

A history of boating at Upnor and Upnor Sailing Club:

From mudlarks to overseas voyagers in 35 years.

By Ken Barrett

THE EARLY YEARS

I would like to give you a brief history of the Club, as I have managed to unearth it, part of which has been extracted from the first Commodore's Speech.

Before the 2nd World War, a very few private yacht owners were given permission by the Queen's Harbour Master to lay swinging moorings at Upnor. During the war some of these moorings were used by the Services, others were taken up, and when the war ended these yachtsmen had a hard time in getting their moorings back, but eventually most succeeded. At that time Upnor did not have a sea wall and you could walk straight onto a fairly sandy beach from the road.

There were also a number of unofficial moorings laid during the next eight years, at a time when the area was administered not only by the Dockyard but also by the Medway Conservancy.

In July of 1954 a meeting of some people, under the heading of the Upnor Yacht Club was called, but as far as I can find out this venture never got off the ground.

In 1958, after a lot of correspondence, permission was officially obtained by Bob Kemsley to lay eight moorings on the low water line and in 1959 an additional four moorings were granted inshore of the previous ones making a round dozen.

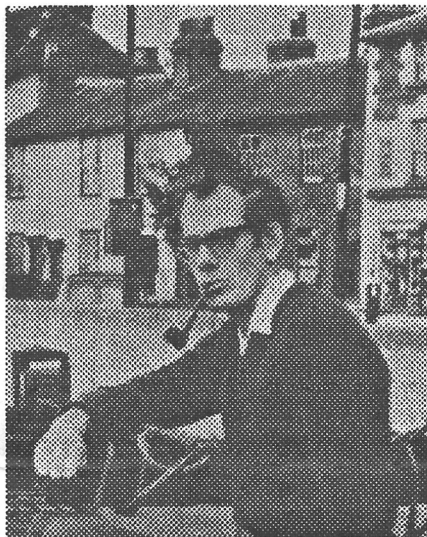
During the next couple of years a situation was developing, which the persons who were on these moorings were getting very worried about, as during 1962 these moorings had mysteriously increased to 20.

At the end of 1962 it was decided by these persons to form a club to administer the moorings held by the boatman, Bob Kemsley. The club's name was to be The Upnor Sailing Club.

Due to the very hard work of one or two people in particular and most especially of Mr. Roy Scott, the moorings were taken over by the Club and the Medway Conservancy granted the Club a licence for 20 moorings. This did not include private licences for boats on deep water moorings. The committee at that time

must have worked very hard, their Treasurer was Joe Putney who put in many years of continuous service.

During the next few years the main problem was redesigning the mooring layout and making a dinghy park. In June 1969 plans were approved for building a



Ken Barrat in front of the cottages that became the Clubhouse (from the Chatham Standard 14/7/1970)

new dinghy park at the top of the causeway and this was carried out during the following winter. Before this, dinghies were placed anywhere and a lot of damage resulted. Chas Rudham was Secretary and he did a lot of hard work, the Club was run for the benefit of the 20 members and the finances were geared to that end. All work such as overhauling the moorings, etc. was done by the members. During this time Chas Rudham died very suddenly and I took over the reins.

At this time the causeway (which many will remember was all wood, without the gratings) was cleaned regularly by a resident of Upnor who was paid by the Club.

At a social get-together at the end of 1969, 27 members brought 30 guests and a profit of £2.19.4d was made. However around this time, cash was so short that we had to call a Special Meeting at which it was decided to struggle on for a while, though unofficial talks took place with MYC about them taking us over. Luckily these were put on the back burner!

It must have been in 1970 that a meeting was called in the back room of The Ship, when I made an announcement that we had obtained permission for the Rudham Trot – I don't think I will ever forget that meeting – you could have heard a pin drop. The chain and anchors were got from scrap yards on the Thames, mainly around Blackwall and Gravesend – the anchors, four of them costing, £15 each – were found during a snowstorm at Greenwich. This trot was the first to go fore and aft in the river and we had to get permission from the river's Fishing Association – permission was only granted for one year. All the negotiations and getting equipment ready was all done secretly, even Bob Kemsley was shocked when I gave him the news just before the AGM. The cost of the Rudham Trot was initially financed by myself and was paid back out of the first years mooring charges. It was named after Chas Rudham in appreciation of all his hard work in the early years.

I was invited onto the laying vessel and it was a great day to remember, seeing all the chain, anchors, etc. going out over the prow.

That same year we applied for membership of the RYA and MYA. Also during this time, George Dennis was actively engaged in drawing up plans for a clubhouse – which we might, or might not, be able to afford. One plan was for an A frame type of wooden building over the top of the dinghy park – this had great support from the local planners – they even went so far as to draw up a beautiful plan for that part of Upnor (does anyone know if this still exists?), but in the end we just could not afford it.

This was a period of great change in the Club, going from 25 members to over 60 in one year. Upnor at that time still had the wives of two or three barge skippers living in it – one was still smoking an old clay pipe, many of which gave been picked up on the foreshore broken, together with old bottles which had been thrown over the side of barges which used to use the foreshore for laying up and also for taking on cargo.

1972 also saw an extension of the Rudham Trot, not a year after it was first laid. Also that year the moorings on the Upnor side of the river were changed to fore and aft and we were asked to take over the administration of the outer (private) moorings, but for them to still hold their own mooring licences, (I have still got mine!).

