

Looking Astern – A Brief History of the Club by John Parfit

Sailing had taken place in The Mumbles for much of the early part of this century. The old oyster smacks used to sail out of The Dunns and needless to say, although they were primarily commercial craft, regattas were organised and competitive sailing became part of their social scene.

This was followed by racing on a somewhat grander scale with 'J' Class yachts racing in the bay and the fleet included such names as - Endeavour, Shamrock and of course 'Britannia' with King George V in command. There are many wonderful paintings in the BCYC depicting these forgotten days.

Mumbles Yacht Club was formed in 1938 by a number of locals who, inspired by the magnificence of, and in many cases, their own involvement in the events of previous years had purchased a variety of much very more humble yet equally precious craft. After taking part in a number of impromptu regattas and races, they considered local sailing should be put on a firm footing. Many of our older members remember the names F.H. Treharne-Thomas, Geoff Leader, Bryan Andrews, David Johns, Albert Williams and Doug Probert to name but a few of those involved in founding the Club.

At the start of World War II everything was put on hold and Club activity ceased. After the war, it was decided to start again and the original founders approached the active young men and women who had returned home from 'battle' and, with a new found enthusiasm, the Club reformed in 1946. Meeting firstly once a month in the back room of the Pilot Inn and later when numbers had increased, in the Mermaid Hotel, now sadly lost forever but fondly remembered by many.

Races were run from the shore. The Race Office was a small white 'tin' hut on the promenade in front of the Mumbles Railway Line where yet another far more resplendent and luxurious 'tin' hut, Verdi's stands today.

The starting line was formed by two transit posts with triangles on them. One being situated on the hut itself, part of the flag signal mast and the other on the timber groin, which ran out directly in front of it.

A complete menagerie of craft, which included converted ships lifeboats, airborne lifeboats, small long keeled boats, various one designs (which had originated in numerous other parts of the country), a few of the more modern centreboard dayboats and even one or two of the very early racing 'dinghy' designs took part in handicap racing.

After the 'stresses' of 'highly competitive racing' the participants would return to the security of dry land and retire to one of the local hostelries, in the absence of the not yet even dreamt of Clubhouse, to discuss at great length the tactical errors of their own craft and the sheer luck and flukes that had been experienced by others who had fared better in the results of the evenings racing.



One of the most popular boats in the early days of class racing within the Club was the National Eighteen. This was an eighteen-foot clinker built boat with a cast iron centreboard that weighed over three-hundredweight (150 Kg) and required three fairly hefty crewmembers to race competitively. By virtue of their sheer size and weight these boats had to be kept on moorings during the season and required extensive maintenance work during the winter since the planked hulls and wooden decks were always kept immaculately varnished with the exception of anti - fouling below the waterline. In spite of all the hassle, there was, for many years, a fleet of 12 to 15 [*ed:Richard Howells has provided evidence of 24 boats - see photos galleries*] boats that raced regularly in Mumbles.

The Class was raced all over the U.K., another strong local fleet existed in Barry and, when the two fleets met at open meetings racing was very competitive. There was also a strong fleet in Cork and, National Championships were an annual pilgrimage for the fleet who travelled not only to Cork, but also as far afield as Findhorn in Scotland and Herne Bay in Kent. In those early days, transporting well over a ton of boat and trailer over that sort of distance was no mean feat and showed real dedication.

No doubt there are many who can remember the sight of three large crew-members draped in war surplus gas capes, cork lifebelts and sou'westers, with plimsolls on their feet, wheeling a six or seven foot tender down the slip in order to go racing an 'Eighteen'. However, with the rapid increase in popularity of sailing as a sport, the attire progressed rapidly through more comfortable and increasingly practical oilskins, which soon became lightweight sailing suits until finally the wetsuit appeared on the scene.

For those who liked the easy life and preferred to launch off the slipways, the menagerie grew rapidly and among the early designs seen parked alongside the old Mumbles Railway were Redwings, Sharpies, Herons, Fireflies, Graduates, Cadets, a Jollyboat and even 505.

Meanwhile, the back room of the Mermaid Hotel could no longer contain the rapidly increasing membership of the Club, and the need for a 'Clubhouse' became ever more pressing, raising the question of where to build and what would it cost? The only suitable site that could be found was a small plot that overlooked the Knab Rock at Whitegates and access would have to have been via a pedestrian bridge over the Mumbles Railway.



The club was fortunate in having amongst its members several people in the building trade and an architect (Viv Howells) who with various other members formed the Building Committee. The plans had been drawn up, costed, and approved by the Corporation. The scheme was about to proceed when somebody brought to the committee's attention the piece of land where the Clubhouse stands today. At the time it had been fenced off, as part of a private car park, and this fact had escaped the Council's attention. After considerable discussion and lengthy negotiation the Club was granted a 50-year lease on the land and new plans were immediately drawn up and approved.

The present Clubhouse actually consists of three phases of construction spread over a period of almost twenty-five years. The original building consisted of the "club room", as

it is still known today, over the changing rooms below. The "front door" was on the side of the building. Now the outer door of the ladies changing room.

Finance for the structure of the original building was raised by a committee under the chairmanship of Mr. Percy Owen, which succeeded in raising the bulk of the monies, needed for materials, in the form of loans from the membership.

Everybody chipped in what they could afford, interest free. The original records are still filed in the Clubhouse. Several of the members made substantial donations, not the least of which was the time and labour required to build the Club, given freely by both the trades-men and the lesser mortals who laboured for them, all of whom were members.

Fund raising continued apace. Bricks, stacked ready for use on the site, were sold individually to members who wrote their names on them in chalk and the entire roof of the original building was in fact, donated by one member - Harry Wilson who was in the trade.

The Ladies of the Club held a raffle every Saturday night. The prize being a "Chicken Dinner" (the bird, vegetables and all the trimmings to take home and cook), five tickets for a shilling. The money raised from these sources amounted to many hundreds of pounds and helped to furnish and equip the Club. The entire project was hard work and involved the total membership which, as we can see today, was well worth the time and effort expended.

With the new premises, came a greater interest in the sport and membership increased rapidly, bringing with it many more modern designs of boat and much more competitive racing.

John Parfit