

Early Years of model yachting

In this first part of the story Russell Potts, MYA Archivist and former Secretary of the Association, begins with snapshot of those early years before the MYRA (MYA) began.

In part two, (page 9), he carries the story forward from the birth of the MYRA in 1911, and concludes with the immediate pre war years.

To begin with: free sailing in all its forms

The first part of our story is necessarily concerned only with free sailing in its various forms. Though experiments with radio control of powered models go back before 1914 and radio developers used superannuated A Class boats as trial vehicles in the immediate post war period, no sensible radio sailing competition was possible until the late 50s when more than one boat could be controlled at a time. Serious radio competition in fleets did not start in the UK until the early 1970s.



10 and 15 Raters of the Plymouth Club about 1900. Their clubroom was under the Hoe and they sailed from skiffs on the Sound

We have been at it for a long time

The sailing of model yachts goes back a long time. Informal sailing is recorded in a few biographies and memoirs from as early as the late 18th century; it very probably existed much earlier, but there is no record. Organised sailing is first recorded from the 1820s, when a group of tradesmen who lived and worked in the mews of London's West End, servicing the needs of the well heeled residents of the area, sailed on a reservoir that then existed in the Green Park. They were typically workers in luxury trades; cobblers, a watchmaker

who devised a clockwork guying device and 'Cooper the gunsmith' who first introduced outside ballast in his models, eventually revolutionising the design of both models and full size craft.

Tutored by a survivor of Trafalgar

One of their members had been a seaman at Trafalgar (*! Ed.*) and acted as mentor to George Sanderson. George sailed with the Green Park group as a very young boy and, as an adult, became a professional model boat builder on a large scale, employing ten hands in 1881. He was a member successively of the Green Park group, the London MYC on the Serpentine, and Model Yacht Sailing Association (MYSA) at the Round Pond, and was still to be seen at the pond side in 1898. He wrote a couple of letters to *The Model Yachtsman and Canoeist* in the 1890s. which are our only source for the Green Park sailors.

In the early years of model yachting artisans and gentlemen viewed their model sailing in different ways...

By the 1850s there were two organised clubs on the Serpentine and reports of a club in Plymouth and another in the Lancaster area. Hunt's Yachting Magazine records an episode in which the London MYC, the artisan's club, sailing on the Serpentine after the Green Park reservoir was enclosed, was taken over for a period by a group of full size yachtsmen, members of various Royal yacht clubs, who wanted to use models to experiment with design ideas.

A manned models of full sized craft sailed on the Serpentine

There was conflict between the original members and the incomers, who instituted a First Class of model which was in fact a manned model One Tonner, sailed on the Thames, and a manned twelve foot boat which was sailed on the Serpentine. The original members, who sailed unmanned models of moderate size, took a dim view of this and quite soon were seeking 'a Commodore ... who will not be ashamed to appear at regattas on the Serpentine ... not an Esquire, but a tradesman, one of the true originals of the club'. This is the first recorded appearance of two distinct threads in the personnel of the sport. On the one hand artisans, very frequently drawn from the shoreside trades associated with shipbuilding, on the other a gentleman amateur group of middle class modellers, often men with interests in full size yachting.

More clubs where therefore organised

This pattern is reproduced as more clubs become organised in the later 19th century; in locations where the number of model yachtsmen is large enough, the groups tend to separate out into 'gentleman's' and 'artisans' clubs, as in Hull where in 1884 the Albert MYC split from the existing Kingston club with the intention of being 'exclusive' with a subscription of a guinea, when most clubs charged only a few shillings.

In the same year, on the Round Pond, the London MYC split from the MYSA. For many years the two clubs pursued entirely separate existences and did not sail against each other. They were generally known as the gentleman's and the tradesman's clubs and a social distinction between them seems to have persisted as long as the

two clubs had a separate existence. The Rules of the Junior London club, which flourished briefly in the early years of the 20th century, say quite explicitly that 'this is a club for the sons of gentlemen'.

In most places however the numbers were not sufficient to support more than one club. In these cases, unusually for Victorian sporting organisations, the membership was socially diverse. A club essentially composed of shipyard workers as in Dundee, would have a sprinkling of middle class members including a bank manager; and a shopkeeper's club like the Kingston upon Hull would have a few members who are identifiable as fishermen. This pattern is found in the clubs on Tyneside and on the Clyde, which often had close links with particular shipyards and drew their members from the craftsmen and drawing office staff, but would also have some members, often middle class, who were not linked to the yard.

