'Number one, just having attended Cambridge, you know, the fact that you've been at Cambridge opens doors. And the fact that you were a rower at Cambridge opens even more doors. When people see my resumé, and they see that I have the PhD, fine, from the University of Pennsylvania, but then they say: "Oh, you're a rower." People are impressed.'

Jane Kingsbury (1972, 1972)

'On the river you were all doing the same activity and you were all interested in it. You met people from different colleges and different countries, and I think it enriched my life a lot more than the study did at Cambridge. The friends I retained from Cambridge would be largely my rowing friends.'

Carol Williams (1972)

'I have become immensely proud that I was part of this organisation.'



Kathy Brayshaw (1975 1976, 1977)

'I think the whole Cambridge experience was fantastic. I managed to move the race (to Henley for the first time), I managed to get my crew together and we won. I had a bit more faith in myself and in being able to organise people and things. Also, acceptance that however much you may want things to go as you want, they very rarely work out exactly as you as you expect.'

Nerys Jones (1976)



'It was great to be part of something which was so all-consuming, I think you really did have to commit fully to rowing to, to get anywhere with it. So it was, I don't suppose it was six days a week initially, but it certainly was that in my final year, and probably before that.

(It was) just great to have made so many different friends. It was a fantastic social side to rowing as well that really formed a big part of our Cambridge experience. I have some lifelong friends really through rowing that I continue to see, some of them are very far flung other parts of the world, but I continue to be in touch with them.'

Nonie Ferrand née Ray (1983, 1984)



'Professionally it taught me toughness and resilience, to be cool, calm and collected even in adverse situations and ambition to succeed despite difficulties. I was never very good at time management, but rowing forces a schedule with deadlines which can't be missed. Anything related "Cambridge University" looks good on a CV but "The Boat Race" is known internationally and even if people didn't know women participated it certainly drew attention.'





Kath Pocock née Langsford (1983, 1984)

'I think of the Cambridge University Boat Club as a timeline, and my participation is just a very small part of it. Being the first Cambridge Women's Lightweight captain was my biggest university achievement and having a boat named after me years later was my biggest honour. Since I rowed, the boat house, equipment and training programme have improved immensely, but the crew spirit and determination to beat Oxford is the same. Tenacity, tolerance, friendship, resilience, and a determination to get things done is what I have gained through rowing for Cambridge.'

Siobhan Cassidy née McKenna (1995)

'I think first of all friendships. Great, really strong friendships that you develop through training and spending long amounts of time together, doing something that's really not that easy. I think those friendships take you through testing times afterwards.

In terms of the practical skills, it's planning and having an idea of where you're going and then setting out a plan and a framework to get there. And that if you want something to happen, you have to make it happen, and you need to put yourself in the best place to do that.'

Sarah Winckless (1995, 1996, 1997)

'I've learned so much from the sport that I have done. I think learning quickly how to fit into groups is incredibly important when you're doing sport, whether you're the best or the worst in the team, and especially in rowing where you're only as good as your weakest member. You can't work around someone who's not having a good day. Lifting people up when they're down, that's incredibly important. That makes a massive difference.

And leadership. I ended up being Chef de Mission of Team England and I certainly wouldn't have gone anywhere near that path without learning to lead myself first and lead others in the world of rowing and at Cambridge. And it taught me how much I could push myself and my capacity to recover from disappointments as well, because there were ups and downs on the journey.'

Sarah Shipton née Cottell (2001, 2002)

'The most important thing that rowing for Cambridge has given me? The physical resilience dies, but the mental resilience stays with you. If somebody said "You just won a boat race and that gives you everything that you ever need in life," you'd laugh about it at the time, but what it has given me for life, is a tenacity that I think is unparalleled. You learn that you can carry on, you can run to the next lamppost, you can run faster to the next lamppost, and I think that is a great story for life.'

Melissa Wilson (2013, 2014, 2015, 2017)

'I think I just feel hugely lucky for the time spent rowing at the University. It had a totally transformational role on my time there, but also in every facet of my life since. So I just feel very lucky for the coaches that were there, the other rowers that were there, the friendships built and the way it set up the rest of life afterwards as well.'

Larkin Sayre (2018, 2019, 2020)

'The one that's often mentioned is how to manage your time and how to deal with stress and uncertainty. All of those skills are just absolutely hammered into you by rowing at Cambridge.

