

Memories from Dick Martin

Written 14th Sept 2004.

I joined the Rowing Club when I was 19/20 around 1947/48. The members then consisted of mainly tradesmen such as Railway Workshop workers, carpenters, etc. A number of the members were ex armed forces, which had been given tuition etc as builders. The ace crew when I joined was the champion 8, composed of Pete Carter, Ward Muller, Lofty Greenstreet and Tiny Booth.

The plant was looked after by an old member who was in charge of who used what; name Claude Drummond, who had to be obeyed without question.

I was well known to the Duncan family; in fact, my Godmother was Mrs Melba Miller, who was one of that family. Bluey Duncan was also our Petone League team coach and masseur, another Railway Workshops man. Two of the Duncan's worked for the BNZ, and I understand that Royal Duncan was instrumental in arranging finance for the construction of the building, around depression time, when it was built by members, who probably had no other work at that time. The boats were named after ladies on the ladies committee, and I can remember Harriet [8] was named after the old lady Mrs. Duncan, and Angela [4] after Tom Watson's wife.

The club owned two heavy training clinker fours and every Saturday afternoon there would be a club race, starting down the east end of the beach almost opposite the rubbish tip and finishing opposite the west side of the club where the sea wall started again. There were cups awarded for these races, I forget the names now. The club also owned a clinker pleasure boat, which was available for the members if they wanted it. I can remember using it quite often to rescue yachts from next door who had tipped up. I also remember one trip to Leper Island with mates and their girlfriends. The wind came up and one of the girls became frightened and hysterical. We had to carry her into the boat and row back through a northwestern gale, someone holding her from damage. The practice fours were very heavy, and there were strict rules that all four of the crew had to carry the boat up to the trestles after use. This was circumvented occasionally by some wiseacres, and I remember only two tried to carry one up on a Saturday afternoon after use. One of the perpetrators was Jimmy Beard, who was neither particularly tall nor muscular, and his legs buckled on the way up and he and the boat collapsed on the beach. He had some explaining to do after that!

The names for the races on a Saturday were picked out of a hat and all members entered were placed in a crew, could be anyone, novices, seniors, juniors etc. I think it was designed to give all members the chance to row with each other. This was hard to do any other time after crews for regattas were picked. Usually most members adjointed to the Vic (Victoria Hotel) after the club races for a convivial afternoon. Remember, it was six o'clock closing those days. Everyone rode bikes except the affluent few, one of whom was Ward Muller. His family came from Wanganui and always looked posh compared with us working class blokes. One day after a club race, Ward was full of rage when he found his car, (a Prefect) perched up on top of two trestles next to the club.

The club in those days subsisted on money from Saturday night dances. These carried over from the War, when they were fantastically popular with all the American soldiers living close at Hutt Park and McEwen Park along the beach. Being a clerical type, not a tradesman, I ended up as treasurer for a time. It was quite a job running the dance. One finished the races, had a few beers, rushed home to have tea, and straight down to the club. There the floor had to be swept, any cleaning of toilets etc to be done, ensure that the supper was ordered, the band also available.

I usually started in the ticket box at the bottom of the stairs as soon as all this had been done, selling tickets. Often the swimming club blokes would arrive, or some other trustworthy member, who took over the ticket box while the so-called executive [1] became the MC and announced the dances etc. When not on duty, a lot of the blokes would start off at Pete Carter's place in Waione Street. We would take some flagons or square-riggers of beer to Pete's place and have a natter. Pete was also in the Petone Rugby A team as were some of the members. He was very good at producing his home brew, which was horrible, which we drank. Then Pete would offer to drive us down to the club in his old builder's truck. Of course we left all our decent beer behind with him and his football mates. No liquor was allowed near dance halls in those days, but we always had some, and quite often finished up with the band and some hardy regulars after the dance, having a convivial time. On some occasions it was daylight before some finished going home.

After some years, the tiring few workers gave up, and closed the dance. One had a few bruises from collecting tickets and refusing entrance to drunks and gangs etc. I can remember spending a few journeys down the stairway trying to keep order. We then devised a method of football scorecards. An industrious few stapled up the tickets from pre-printed cards, and dated them with rubber stamps. They were then handed out to members and supporters who sold them every week. It was hard work but produced income for the club.

Other activities for the club included a Petone Rugby club football team in the social grade. We usually one that competition each year, I can remember one year when we did not have our line crossed until practically the last game. I noticed our name up in the Rugby Club hall in later years. Some of the members also informed a basketball team which played competitively in the old Palace Theatre building. Before I joined the club, they had Alf Jenkins come to the club and try to get them fit in the winter. Some of us joined Jenkins Gym and trained there at a later stage. It nearly killed us, but meant that we started the season very fit.

