

Maidenhead Rowing Club

The origins of Maidenhead Rowing Club are not clear, but records of Henley Royal Regatta indicate that there was an entry from 'The Star Club, Maidenhead' in 1840, and as the club's symbol is a green star, there may be some direct connection. The very first *Rowing Almanack* gives details of a regatta held in Maidenhead in 1860 and is known that the present club was in existence around the 1870s.

The club recorded its first Henley Royal Regatta win in 1924 in the Thames Cup, a second success followed in 1939 beating Tigre Boat Club from Argentina in the final of the coxless fours.

Notable past members include Bert Bushnell, winner of the double sculls at the 1948 Olympics, and William Grenfell, later Lord Desborough of Taplow, who, among his many achievements competed for Oxford in the dead heat boat race of 1877, rowed the channel in an eight, became club captain, mayor of Maidenhead and was a notable punting champion (the Thames Punting Championships are still held to this day on the Maidenhead stretch). Somehow he even found time to climb the Matterhorn three times and the Niagara falls twice as well as later serving as chairman of the British Olympic Association. Lord Desborough is also notable for having his obituary erroneously published in *The Times* in 1920 (in fact, he lived until 1945). Lord Desborough's portrait is prominently positioned in the club above the stairs leading from the reception area.

In the mid 1970s, the club admitted its first female member, Laura Lion (nee Jenkinson), as a junior – the club rules had to be changed in order to admit her. Laura went on to represent Great Britain in several junior competitions and remains a member and active junior coach. Now, half the membership is female and the club currently has its first female captain, Keri Johnson.

The club's Henley Royal Regatta success continued in the 1980 with three wins. Eric Sims (now director of senior rowing at Maidenhead and winner of five Henley medals) winning one of them in partnership with Steve Redgrave.

Until 1998 the club was located in a timber and corrugated iron structure sandwiched between the Thames Riviera Hotel and the A4 road bridge. This was last extended in 1926 and by the 1990s was in a poor condition.



However, in 1998, with the help of lottery funding, the club moved to a large modern purpose-built clubhouse on the other side of the river in Taplow, between the A4 bridge and Brunel's railway bridge. Crews row on the stretch between Boulter's lock and Bray lock, a distance of approximately 3000m.

The move to the new larger premises in Taplow allowed the club to actively recruit new members, especially from local schools. Membership has nearly quadrupled since the move and now stands at well over 300.

The club has now developed one of, if not the, most successful junior sections in the country, regularly appearing at the top of National Championships and National Schools Championships medal tables along with leading rowing schools such as Eton and Lady Eleanor Holles, despite much smaller resources and number of athletes. In 2007, the club's women's junior eight won the School's Head (held on the Tideway over the Boat Race course) beating all the top rowing schools in a course record time – the first time that a club has ever won this event.

Traditionally in the UK we have been strongest at sweep-oar rowing (each person handling one large oar each, on alternating sides of the boat). However recent years have seen a huge growth in sculling (two smaller oars per person, one in each hand) and the majority of the rowing at Maidenhead is now in sculling boats, partly reflecting the fact

that all juniors start with sculling. However, crews in traditional boats such as coxed fours and eights are still seen regularly on the Maidenhead stretch.



Despite the success of the club in recent years, the one notable absence in its catalogue of recent success had been wins at Henley Royal Regatta and Henley Women's Regatta. This was rectified in 2006 when two HWR medals were won by Ally Brooks and Louise Entwistle in the junior double sculls event and by Natalie Trinder and Vicky Sims in the senior double sculls. In 2007, Phil Clapp, sculling in a composite quad with Henley RC, won the under-19s Fawley Cup, crushing the best Australian and domestic competition in the process and becoming the first Maidenhead HRR winner since 1994. Phil then went on to represent Great Britain in the final of the world junior rowing championships in Beijing – the first major event held on the Olympic course. Products of the club's junior rowing programme are now appearing on the senior international scene, with former junior (and now University of London student) Rob Williams winning a bronze medal in the men's lightweight quad at the 2007 world championships and travelling to the Beijing Olympics with the GB squad.

The club organizes two events every year, Maidenhead Junior Regatta in May and Maidenhead Regatta in early August. The Junior Regatta, brainchild of club member Piers Alington about five years ago, is specifically designed for less experienced junior rowers (for many it is their first experience of racing) and is held in a special Amateur Rowing Association-sanctioned format that gives crews plenty of opportunities to compete in appropriate categories using a repechage system, so that nobody's day

finishes by losing in the first round (as is the experience of so many juniors at other regattas). This event is now a firmly established favourite with other rowing clubs and schools in the region and operates at full capacity (of around 85 crews) every year.

Maidenhead Regatta is a late season 500m sprint regatta that, traditionally, has been raced upstream on the Bray stretch of the river finishing just before the railway bridge. However, in 2007 river conditions necessitated a successful last minute relocation to Dorney lake and the experiment was repeated this year. The club has not yet decided whether to continue with this event at Dorney or to move back to its original river venue.

The success of the regular adult learn-to-row courses has been a major development in recent years, feeding both the senior and veteran competitive squads and the recreational squad. Recreational rowing has been a feature of continental clubs for many years and is growing in popularity in the UK for both social and fitness reasons. Learn-to-row has now been supplemented by a learn-to-cox course, as coxes are always in demand. So if you are small, loud and bossy, there's a role for you at the club.

The clubhouse boasts a splendid club room that is available for hire and has been used for many wedding receptions and parties, with the large doors and balcony providing a magnificent view of the Thames. The clubhouse is kept in good condition thanks to club 'work days' where all members are expected to lend a helping hand. It is always interesting to find out what other talents club members have – from carpentry to laying concreting, someone will know how to do it.

This June, the club celebrated ten years in its new clubhouse, with guest Maidenhead MP Teresa May attending the celebrations and presenting a special cake in the shape of a woman's coxed four (in Maidenhead colours) to the relocation committee.



The club's ambitions now are to revitalize its men's squad, which has been overshadowed by juniors', women's and veterans' squad successes in recent years and to capitalize on the 2012 Olympic rowing regatta which is being held at nearby Dorney Lake. It is hoped that some current and former juniors will be competing in 2012 and the club hopes to host rowers or supporters from at least one competing nation.

The club's web site and details of learn-to-row and learn-to-cox courses can be found at: www.maidenheadrc.org.uk