A lot of what I took away from it actually was how to be a leader. Things like how do you manage people when they're stressed and tired, and how do you manage yourself when you're stressed and tired and feeling insecure and worried? How do you build community with each other through difficult times? I think a lot of being a rower, you learn as much from the things that you get wrong as the things you get right.

Being at CUWBC was a wonderful experience, but really difficult at times, especially pushing your body and your mind at the same time. It's invaluable. It forged me into someone who is much better at leading, and also at being led, and helping leaders that I interact with. I understand what they're going through now, and can support them better.'



Bronya Sykes (2020, 2021, 2022)

'It certainly really helped me in my career as a rowing coach. It also just really developed me as a person. That is what's really nice now is that the wider CUBC really care a lot about the squad. I think it goes beyond just wanting to see them win, which is really nice.'



Annie Wertheimer (2025)

'What is so special is that you have someone who has been to the Olympics, and someone who rowed at university in the States and someone who learned at their college and we're all competing in the same boat. It was the most collaborative project I've ever been a part of.'



Many CUWBC oarswomen say rowing for Cambridge was their formative and most memorable experience at Cambridge.

Every athlete takes something unique from their Cambridge experience, yet confidence, self-management, leadership and resilient determination consistently shine through. The rigour of the programme ensures that only exceptional people reach University level crews. The achievements of those who have done so show how powerfully these qualities endure in life beyond the sport.



The road to the Tideway



Boat race venues and the stories behind them

By Steve Jones

Between the first race in 1927 and the move to the Championship Course in 2015, the Women's Boat Race travelled a remarkable and often unexpected path. Long before it found a permanent home on the Tideway, the event was contested on rivers, regatta courses and rowing lakes, shaped by changing attitudes, practical necessity and, on more than one occasion, an international crisis.

The first race was held on the Isis; over a 900m course between the Gut and the Finishing Post. The crews rowed separately and covered the course twice, once downstream for style and again upstream when they were timed.

The Newnham crew from Cambridge boated from the St Edmond Hall barge, one of many, at that time, moored along the river bank.

The judges did not announce a style winner, although whether this was due to the crews being judged as equal, or that the judges could not agree, has not been recorded. What we do know is that on speed, Oxford won by some 15 seconds.

It is a persistent misconception that the 2015 race marked the first occasion on which the event was held on the Tideway. While it was indeed the inaugural running over the full Championship Course, the Race had in fact ventured onto the Tideway three times before.

In 1929, the Race was rowed on the ebb tide from just below Kew Railway Bridge to Quintin Boat Club. The crews still raced sequentially rather than abreast and, as in earlier years, marks were awarded not only for speed but for style. Top-level interest was hardly lacking: Jack Beresford of Thames Rowing Club, then at the height of his Olympic career, served as one of the judges.

Cambridge won by three-fifths of a second, yet even with a judge of such calibre, on style there was still no clear winner. The Race did not return to this stretch the following year, possibly owing to the construction of Chiswick Bridge. Instead, the 1930 contest was held at Reading, where Cambridge won by two seconds and also secured a two-point victory for style. Although a style verdict had now been recorded for the first time, the futility of such a subjective measure had already become apparent, and the criterion was never again employed in the Race.

There were no races in the following three years, but in 1934 Newnham challenged Oxford – this time proposing that the contest be held on the Cam to reduce transport costs (for them, at least). Oxford accepted, though they insisted on a shorter course than the Cambridge crew had suggested, and the race was duly rowed from Plough Reach to the Railway Bridge, a distance of roughly 800 metres. Cambridge won by 0.3 seconds.

By the mid-1930s, many in Cambridge had grown increasingly frustrated by the limitations imposed on the event. Newnham's women wanted nothing more radical than the opportunity to race their rivals directly, side by side, and over a distance that would properly test them. Oxford resisted – though this was probably not down to the crew themselves – and although the 1935 Race returned to the Tideway at Chiswick, it was still run individually and over only 800 metres. In a violent thunderstorm, Oxford prevailed by six seconds.

