

Boat Club Anniversary - 50 Years of Rowing

With the 50th anniversary of the St Edmund's College Boat Club (SECBC) coming up in 2019, former Master Prof Paul Luzio - who has a long-standing connection with the club - shares some remarks on the club's history.

The year 2019 will mark the 50th anniversary of the St Edmund's College Boat Club (SECBC). This is not to say that rowing wasn't a pastime favoured by earlier members of St Edmund's. Indeed, in his Master's report 1956-57, the Right Reverend Monsignor Canon Raymond Corboy recorded that "a novel incident of the Easter term was Downing's fifth boat being manned entirely by members of St Edmund's House." Nevertheless, it wasn't until the late 1960s, after St Edmund's had become one of the first graduate colleges, that a Boat Club was formed. In his history of the first eighty years of St Edmund's, Corboy's successor as Master, the Very Reverend Canon Garret Sweeney described "some of the student and academic activities proper to collegiate life" beginning to make their appearance. He wrote, "earliest in point of time was a Boat Club which competed in the Fairbairns, Lents and Mays of 1969-70 but had a somewhat uncertain existence. It failed to qualify during the two subsequent years, passed for a time out of existence, and reappeared on the river for the Mays of 1975 and Lents of 1976". So, just as the mists swirl along the Cam on cold, damp mornings during Michaelmas and Lent terms, they swirl around the origins of our Boat Club.

As Mike Smith has pointed out in another article in this Edition, it was Bernard Buckley who actually initiated the Boat Club and in 2011 Bernard donated to the College archive some documents relating to its foundation and early years. One of Bernard's key actions in October 1969 was to write to the then CUBC President David Cruttenden, who responded by giving permission to St Edmund's to put a boat on the river and enter the Bumps. Thus, St Edmund's entered a men's crew in the 1970 Lent Bumps and recorded the first ever bump by a St Edmund's boat. The first St Edmund's boat to win blades was the men's first May boat in 1975 but, despite other successes in the mid-1970s, the progress of the Boat Club was not steady.



1976 - first year the College was awarded oars.

In 1985 a report by the then CR President John Kalmus recorded that "those of us rowing back in the mists of time (i.e. pre-1984) will remember our old College 'eight', 'El Vita', with a mixture of amusement and affection". After frequent breakages and much application of G-clamps and glue it soon became clear that ElVita had reached the end of her life. This led to the purchase of a second hand boat from Clare and a completely new set of oars but, despite the new equipment, success on the river was intermittent and remained elusive until the 1990s. This coincided with the admission to St Edmund's of a succession of outstanding oarsmen, who not only rowed for the University in the men's Blue boat but also rowed in the St Edmund's first May boat whenever their other rowing commitments allowed. Thus, from 1993 (when our first men's rowing blues were Malcolm Baker, now Professor of Business Administration at Harvard Business School, Jon Bernstein and Richard Phelps, now a Henley Steward), the men's first boat in the Mays started its climb to its current position towards the top of Division 2. In addition, the Bumps races increasingly saw the presence of second and even third men's crews, as well as the occasional appearance of women's boats described below.

To date 36 members of St Edmund's have rowed for the University in the men's Blue boat and 11 others in Goldie (the men's second boat). Between them, those Eddies oarsmen have won 12 gold, 7 silver and 12 bronze World

Championship medals as well as 3 silver and 2 bronze Olympic medals before, during or after their time in Cambridge.

Women's rowing has also participated in its share of success at St Edmund's. In 1985 Sarah Cleaveland (now Professor of Comparative Epidemiology at Glasgow, Fellow of the Royal Society and OBE) became the first St Edmund's student to win a rowing blue and was also in a winning crew at the National Championships. Since then, 3 St Edmund's students have represented the University in Blondie (the women's second boat) and 4 in the women's lightweights. Of course, like the men, the women have had their ups and downs. As recently as 2000, it was noted in the history of the Bumps that, "With very small numbers, it is not surprising that St Edmund's has only been represented very rarely in either women's Lents or Mays. During the mid-1990s, thanks mainly to the enthusiasm of its Captain Anna Melville-James, St Edmund's put out women's Boats for three consecutive sets of races, but other than this has only appeared a total of six times in approximately twenty years".

Since 2000 however, the College Boat Club has gone from strength to strength, with greater numbers of students rowing and our boats steadily climbing the charts. One highlight occurred in 2008 with the Club winning the Pegasus Cup, which is awarded annually to the most successful college boat club competing in the May Bumps. After many years of squatting in different boat houses on the Cam, the College made a formal agreement with the Cambridge '99 Rowing Club in 2013, whereby our boats are now stored in the Nine's boathouse



1976 Men's VIII

and our athletes have the use of their gym and other facilities. 2018 saw 2 men's boats and 1 women's boat in both the Lents and the Mays as well as our biggest ever novice programme this Michaelmas term. Rowers from St Edmund's also recently claimed two world records on the 'erg', longest continual row by a team of 4 and fastest million metres by a small team of 10 in the male 20-29 years heavyweight category.

As we start our second 50 years, we have a College Boat Club that is better organised and supported than ever before. It has a revised constitution, including a senior committee, with several very supportive fellows, fellow commoners and other senior members, as well as the full support of the present and former Masters. Our Boat

Club alumni have also been active in enthusiastically contributing towards coaching and equipment as well as sometimes coaching themselves. In 2002, on the eve of the men's Boat Race, a dozen alumni of St Edmund's Boat Club gathered for dinner in the RAC in Pall Mall and founded the 2020 'club' and dinner. The goal of the 2020 club "other than enjoying one another's company within the alumni base is to help the men's and women's eights go head of the May/Lent Bumps (whichever comes sooner) in 2020". Sadly, that is now mathematically impossible, but the club and dinner (which is now open to present students at a rate subsidised by the alumni as well as all SECBC alumni) have continued to thrive, with the 2019 dinner held on Saturday 6 April at the Oriental Club in London. It proved once again a wonderful occasion for Eddies boaties to celebrate their rose-tinted memories of the Cam during the evening before both men's and women's Boat Races were rowed from Putney to Mortlake.

To those who were present at the founding of the St Edmund's Boat Club in 1969 its subsequent development and rise in the Bumps, as well as its membership sometimes including world champions and Olympians, may seem almost miraculous. That we are jousting amongst the likes of Trinity Hall and Fitzwilliam first boats towards the top of the men's Division 2, as well as being in the top half of the women's Division 3 in the Mays, is a tribute to all those who have rowed and contributed so much to the Boat Club. Division 1 now beckons for both the men and the women and, although we may not achieve it by 2020, one day we shall indeed be Head of the River.

- Prof Paul Luzio
former Master and active Benefactor of SECBC