



The History of Wembley Sailing Club

By John Sagues

I arrived at the Harp in January 1952, about 18 months before WSC was founded.

Back then there were no “individual member” clubs: all the clubs were associated with organizations such as Smiths of England (now Smiths Industries), University of London, British Transport, RAF Sailing Association, RAF Hendon, Post Office Research Station, Handley Page Aircraft (the factory is long gone), Cadets and the Scouts.

Individual members did not belong to a club and sailed a variety of boats, such as Fireflies, Snipes, National 12s and Wildcats – a mono hull with a cat logo. In the early days any boat was acceptable. After the WHSA was set up, boat classes were restricted but existing boats allowed to stay on. One very memorable vessel was known as WHOD no.1 (politely) or the banana boat as it looked like a banana shaped coffin! Its owner had built it himself and knew so little about boats that he was not even sure that it would float. Nobody crewed in it more than once; the crew was sure that a capsized would mean guaranteed drowning.

There were no concrete berths. The boats were parked on clinker; most of them did not have trolleys and were supported by chocks at the back. A Firefly needed four people to launch it, lifting it by means of rope handles through holes in the deck. There was only one slipway, the one nearest to the clubhouses, much shorter and steeper than the current one. The starter's box consisted of a tripod with a bell hung from it at the top of the slipway: protection from the elements for the race officer was an umbrella (provided he had a friend willing to hold it up for him). It was thought at the time that a piece of water the size of the Harp could not support more than about 25 boats. We were given a small nissen hut (named Seagrim Villa after its donor, Colonel Seagrim) and an Elsan toilet. It was the race officer's job on arriving to empty the Elsan by tipping the contents onto the allotments behind Smith's (now replaced by the housing estate.)

Probably the first act of the newly formed WHSA was the setting up of WSC in 1953. The first chairman of the WHSA was Peter Glasby who had just graduated from the University. Peter and his wife Barbara, also an ex-UL member, live on Hayling Island and is an active member of Hayling Island Sailing Club.

The founder members were Charles Williams (Firefly 442),

Alan Cramb (Snipe), John Pyne (RAF Hendon – N12), Pete and Ann Smith, Frank Hewlett, probably Bill Letten of RAF Sailing Association, Brian Ansty and Peter Glasby. They had to go to Wembley Town Hall to get permission to use the name Wembley and the town logo, and then negotiate with the Waterways for permission to put up a new clubhouse. Someone found a possible clubhouse building at a disused RAF aerodrome at Stansted. It was wooden, needed to be dismantled, transported to the Harp and reassembled. A visit to Stansted showed that it would not be sensible to accept the offer and it was decided to have one built. Partway through the building a party was held during which Bill Letten and Pete Smith danced a “flamenco” on the just laid floor – concrete paving slabs on pillars. The slabs broke and both dancers fell through.

Also in 1953, Willesden Borough (predecessor of Brent) sponsored a regatta the Willesden Coronation Regatta. Willesden's representative on the organizing committee was known as Bomber Harris (not the real one!) and they erected a stand on the North Circular shore. John Conway-Jones, a Firefly Gore winner, amongst other successes, did a commentary over the PA from the stand. We had sailing and paddling canoes from the Royal Canoe Club, and a lots of rowing races in eights, fours, etc. The Race Officer was Frank Hewlett (with yachting cap of course). We had one reaching start with the line about the width of the Harp and the first mark 200 yards away!

Over the years the clubhouse was modified and extended, each modification being preceded by lengthy arguments for and against. One unsuccessful idea was an attempt to make the front of the bar look like a ship by bowing it out and covering it with timber strips, clinker fashion. The result was awful. Changes included the addition of a committee room, the changing rooms tower and finally the replacement of the original single storey clubhouse by the current two storey version.

The current clubhouse was built in three stages, firstly to the left of the front door where the garages are now, this was the club room and was single storey, Then the second phase was to build on top of the single storey. Phase three was to build the two storey changing rooms to the right of the main door, and convert the club room to garages. You can see the join where the changing

rooms were added to the right of the main door running from top to bottom of the building. The completed clubhouse was opened on 23rd June 1973.

In the early days there was no formal training. New members who wanted to learn put their names on the "crew available" board. In the pre-Laser days crews were in great demand and many helmsmen were prepared to train novices hoping that it would give them a good permanent crew.

At first there was nothing special for training juniors. But a very active junior section was set up with the purpose of having team racing with other clubs with similar sections.

Later the Gull was chosen as the junior training and racing boat in preference to the Cadet, very popular at the time. The reason for the choice was that the Gull was big enough to enable a parent to sail with the junior when teaching. This would have been rather difficult in a Cadet.

By 1974 the classes sailed were Merlin Rocket, GP14, Firefly and Fireball with the Gull being the junior class. We introduced the Laser class when Fireball numbers started to dwindle in the late 70's. It was not until the 2000's that the RS200 and MRX were introduced, with the RS Vision being adopted in 2006 as a training boat for the Harp Sailing School, and finally made a WSC racing class in 2009.

The Harp Sailing School was founded in 2003 and granted RYA Training Centre status.

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