After years of negotiation and persuasion, the breakthrough finally came in 1936. Oxford agreed to a side-by-side contest, ending almost a decade of processional racing and bringing the Women's Boat Race a significant step closer to the form we would recognise today, though they still insisted on a half-mile (800-metre) course. This was held on the Isis, but at Port Meadow – a different stretch from that used for the inaugural race in 1927. Oxford won by seven seconds. The race was then held on the Cam in 1937. There was no race in 1938, and in 1939 it was rowed again on the Port Meadow stretch at Oxford.

Newnham's women wanted nothing more radical than the opportunity to race their rivals directly, side by side, and over a distance that would properly test them

1942 CUWBC crew racing Oxford



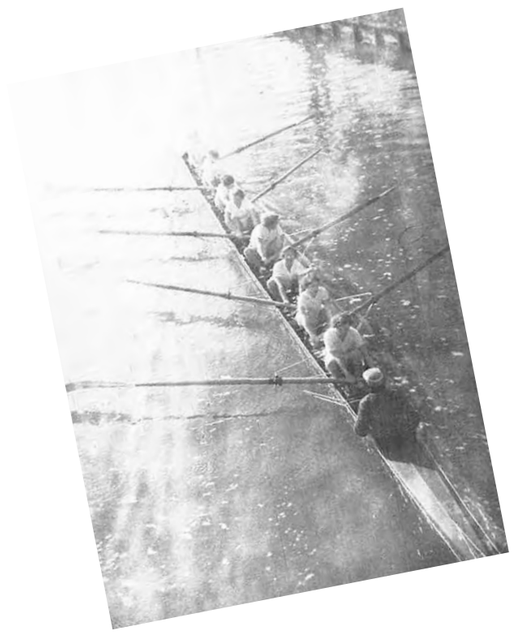
From 1941-51, the race was rowed alternately on the Cam and the Isis, with the exception of 1943 when Oxford declined to race, and 1948 when the race is recorded as having been rowed again on the Tideway.

The momentum painstakingly built before and after the war was abruptly halted in the early 1950s. For more than a decade the race disappeared entirely from the sporting calendar, creating one of the longest interruptions in its history, following an accident on the river resulting in the Oxford boat being written off. A recently debunked urban myth was that this was due to OUBC imposing a 10 year ban on OUWBC, when in fact it was simply due to lack of funds preventing the purchase of a replacement boat.

As Ruth Simpson née Bonney, observed:

'Oxford rowing was in a very poor state and although we had two boats, two eights, they couldn't raise one eight. So we agreed to race in a four.

'I managed to get bow in that four and we trained for the race, but the day the race came, we learned that there would be no race because the day before, the Oxford IV had got swept over the weir. They were all alright, but their boat was smashed up.'



The races were re-established in 1964 with Cambridge taking victory on the Isis over a 900m course. The annual alternating pattern continued after this, with varying race distances recorded at both venues, but with the Oxford courses generally being shorter than the races rowed at Cambridge.

1n 1977 Kathy Brayshaw, CUWBC President, frustrated by the lack of consistency in the distance raced, and the inevitable advantage for the home crew, proposed that the race be moved to Henley. The Men's Lightweights had, by this time, established a successful format for racing at Henley, one with which the Women's crews could readily fall in line. Oxford agreed, and on 20 March 1977, the Women's Boat Race was contested at Henley for the first time.

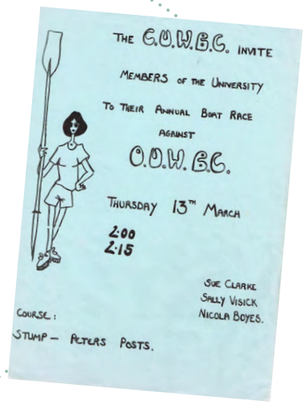
Kathy Brayshaw said of the decision:

'I felt it was just so silly to be rowing either 900 metres or 1600 meters and obviously you have an advantage on your own water and that isn't really fair. I was musing about this when my boyfriend, who was the secretary of the Lightweight Men, said "Well why don't you come and have your race with us on the same day at Henley?"



'And that's what we decided to do. I wanted it to be over 2000 metres, but Oxford refused, so the first race was only over 1000 metres - maybe not even that - because there was an awfully big stream that day and we had a running start because the state boats couldn't hold us.' What began as a pragmatic solution soon transformed the event. Henley provided something the race had often lacked: a neutral venue, a consistent course and the opportunity to build a broader occasion around the contest itself. Over the following decades, the Women's Boat Race at Henley developed its own traditions and atmosphere, becoming a full programme of races, including Reserve crews, Women's Lightweights (1984) and later University Torpids and Lents Head crews. This continued until 2014.





