

VISION, OPPORTUNITY AND PERSISTENCE

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Developing rowing at regional level requires dogged persistence, community spirit and an awful lot of paperwork, but this story of regeneration in Greenwich is an inspiration to all.

So much has happened, it seems, in such a short time and yet the seed of the present re-emergence of rowing in Greenwich was sown years rather than months ago. This article tells something of the story so far, and of what is on our horizon for the coming years. I write from the perspective of someone who came to rowing on the Thames from Greenwich only about six years ago, joining Globe RC based at the somewhat grandly named Trafalgar Rowing Centre (TRC), a stone's throw from the old Royal Naval Hospital now home to Greenwich University and Trinity College of Music.

Globe was formed in 1923 and kept its boats on a barge until eventually taking up residence at the TRC in 1968. While old photographs and occasional shared memories from remaining senior club members tell something of the Club's history, I was privileged to attend a Globe reunion dinner on 15 June organised by our current chairman, Ken Milton, and witnessed the tremendous sense of community and loyal affection that a rowing club can engender. Though I have heard talk of the many characters who made their particular contribution to the history of the Club, it was very special to listen to stories first hand of the ebb and flow of the Club's fortunes on and off the river.

For various reasons, at the time I joined the Club, Globe had dwindled to a membership of perhaps only 40 with few active rowers and held together by a hardcore of veterans. The TRC had fallen into disrepair while uncertainties persisted over tenure arising from a once unhappy and litigious relationship with Greenwich Council. Discussions were going on with



Sport England and the ARA over possible funding for much-needed refurbishment of the clubhouse building, to provide a new roof and adequate changing facilities, assuming tenure could be resolved. This became in effect the condition precedent for regeneration in the collective mind and so we all remained somewhat in limbo while the wheels slowly, slowly turned.

In June 2006, thanks to a combination of efforts from key individuals within Greenwich Council and from the ARA and

Sport England, the leases of the clubhouse and boathouse were finally granted. Having overcome that hurdle, we learnt that we had to raise far more than expected when the architects delivered their estimate for the building works. The search for funding goes on and is far from easy as anyone who has sought capital funding will surely attest to. It takes many hours of work gathering information, completing the various forms and supplying the differing documentation requirements that funding bodies demand.

Before going further I should provide a few words of explanation about the set-up in Greenwich. The TRC is run by Trafalgar 2001 Trust Limited, a registered charity and company limited by guarantee. The Trust is the lessee of the clubhouse and boathouse having taken over running of the Centre in February 2006 from the predecessor organisation called the South East London Rowing Group, established in 1968. Globe RC is a resident club paying for use of racking and other facilities at the TRC with one elected representative on the Board of the Trust. Curlew RC is another club resident at the TRC, though they do their rowing at the London Regatta Centre. In September 2006, I became the first elected representative of Globe RC on the Trust Board. I am also 'development officer' on the Globe Committee.

Without labouring the sailing analogy, I and others on the Globe Committee recognised that we needed to get the wind back in our sails and that we could not wait any longer to begin a much needed programme of regeneration for the Club and the TRC. Though divided in governance, the fortunes of Club and Centre are inextricably intertwined and we could not wait for capital funding that might be yet further delayed – or indeed may never come. The 'if we rebuild it they will come' way of thinking amounted to no more than weary procrastination and showed none of the spirit so apparent in the Club's history.

Quite properly, the fundamental test for investment in community projects is that they should be relevant to the community. Though the numbers game (how many people, how many sessions, over what period?) grates more than a little, it is nevertheless the current regime with which we must work. We needed to engage with our local community and build from the ground up. Our obvious focus must therefore be on juniors who happily are also the focus for many major funding bodies and of our local council's 'Sports Promotion' unit.

As part and parcel of the funding application long underway under the ARA and Sport England Community Clubs Development Programme (CCDP) for refurbishment of the clubhouse, we had to produce a Sports Development Plan with projections of numbers of participants per year up to 15 years from commencement. This involved making and agreeing estimates as to the capacity of the Centre in terms of numbers of people / boats / outings possible – taking all factors into account – which in turn informed decisions as to the capacity needed for male / female changing rooms. As Ted Nelson eloquently put it: "Everything is deeply intertwined!" So we had, in any event, some targets to meet should we ever obtain the balance of funding needed to



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complete the project without which the CCDP money will not be forthcoming.