The classes in those days were Novice, Under 21, Maiden, Junior and Senior. I had been helping my father build boats and fishing since I was young, and I knew how to row before joining the club. Some of the members used to look down on me; Ward Muller was one, a dinghy rower, not a polished oarsman. I remember starting in and eight [Youth] in Port Chalmers, for a NZ Championship. We were quartered in a derelict shipbuilders shed where ships were built during the war as minesweepers and later converted into trawlers. The quarters were upstairs, downstairs was a concrete floor where the ships were built and a runway into the sea. We used to put the boat into the water alongside the concrete runway and get in gingerly. One night everyone undid the swivels on the seaward side as usual and the cox, Tom Watson Jumped out. The motion was enough to tip the boat over, all the oars came adrift and we all enjoyed the sight of seaweed on the bottom below. We did no good at the regatta; a merchant ship came round the corner in the middle of the race, and caused chaos among the crews.

I later joined up with Fred Flowers in a pair as maiden oarsmen. We showed some form in that we won a few races in the coxed clinker pair, so were offered a place in the NZ Championship as the Petone pair in the first one ever held at Karapiro. We all travelled by train, which had a passenger carriages and UB wagons for the boats to Hamilton, thence to Cambridge. The dam had only just been completed and Cambridge was a place of closed entertainment dumps, which formally fleeced the dam builders. Fred and I started in the pair race, and thought we had won it; I was shortsighted and hadn't worn my glasses. The gun went off and a Blenheim pair, Patchett and Hird won. We should have heard them ahead of us, because they were rowing with sticks between the oars called poppets, not swivels like us.

They collapsed and fell out of their boat. We were asked to rescue them, which we said was not likely, we were so disappointed. Then after the race we were all cancelled out because we did not keep between the buoys, and the crew, which came in last was awarded the win. It was not until some time later, after we got home, before the bigheads running the regatta revised their decision and awarded us second place. I could row on both sides of the boat, and usually rowed as three or stroke. I could also scull, but was not selected because I was not considered good enough.

Eventually I challenged, and won my challenge easily, having to scull twice because the selected chap fell out first race, and said it wasn't fair. I remember starting at the Wanganui regatta one year in four races, as stroke of a pair with Fred, three in a four with others, and in two single scull races. I won the first one easily, but the last sculling race, found that I was last in the middle stages, so I got my arse into gear and finished third. I remember Clarry Healey of Union pooh poohing the blokes bringing down the different boats, which I just got into. After that he brought me a cup of tea. I also started in coxed double sculls with Bernie Bose, an old Picton rower and winning races with him. I also rowed with Graham France, but didn't do much good with him.

The Hutt Club did not get off the ground initially because of snags in the river, although we helped build the boatshed at the end of Whites line, it was eventually sold to a Rugby League Club.

I had retired, but was the president when Tony Antonovitch came into the club. He took over ordering of new boats and coaching, and then took off with his henchmen to form a new Hutt Club. We had been barracking at the Wellington Clubs to set up a building on the Korokoro course, and I was in the delegation, which put the proposition for a site to Mike Moohan in Parliament after the Water Ski club had been given a site. We all helped shift a building in pieces to the site and put it together. Tony shifted in there and offered to buy our boats for the Hutt Club. We cancelled the undelivered orders and refused to sell him any boats. He was an abusive sort of bloke, so the only thing was to walk away from him.

Ken White organised the finance for the addition to the side of the club next to the Navy League. I was still an officer when this was completed. The father of twins rowing for the club was the builder. Tony had already arranged showering and changing facilities downstairs before shifting out, I remember Ron Blandford single handed did the decorating, said he was better left on his own doing.

I remember being invited by the Boswell family to have a row with them to make up the numbers in a four about twenty years ago. They were Ken Boswell, a redcoat, Dave Boswell and Laurie Boswell, all before my time in active participation. I remember competing in regatta commemorating the Queen's visit in Wellington. We rowed alongside her ship, which was painted white. I knew it was a crazy thing to row in Wellington in a Northerly, but the wiseheads insisted. We finished up in our eight sinking, all hands jumping overboard to save the coxswain until a Navy Fairmile came to our rescue. We had to stay in the water and be towed over to the Star club, cold and annoyed. I think the Queen's Cup may still be competed for.

I was elected treasurer, club captain, and president at various times of my life. I was never elected as selector, probably because I got all the arsehole jobs. Some of the Hutt residents got the idea that the Hutt River should be used, because the Harbour was often rough and windy. They got together.