In characteristic fashion, however, the race survived.

Well, almost…

Just when Henley seemed firmly established as the race's home, events beyond rowing intervened once more. In the spring of 2001, the Foot and Mouth outbreak brought widespread restrictions across the countryside and threatened to derail the race entirely.

Sarah Shipton said:

'So about 10 days before (the race), we started to have headlines about Foot and Mouth and farmers being forced to close footpaths. We thought it was going to be okay, the club was dealing with this away from us and they didn't stress us with it at all, people were in the background working out a plan if they couldn't use the towpath in Henley.'

In characteristic fashion, however, the race survived. What might have become a cancellation became instead another chapter in the event's long history of adaptation and improvisation.

Sarah continues 'I don't know how the communication came to us, because this was before widespread mobile phones, but we were told, I think probably in a training session, that we were going to row at Holme Pierrepont in Nottingham, but we had accommodation in Henley, we had nowhere to go, basically we had a race course but nowhere to stay.

'My parents and my grandparents live, not on Holme Pierrepont, but very close by, in a town outside Nottingham. So, I called my mother... "Mum, you know, if I turned up with eight other girls, could you feed us? Could we stay with you for an indefinite period of time before and after the race?"

'And so, credit to my grandparents and my parents, they rallied and we arrived there about three hours later and there were beds for everybody.

The race was, I think, still the tightest Women's Boat Race, we won by three feet.'

A decade later, nature again tested the organisers' resolve. Severe flooding across the Thames Valley cast doubt over whether Henley could host the race at all.

Melissa Wilson recalls:

'There'd been a lot of flooding in the Henley area. And I just remember an email from our coach Rob [Baker] soon after we came back from training camp, saying, "Because there's flooding, we don't know in March where we'll be racing, but rest assured we will race them in a ditch if we need to." So we knew that there was a question mark about whether we'd race at Henley, but we knew we would race.'

The venue changed, but the race endured. As so often throughout its history, the precise stretch of water proved less important than the determination to ensure that Oxford and Cambridge would meet.

Melissa recalls 'In the end, we ended up racing at Eton Dorney, not too far away. But a different style of race, because it's a 2k man-made racing course rather than a river with a stream.'

So the race was held on the Olympic course at Eton Dorney, before returning, for the final time, to Henley in 2014.

The move to the Tideway in 2015 represented far more than a change of venue. For generations of athletes, coaches and supporters, it had become symbolic of the race's continuing campaign for recognition and parity. After decades, the Women's Boat Race would finally share the same stage as the Men's event, and this change drew considerable public and media attention.

"Because there's flooding, we don't know in March where we'll be racing, but rest assured we will race them in a ditch if we need to"

Melissa Wilson remembers:

'We knew that Newton [Investment Management] had agreed funding to allow the Women's Boat Race to move to the Tideway as early as 2012-13. And I think Rob Baker had come on as coach at the beginning of that, at the beginning of the 2013 season, I think with a view to training for the goal. Those initial years were really important to everybody involved in those projects. And I think there was always an awareness that a transition was taking place.

'We'd always done 5k prep work in the autumn for The Fours Head, so we'd have had a 5k distance emphasis in our training for the first section of the autumn. But I think probably by 2015, I guess that was continuing right the way through to the race itself.

'We had a brilliant team psychologist, and Rob set us up really well psychologically to be able to focus in. We were simultaneously training ourselves to focus in, but also aware that this was on a different scale to anything that we'd done before.

'The start becomes very different because the tide's pushing you one way and the stake boat's holding you stationary. And if you were to hold your blades square in the water, the tide would push you away. So you're having to kind of reverse feather your blade.'

So the race, along with the Blondie v Osiris (Women's Reserves) race took place, once again, on the Tideway, but this time over the full Championship Course. Oxford won both women's races.

Those initial years were really important to everybody involved in those projects.