Since early 2006 I had been in contact with Jonathan Dixon, who was then heading up Greenwich Council Sports Promotion, trying to find out what he could do to help. Sports Promotion has almost no funding to offer but is charged with supporting clubs and building links across the borough. In addition to his efforts to ensure that the leases were finally granted, Jonathan sent Samantha Richards my way in December 2006. Samantha was retained by the Council to assist in launching the Sports Search scheme which was to be piloted in Greenwich – Sir Steven Redgrave CBE was guest of honour at the launch held at Woolwich Polytechnic. Sports Search is a scheme that tests children's aptitudes (involving various physical tests) and attitudes (there is an online selection tool that matches preferences) and then suggests sports they might wish to participate in outside school hours. The final stage is to establish the link with the local clubs that offer the child's chosen activity.

We talked about the potential for rowing in Greenwich and Samantha agreed that it would be a good choice as one of a number of focus sports to be highlighted in the pilot. This scheme is also in alignment with PESSCL (PE, School Sport and Club Links), a nationwide regime that promotes links to clubs such as Globe RC. Samantha reappears later in the story but it is right that I introduce her here.





'Awards for All' had been mentioned to me a number of times and the fact that maximum awards had been increased to £10,000. In December, I started drafting an application for funding that would allow us to refit our tired gym, in particular replacing our Concept2 PM2 machines with the latest model with PM4 monitors and all they offer in terms of resources. I admit that rather than doing this by committee I just made it up myself – I didn't have the patience to spend months in consultation and didn't want to get hopes up only to see them dashed should the application fail. For good measure, I thought I would also apply to the Capital Community Foundation Local Network Fund whose maximum award is £7,000. Greenwich Sports Promotion kindly provided the references needed and the applications were submitted in January 2007.

The applications were made in essentially the same terms save for some necessary differences / overlaps in what the money sought would be spent on. The applications proposed that we make the TRC gym a centre of excellence for indoor rowing and create an indoor rowing league in the borough. The applications went in during the second week of January.

While drafting the funding applications in December, I first made contact with Tom Kay at Concept2 who is a significant driving force behind the development of rowing in schools. He told me of the Birmingham initiative supported by the PCT (Primary Care Trust) obesity unit and the huge enthusiasm and levels of participation achieved involving hundreds of children. He sent me the DVD they have

produced in which you can see children screaming their heads off with excitement as they race in team relays – truly inspirational and certainly giving me a sense of the possibilities for Greenwich and the contribution we could make as a Club and Centre to our community.

Samantha popped up again and on 17 January asked to meet. She wanted to know whether I would be able to help in delivering taster sessions to secondary school children in the borough – they wanted to reach 1,300 children by the end of March. I had never been involved in anything like it and promised to look into the logistics of such an exercise. I went home and drafted a model plan for discussion and so set myself up for a truly extraordinary experience.

A few days later I met with Gordon Stead, the partnership development manager (PDM) responsible for the Greenwich School Sports Partnership and therefore sports development in roughly half of the primary and secondary schools in the borough. Jane Simber runs the other half and I was to meet her several weeks later. The role of these PDMs has been crucial to the development of rowing as they have helped to guide and support the evolution of our programme, in particular through regular contact with their network of SSCOs (school sports coordinating officers) who link between secondary schools and the primary schools that feed into them, and heads of PE.

A sum of £30,000 had been allocated under a scheme called SRB6 operated by

the Local Education Authority from which Jonathan Dixon ordered 26 machines to be distributed among 13 schools; these were delivered in early February. Then I was introduced to John Dixon, now in charge of PE at Eltham Green Sports College and a genuine mover and shaker. John's enthusiasm for anything that engages and offers learning opportunity to children is seemingly boundless – "it's for the kids, that's what it's all about" is what I hear him saying and watch him putting into practice day in and day out. John welcomed me and without hesitation offered to put as many children from his school through the taster sessions as he could possibly manage.

Eltham Green is the Globe partner school for Project Oarsome Extra and fortunately they already had nine Concept2 machines in their gym with a mixture of PM2s and PM3s. I struck a deal with John that I would bring him replacement new machines on loan from the Council if he lent me his nine machines to go 'on tour' to the other schools. I later helped negotiate the sale of all nine to Kidbrooke School. And so I began a rollercoaster journey that taught me so much and that I would not have missed for the world.

The children in these schools are real inner city kids. Many have never been outside their housing estates; they live the reality of growing up in what are tough neighbourhoods and often with very difficult home situations. They can be very challenging to deal with at the best of times, but one thing I have learnt in my short experience is that children keep you honest. Year 7s are usually delightful and by contrast Years 10 and 11 can be outright scary – on many occasions my patience was tested and I twice lost my temper, baring everyone including myself with a lecture about behaviour. However, among the 1865 children I saw over 13 days, I saw so much potential waiting to be unlocked from shyness or fear or other repression. Seeing the fun the children had when participating in the relay race that ended each session I knew exactly why I loved the sport and what I was doing.