At about this time rumours started flying around, about Upnor being redeveloped – all the bargee cottages were going to be knocked down, etc. etc. – but nothing came of it.

1972 was the time when the administration of the Club was totally reorganised and placed on the present structure of officers and officials, most of this work was done by George Dennis, (I still have a copy of his original draft). It would appear that I was made Commodore about this time.

THE CLUBHOUSE



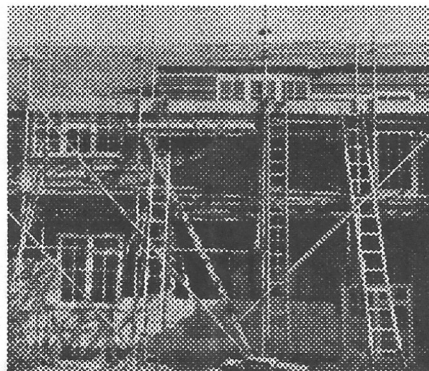
The cottages in the process of being converted into our Clubhouse

For the next few years the Club settled down and various plans were put forward for a clubhouse, mainly drawn up by George Dennis. It wasn't until 1976 that it was officially reported that Upnor would be redeveloped and negotiations were put in hand to purchase three cottages fronting the the River Medway. At that time Bob Kemsley was still occupying no.1. In fact he didn't go into a retirement home until a few years later.

In 1977, after the Club got planning permission, Roger Edwards (Commodore) called a meeting, using the Rochester Cruising Club premises, to obtain approval to purchase the 3 cottages for £6,000 and also to obtain approval to issue Bonds repayable over 10 years. The members approved both of the proposals and quite a lot of money was pledged on that night. The total, I think, was £3,500 increasing afterwards to £4,000, – this was a lot of money in those days. Tim Johnson was asked to draw up plans (detailed) and oversee works.

At that years November dinner dance, I was approached by a few members to see if

I would be Commodore for a second term and sort out the proposed clubhouse. I agreed, but only for 2 years (I had learned from the last time that the third year always seems to be filled with controversy – since then I have found it the same in other Clubs where I have held office).



The back of the Club taking shape

So we had to try and get the work done in two years. Tim and I had numerous meetings and I decided that we would have to have a work schedule involving all the members of the Club – when this was put to the Committee they were not all in favour and wished me “good luck” – the only persons let off were OAPs or anybody with disabilities – and even they turned up to give us a hand. All in all it worked quite well, about 95% of members supported us and turned out over the weekends – about six on each day plus sometimes the wives.

I learnt in half an hour how to put up scaffolding safely and also after an hours tuition was able to do the reslating of the roof – the only time no work was done was when thick ice coated the scaffolding and the mortar froze. Another skill I learnt was laying breeze blocks for the ground floor.

We started rebuilding from the top and ground together – I well remember being up on the roof and the whole building swaying from front to back. The members were fantastic – turning up in all weathers. The cladding and inside of the first floor were taken off and any timber which was rotten replaced, windows put in and the insulation and then the cladding replaced.

On the day of the dinner-dance in November '79 I spent all day reslating and was pleased to report that evening that the front roof was finished except for the flashing.

There were a few times when things were a bit tough – money was short and on at least one occasion we had to call extraordinary meetings to obtain members approval for extra money to be spent – I remember we asked for an extra £5,000 at one meeting.

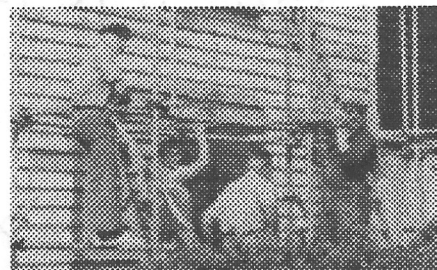
One of the members arranged to build the internal staircase and all the time Tim and I were there, at weekends and sometimes during the week as well.

AGM's became rather controversial and I well remember when one meeting was adjourned for half an hour to let some people cool down – myself included! I just could not understand why some were so against the Clubhouse, especially when Tim and I were there most of the time doing our best to get it finished in two years.

At the end of my two years some people wanted me to carry on and see the project through to the end, but I said “No, I wanted to build my boat” and I left office under a cloud. I don't think people appreciated all I had done for the Club, giving up work days, etc. for two years. My relations with the local authority building inspectors was excellent and quite a few times they suggested doing things in other ways to save money. On the money side we got a small grant from the Sports Council – monthly reports were sent to them by myself – this grant would have to be paid back to the Sports Council if the Club folds – similar to a lottery grant today.

Well that is how the Club and clubhouse came into being – built by members for the use of members.

After all of the above, I didn't have all that much to do with the Club, they wouldn't allow me to put my boat on my own mooring even though I had a private mooring licence – the said ‘they’ weren't going to have a motorboat on ‘their’ moorings, even though there used to be a



Tim Johnson and the scaffolding team

number of motorboats on the moorings in the early days – oh well, such is life. I had to get rid of it two years after it was finished – I could not afford to do what we had planned, going through the canals of Europe, because the recession was biting quite a bit.

If you want the history of the club from 1980 onwards you will have to look elsewhere, BUT if it had not been for the hard work of a few members in those early days there would NOT be a Club today – from mudlarks to overseas voyagers in 35 years isn't too bad!