Whilst the Tideway is among the world's great racing stages, it can also be one of the most unforgiving. In 2016 a hard south-westerly wind blew dead head along the Island, turning the third quarter of the race into some of the harshest water the river can produce. By the Bandstand both crews had shipped a lot of water, but Cambridge had suffered more; by Barnes Bridge their riggers were under water and red flags were waved from the Umpire's launch signalling "Race Over." With the race beyond retrieval, they sought what shelter the Middlesex bank could offer and, astonishingly, pressed on, dragging their boat — and perhaps half a tonne of the Thames — to the finish. Whilst a defeat, it remains one of the most courageous performances in the history of The Boat Race.

Having survived floods, funding crises and outbreaks of disease, the race entered 2020 seemingly secure in its new home. Then, as with so much else around the world, history intervened. The restrictions put in place to counter the COVID-19 pandemic meant there was no race that year.

Says Larkin Sayre:

'It was a really difficult year. Seat racing went extremely long. I think it was pretty much exactly two weeks before the race would have happened when it was cancelled. And so we had only just set the Blue Boat crew and we'd only just had some good sessions and some good rows together. And we were starting to feel like we might come together as a crew and things might be okay. I remember a lot of talk around, "Well, The Boat Race has only ever been cancelled for a world war, so it's going to happen." It might be altered in some ways, but it's going to happen because we wouldn't cancel anything for something other than a global catastrophe. This was before any lockdown. So we didn't really understand COVID in the way that we do now.'

As Sophie Paine recalls:

'When we got to the boathouse, Larkin, who was president at the time, and Siobhan [Cassidy], the Club Chair, were sitting on a bench. They told us the race had been cancelled. You could hear a pin drop. After a moment of silence, people started crying and hugging each other.'

Following extensive discussions, and with the pandemic still at its height, the 2021 race was allowed to proceed — but not on the Tideway. It was relocated to Ely. Ely was a long way from the crowds of the Championship Course, but it captured something fundamental about the spirit of the event. Stripped of spectacle and tradition, the race prioritised the essentials: two crews, a course and the determination to compete.

'No one had rowed for two months, and there was no time for selection," recalls Sophie. 'It was simply: this is the crew, this is the Blue Boat. Every stroke counted. We didn't have time to refine technical details the way you normally would over a training camp – it was rushed, but we got there. Of course, I would have loved the traditional Boat Race experience. But I feel like I got that, and more. I got all of it without the race, and that's what you realise—the seven-month period is more than just race day.'

In 2022, the Men's and Women's Lightweight crews joined their Openweight colleagues on the Tideway, competing the day before, along with the Veterans' crews. The result was a new two-day festival of high-performance rowing, offering the sport at its best to the rowing world and to spectators well beyond it.

Yet the story of the Women's Boat Race has never really been about geography. The move from Oxford to Cambridge, from Reading to Chiswick, from Henley to Eton Dorney, Nottingham, Ely and ultimately the Championship Course itself reflects something far larger than a succession of race venues. Each change tells a story of the determination of generations of women to sustain and develop their race despite financial constraints, institutional resistance, wartime disruption, accidents, floods, and a global pandemic. The course may have changed, sometimes at the last minute, but the determination to race never did.



From a 900-metre procession on the Isis in 1927 to a fully integrated Boat Race festival on the Tideway, the journey of the Women's Boat Race mirrors the extraordinary growth of women's rowing itself. The Championship Course may now be its permanent home, but it stands not as the beginning of the story, nor even its destination, but as the latest chapter in a century-long journey defined by resilience, ambition and the unwavering belief that the race was worth fighting for. As the centenary approaches in 2027, every stretch of water that has hosted the event forms part of that history, a reminder that the road to the Tideway was every bit as remarkable as the race that now takes place upon it.



Kit Through The Ages

1919–1940

As early as 1919, Newnham crews represented the University at regattas. These early crews rowed in gymslips with ties. By 1922 shorts were being worn, but on the Cam, strict rules were imposed on what female rowers could wear and which colours – so as "not to distract male rowers from their serious training". Shorts became shorter by the mid-1930s, but crews wore Newnham's chocolate brown up to 1940.





1941–1976

Crews began to row in light blue, whether in the form of singlets, sweatshirts, or as in the late 1950's a light blue dart in the shorts. Crew photographs in the 1940's featured Cambridge Blue blazers, but these were borrowed from the Cambridge University Women's Athletic Union due to wartime and post-war rationing

1977–2026

Cambridge Blue became the norm for racing kit. Evolution of synthetics and widespread introduction of lycra in the 1990s revolutionised kit design. All-in-ones, waterproof splashtops, puffer jackets and gilets appear. Computer aided production processes enabled greater variation and customisation of kit and incorporation of sponsors' livery.



