

WEYBRIDGE *winners*

John Burnett and Maggie Phillips spotlight the Weybridge Silver Sculls, a race with a quality pedigree

PHOTOS: MAGGIE PHILLIPS



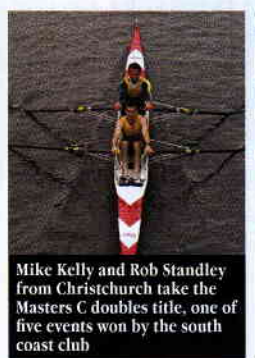
Jack Barrett – this year's winner of the 'Silver Sculls'



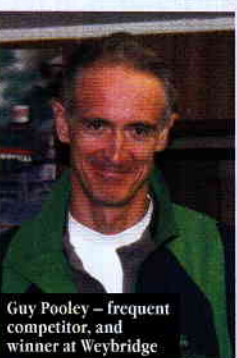
Alison Jackson receives the Houghton Cup from Michael O'Reilly



Steve Redgrave won the junior title for a third time in 1980. Tim Crooks is holding the Demerara Cup for Juniors and looking for his own name there from the 1960s!



Mike Kelly and Rob Standley from Christchurch take the Masters C doubles title, one of five events won by the south coast club



Guy Pooley – frequent competitor, and winner at Weybridge

In the 1950s, long before any GB national squad system, scullers looked for opportunities to race each other. Outside the regatta season these were very few so when Dickie Bird promoted a timed race at Weybridge in October 1956, the best scullers of the day came to compete. The course of about two miles was the longest that could be fitted in between Sunbury and Shepperton Locks. It included the challenge of getting through Walton Bridge, with its notorious Surrey arch.

How things have changed. The first race attracted just 27 entries, men only and all in singles. This year there were 555 entries, including all categories for men, women, masters and juniors in singles, doubles, plus J14 and J13 quads. Even the course is changing – the old bridge with the troublesome small arch has been replaced by a clear span, though the old structure will not be entirely gone until next year. It still remains an event strictly for scullers.

The pencil and paper calculations of 50 years ago have been replaced by computerised entry lists and result calculations. One task that has not changed is sorting the numbers on someone's front room carpet! Also recruiting all the people needed to run the event is close to a full-time job in the weeks before the race.

Doug Melvin (John O'Gaunt) was the first winner. Other distinguished names to follow include Hugh Wardell-Yerburgh, Tim Crooks, Mike

Hart, Dan Topolski and Steve Redgrave. In 1990 Guy Pooley, then of Cambridge University, won the first of his four 'Silver Sculls' and has been a regular winner in various categories since, taking the Masters C single sculls title on this occasion. Jack Barrett from Burway RC won this year's 'Sculls' by just two seconds over former junior and U23 French international Sigmund Verstraete, now at Walton RC, with Tom Carter (Upper Thames) third.

In the women's race Penny Chuter won five times running in the '60s, with internationals including Pauline Bird, Sarah Birch, Rosamund Bradbury and Sophie Hosking, gold medallist in lightweight double sculls at London 2012, following in later years, the latter taking the title in 2008. Since then Alison Jackson (Walton RC) has won the coveted trophy four times, including this year, 2012 being cancelled due to adverse stream conditions.

Junior categories and entries have grown enormously over the last decade, now accounting for well over half of the total. Twenty-five years after one Greg Searle, then of Hampton School, was the fastest junior sculler it was Cameron Kerr from Westminster School who took the title. Katherine Maitland (Eton Excelsior) took the girls' equivalent where Frances Houghton was a former winner in 1995 and still holds the record for the fastest junior woman. Maybe these and other juniors competing here will go on and follow in their footsteps in the international arena...

It remains an upstream course so the times are very much influenced by the stream. The slowest winning time was 18:52 by Jon Hawkesley in 1966 (when the race would probably have been cancelled in today's 'red board' regime) while Rob McKenzie's 12:46 time in 1995 has yet to be beaten.

Tweet of the month



“Holy shmoly. I just won Wingfields! Very surprised, very happy, and feeling a little bit sick...”



Imogen Walsh @imogenwalsh