Throughout the taster session programme, as I travelled about in my hired Transit, I got to know many of the school PE staff and this has paid dividends in terms of progressing towards active participation in rowing.

Good news

On 24 March, I received notification from Awards for All that my application had been granted. A week later the Local Network Fund grant also came through. You can imagine the elation and relief – all the buses coming at once! I thought that preparing an application took a long time but nothing prepared me for the time involved in

actually implementing the grants. I negotiated a variation to the purchases to be made with the Local Network Funding and money that would have gone to four ergos is now invested in two Dyno machines and two gym bikes which have stimulated interest and regular use.

During this summer term, supported by the PDMs, I have been visiting a number of schools to run after-school sessions and some normal school PE sessions with the intention of keeping up the momentum created by the taster sessions. At the beginning of term I met with John Dixon and the PDMs to discuss training PE staff and how we could best ensure that schools engaged in rowing in the coming academic year.

I offered to use funding received by Trafalgar 2001 Trust for training PE staff as dry instructors, and the PDMs offered to cover the considerable cost of supply cover for the staff who attended. On 19 June, Eltham Green Sports College hosted an all-day training event for SSCOs and PE teachers representing 11 of the Borough's 13 secondary schools and the borough's competitions manager Leanne Atkins. The programme began with an ARA Dry Instructors Award run by local ARA CDOs Kate Beaumont and Phil Simmons and with some unexpected but very welcome help from Penny Cuthbert and her colleagues at London Youth Rowing. A tour of the Trafalgar Rowing Centre facilities and an afternoon session followed.

What was also agreed with the PDMs was that the Greenwich School Sports Partnership will fund a programme for the coming academic year involving six schools per term (16 children per school) each for a total of six sessions, the first four sessions being run by the teachers themselves at the Trafalgar Rowing Centre gym, followed by a session in the TRC boathouse learning about boats and a final session in the London Regatta Centre rowing tank. We are confident that we will see many schools making use of the TRC gym for GSCE PE, normal PE classes and after school. We are also planning to offer the facilities to local primary schools within walking distance of the Centre.

Competitions managers in the East London boroughs have elected rowing as their focus sport and an inter-borough competition took place in Bexley on 9 July. In addition, Leanne Atkins and I will be running an inaugural annual indoor rowing competition at the new Eltham Green Sports College indoor stadium as part of a day of activities celebrating the opening of the facility.

We have high hopes that we can get a great many children to the water and perhaps next summer we will host a fun schools regatta. As an Olympic borough there is rightly a special focus on the sport in which we have had such consistent success and

anything that raises the profile of rowing must help us recruit new rowers and build participation for the long term. I also hope that the much needed capital investment is made available so that we can provide proper changing facilities that increased use will require. And most importantly of all we will need to build our coaching capacity, a process that has already begun with local PE staff some of whom we may hope will wish to progress to a Level 2 qualification.

Energy rising

There is no doubt that the arrival of new equipment has lifted spirits, though inevitably attention is drawn by some to their preferences for investment such as in

The recent reunion dinner was a huge success and our chairman has organised a number of social events as well as resurrecting club races (the first sponsored by the parent of another junior) with following boats so that friends and family can cheer the crews on. The father of another of our junior members also organised a fundraising 'Fools Eight' challenge and raised a tidy sum towards the fund needed for the clubhouse refurbishment project.

The sense of energy and purpose in the club is palpable and we have seen the numbers of beginners applying for our 10-week 'Learn to Row' courses have grown considerably, with 14 adults attending the current course. Rather than waiting for something to happen, the Club has

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new boats. We are working with our regional ARA CDO Kate Beaumont to bring in coaching capacity to be shared with Poplar & Blackwall and Curlw and this is certainly a very positive step – my feeling is that rowers can be a little like golfers, preferring to spend money on equipment than lessons with predicament and noisy consequences.

Globe has organised a number of working parties – one to 'splish splosh' the changing rooms with paint donated by a supportive parent of two of our junior members and one to repair our temporary slipway (another project that is underway, now with the involvement of the Port of London Authority).

rallied and the results promise greater cohesion and community among a growing membership able to enjoy rowing from Greenwich.

We have been fortunate indeed in the grants we have received and the regeneration of our Club, Centre and rowing generally in Greenwich is just beginning. We understand ebb and flow all too well on the Tideway and my sense is that rowing is rising again on a tide of genuine enthusiasm that is entirely aligned with the current and much needed emphasis on the young and on healthier lifestyles. ■

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