Coxes



1919 1922 1927 1936 1947 1958 1963 1964 1969

Coxes' apparel has undergone a marked evolution. In 1919 the cox wore precisely what the crew wore: a gymslip, shirt and tie, topped with a blazer. Blazer-and-tie racing dress remained the norm until the 1950s, when looser, warmer cotton tracksuits began to appear. By the early 1960s, anoraks and parkas—already emblematic of the Mod movement—were quickly embraced by coxes for their warmth and waterproof practicality. As synthetic materials became more common in clothing, coxes adopted lightweight plastic waterproofs worn over insulating layers, completing the transition from formal dress to purpose-built outerwear.

The 1970s marked the transition from traditional cotton tracksuits to lighter, faster-drying synthetics such as terylene and polyester. By the 1980s, sponsored kit had become commonplace, accompanied by increasingly personalised designs. Advances in sportswear technology introduced more effective waterproof and water-repellent fabrics, together with improved insulation achieved through thinner, more efficient layers. Lifejackets became compulsory for coxes in the 2000s.

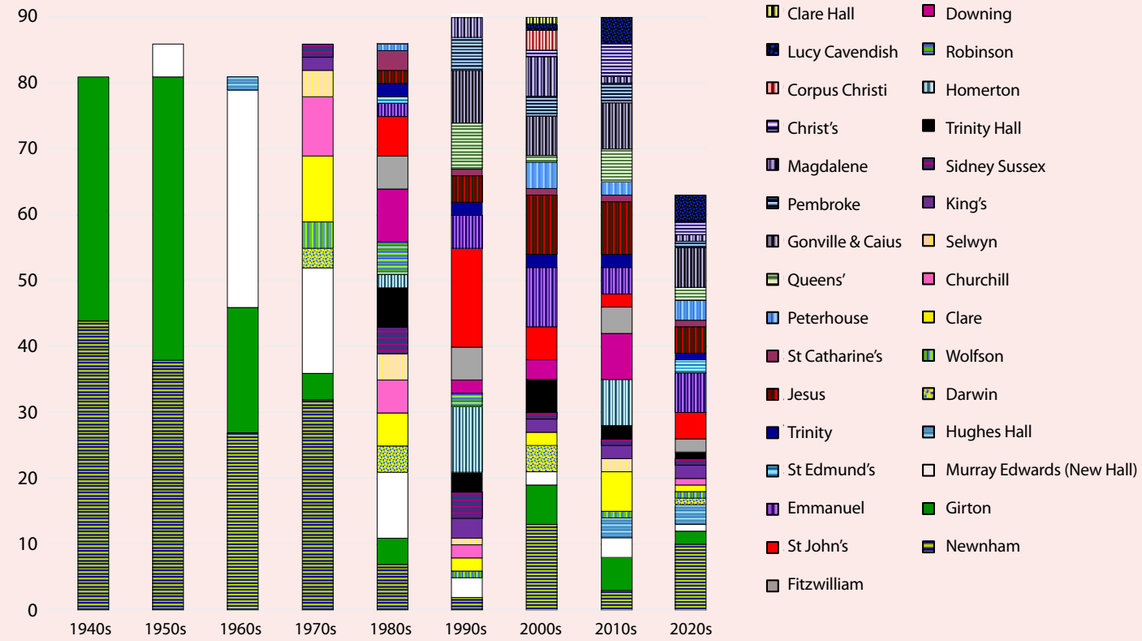


1973 1984 1995 2006 2012 2026

Fun facts… get to know our alumni

Women's rowing was first included in the World Rowing Championships in 1974, and made its Olympic debut at the Montreal Games in 1976, with lightweight events added to the programme in Atlanta in 1996. Guided by outstanding coaches such as Roger Silk, Ron Needs, Mike Spracklen, Rob Baker, and Patrick Ryan, generations of Cambridge women have gone on to compete beyond their university years, representing their countries at both World Championships and Olympic Games. We celebrate not only their remarkable achievements on the international stage, but also the enduring legacy they have built, one that continues to shape and inspire the Club today.

CUWBC Blue Boat Participation by College by Decade (1941 to 2026)



top **5** **names** for winning The Boat Race.

If you want to win The Boat Race, change your name to ***Susan***!

A Susan has been in the winning crew a total of 24 times from 1941 to 2026.

You could also choose ***Sarah*** (14 times), ***Anne*** (11 times), ***Elizabeth*** (10 times) or ***Helen*** (10 times).

Or you could keep your own name and pull extra hard!

CUWBC Participants Top Colleges 1941 to 2026

Blue Boat

1. Newnham
2. Girton
3. Murray Edwards (New Hall)

Blondie

1. Murray Edwards (New Hall)
2. Girton
3. Clare

Lightweights

1. Emmanuel
2. Jesus
3. Gonville & Caius

Cambridge Women's Rowing Olympians



Name	College	Year	Country	Medal Awarded
Bishop, Cath, Dr	Pembroke	1996 '00 '04	GBR	Silver medalist
Burbidge née Boyes, Nicola, Dr	Clare	1980	GBR	
Casey, Helen, Dr	St Catharine's	2004 '08	GBR	
Coffey, Olivia	Homerton	2020	USA	
Daniell née Hunter-Jones, Sarah	Murray Edwards	1984	GBR	
Gait née Buckley, Bridget	Clare	1980	GBR	
Goodsell, Hester	Hughes Hall	2008	GBR	
Grant, Imogen	Trinity	2020 '24	GBR	Gold medalist
Grose, Kate	Trinity Hall	1988 '92	GBR	
Jacobsen, Ida	Newnham	2020	DEN	
Larkin née Marwick, Kareen	Girton	1992	GBR	
Mowbray, Alison, Dr	Gonville & Caius	2000 '04	GBR	Silver medalist
Panter, Kate	Downing	1984	GBR	
Phelps Née Stapleton, Annamarie	St John's	1996	GBR	
Prendergast, Grace	Queens'	2016 '20	NZ	Gold and silver medalist
Ray, Nonie, Dr	Darwin	1984	GBR	
Tew, Ruby	Queens'	2016 '20	NZ	
Vernon, Annabel	Downing	2008 '12	GBR	Silver medalist
Vincent-Sweet, Penelope	Clare	1980	GBR	
Watkins née Bebington, Anna*	Newnham	2008 '12	GBR	Gold and bronze medalist
Winckless, Sarah	Fitzwilliam	2000 '04 '08	GBR	Bronze medalist
Zino, Francesca	Magdalene	2000	GBR	

*Anna Watkins rowed for Newnham College Boat Club but did not row for CUWBC

Where Women's Rowing Is Now — and Where It Goes Next >>>>



By Annamarie Phelps CBE OLY,
Vice-President of World Rowing

Rowing is a sport as old as travel. Throughout humanity's history women have travelled by boat, often rowing themselves and have raced competitively for hundreds of years. Even so, the Women's Boat Race celebrating 100 years in 2027 is a monumental milestone, as is this year's 50th anniversary of women rowing at the Olympic Games, not only because of the credibility that such heritage brings, but also for the visibility and progress these breakthrough moments can deliver.

Since the 1970s the sport's international federation, World Rowing, has been deliberate in strengthening its commitment to equality: leveling up medal opportunities at World Championships and the Games, and recently introducing mixed crew events to the World Championship programme alongside existing mixed para boat classes. The newest discipline, Beach Sprint Rowing (designed by a British woman, Guin Batten) included in both the Youth Olympic Games and Los Angeles Olympic Games is also, by design, gender equal.

Women's rowing has never been healthier, and it hasn't been by chance. The British team has gone from strength to strength since the advent of National Lottery Funding, which provided equal opportunity to talented athletes regardless of gender. Its introduction in 1997 can be credited with facilitating Great Britain's first female Olympic rowing medal in Sydney 2000 and the gold rush of London 2012, when not one but three female crews won gold.

The impact of increased visibility and success at international competition has inspired women to take up the sport, grown participation and improved performance. In the UK the number of women rowing has risen by 151% over the last 25 years across a wide age range. Today women make up 48% of rowers, up from 34% in 2002. In fact, British Rowing clubs say women make up around 60% of participants on Learn to Row courses, and the UK is not the only country seeing such a re-balance.



Over the last century, the sport of rowing has been genuinely transformed by the inclusion of women and diversification of rowing disciplines.



In the same year as those first gold medals, The Boat Race announced that the women's race would be held on the Tideway on the same course and day as the men's race from 2015, with TV broadcast and equal sponsorship. The impact of that announcement was immediate: students wanted to extend courses, talented athletes from overseas were attracted to both universities to compete in one of the most famous rowing races in the world. This concentration of talent, alongside professional full-time coaches and support, significantly raised the quality of training and racing. Suddenly relative newcomers to the sport could train alongside Olympic and World Champions such as Grace Prendergast and Ruby Tew at Cambridge or Caryn Davies at Oxford.

Kieran Clarke's analysis of the men's and women's Head of the River Races in London, both held over the same distance and course as The Boat Race, only in reverse, suggests the healthy growth in entry numbers has not diminished the depth of field. In fact, Clarke identifies a significant shift in the performance level of women's rowing, with the women's race now showing stronger depth at every marker in the top 100 compared with the men's.

Other events have recognised the opportunity women's rowing can bring. Just as the Fawley Challenge Cup at Henley Royal Regatta transformed junior boys sculling, the Diamond Jubilee has delivered an uplift in girls' sculling, with British women now regularly winning World and Olympic medals in sculling events. I have no doubt the new club and university events for women – the Princess of Wales, Danesfield and Queen Victoria – will see some of the best and closest races, encouraging more investment, an increase in quality and depth of racing, and more inspiring athletes challenging for the prestige of a "red box."

The introduction of women's events across Henley Royal Regatta, the move of the Women's Boat Race to the Tideway and the success of the GB Women's team, have played an important part in growing participation in the UK. However, I would also note that until recently a lack of gender specific research and science behind women's training programmes held female athletes back from optimising performances. Whilst recognition of this deficiency has improved there is still a long way to go: only 8% of sports science and sports medicine research is estimated to be based on female athletes. Imagine how much potential there still is once an understanding of gender-specific training, psychology recovery and equipment, is freely available to all women's programmes globally, not only optimising their training but helping avoid injury and retaining them longer in the sport.



Participation is not the only measure of progress. Increasingly attention is being focussed on leadership, and whilst World Rowing has an Executive Committee made up of 44% women, and a Council of 48% women, there are serious signs of a dearth of women in the pipeline for boards and committees at all levels, as umpires, and most worrying perhaps, as coaches. For this we need to look to clubs and federations around the world to increase the base, retain and develop talent.

Globally men make up more than 90% of presidents of national rowing federations. No single continent has more than 22% female presidents (Oceania) and Europe sits at a very uncomfortable 11%, despite targets and quotas set by funding agencies and governments. The picture is also concerning when we look at the average makeup of Boards or Executive Committees at national federations across the world which shows we are still not achieving the minimum gender balance of 30% women. With this lack of representation around decision-making tables in federations, it is not surprising there is a shortage of female candidates nominated for World Rowing's Commissions: only one, the Athlete Commission, reaching 50% men and women. Clubs, federations and continental bodies will need to be deliberate in their efforts to be more female-friendly: from changing facilities to committee meeting times. Without a voice at the club, decisions will be made that don't take account of women's needs, and without a welcoming environment, retention will be a challenge, numbers will fall and future leaders won't be identified. Every club and organisation has a duty to ensure they are embedding an inclusive and welcoming environment.





Over the last century, the sport of rowing has been genuinely transformed by the inclusion of women and diversification of rowing disciplines. As sports evolve from privileged pastime to a human right, every sport is reviewing its membership and attractiveness. I am optimistic that rowing has a sustainable and successful future. Our big marquee events are commercially focussed, recognising the need to appeal to as wide an audience as possible, and understanding that this necessitates more than participation and representation. There are brilliant people working in research, and unprecedented momentum behind women's sport. There will be more balanced senior leadership, more great stories of female athletes, and more great female athletes to create those stories, because that is what rowing needs to thrive.

The future is bright, believe it. As we celebrate the centenary of the first Women's Boat Race in 2027, we honour not only the courage of the women of Oxford and Cambridge who took to the water in 1927, but also their legacy. The foundations they laid have transformed the sport over the past hundred years, and by continuing to champion participation, performance, research and leadership for women, we can ensure that their pioneering spirit shapes the next century of rowing as profoundly as it has the first.





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