Sailing on lakes in public parks

By the late 1880s, when *The Model Yachtsman and Canoeist* (based on Hull) was acting as the journal of record for the sport, there were clubs in many large towns, most of them sailing on lakes provided in public parks. These waters were in general not initially intended as model sailing facilities and the relationship between the model yachtsmen and the local authority could be difficult. In Gateshead, the desire of the park authority to breed ornamental waterfowl caused constant problems. In Liverpool however, a club which had started as an artisan's club, sailing on a timber dock in Bootle, was taken over by gentlemen, including some of the merchant princes of the city. Its sailing was transferred to the ornamental lake in Sefton Park, convenient for the villas of its members, and the lake was improved by the removal of some islands and the provision of a boathouse by the city council at the very high cost of £700. (At least £13,000 in current values.)

The first attempts at a national association

Attempts to put together a national association of model yacht clubs started in the late 1880's and early 90's under the aegis of Tom Bruce, editor of *The Model Yachtsman and Canoeist*. He was a tireless promoter of interclub, regional and national competition. The first two were well established by the 1890's, with many clubs using a common rating Rule in the '1730' Tonnage Rule and a series of regional competitions for the Yorkshire Challenge Shield, the Durham Shield and others. It's not clear what form of organisation underpinned these competitions, probably nothing very complex or permanent.

The national competition didn't get off the ground at this stage, partly because social inhibitions made some clubs unwilling to sail against some others, partly because there was no universally accepted Rating Rule, but mainly because a single day competition was all that was envisaged and few were able or willing to undertake the travelling to a central venue that would be needed.

Which Rating Rule?

The growth of interclub racing continued through the latter part of the 19th century and the early years of the 20th. Not only between clubs in the same town, but with occasional inter club matches over a longer distance. There were continuing difficulties over differences between clubs over the Rules to which they built their boats. Though the 10-rater was becoming the most popular model class, some clubs wanted to sail only to the current full size Rule and others still clung to the old full size '1730' Rule.



Laura, a 5 Tonner to the 1730 Tonnage Rule. An early example built in the mid 1880s

Plumstead South London around the time of the MYRA's foundation. The boats are rather outdated in style and are probably 10 Tonners to the '1730' Rule. The huge sail areas are typical of the boats sailed on this lake, which even then was heavily set about with trees and shrubbery.

In 1907 the Wirral club decided by a very small majority to allow the existing 42 foot Linear Raters to continue to compete for one year. After that all members would have to have boats to the new International (Metre) Rule (of 1906).

which sailed on the water in Victoria Park in East London began making similar suggestions about a national organisation.

some lack of sensitivity in attempting to push a ready-made structure onto clubs, and got a very dusty answer from his elders and betters: he went away to Australia 'on business', 'for his health' or possibly to nurse his wounds.

But in the meantime the Scots had gone ahead ...

Meanwhile, in 1908 eight of the Scots clubs, mainly in Glasgow, got together and formed their own national association, possibly the first in the world. The French had a national organisation by 1913, but we don't know the date of its foundation. Unfortunately, all the early Scottish MYA records have been lost and we know little about how it was done.

So here we have a view of the early years of model yachting - the tensions between the 'artisans' and the 'gentlemen' and the design of models based on the rating rules which governed the full size' sport. The second part of our Story begins as Russell Potts describes the founding of the MYRA in 1911.



A 12-Metre to the 1906 International Rule, running on the Round Pond. The square sail is unusual.

This attitude to the full size Rule was characteristic of gentlemen's clubs, whose members might also be owners of full size craft, or at least be able to contemplate such ownership

In the early years of the 20th century a number of proposals for a national organisation were made. In 1904 Charles Rivett-Carnac, a successful member of the Indian Civil Service who was working as financial adviser to the Siamese Embassy, wrote to The Yachtsman suggesting that a national model yachting organisation was needed to bring clubs together to frame common Rating and racing Rules and to institute national competitions. He argued that the limited competition was inhibiting design development and that there were social advantages to encouraging competition between men like himself who could afford to spend £20 on a boat and 'the workman, who has to build his own, but probably makes up in keenness and skill his other relative disadvantages'.

At the same time he persuaded his club, The London MYC, to hold its first open meeting, probably the first time that this very gentlemanly and exclusive club had invited members of other clubs to sail with them. At around the same time the Alexandra club

And so we have the National Model Yacht Racing Association

The most serious attempt was made by George Colman Green, the young and enthusiastic Secretary of the newly founded Norwich and Norfolk MYC. He circularised all the clubs he could find and produced the wildly optimistic British MYC Guide and Directory of 1908, which grossly overestimated both the number and size of active clubs. He also took the views of clubs on the idea of a national association and, encouraged by the response, he proclaimed the foundation of a National Model Yacht Racing Association.

He had it all worked out, with a regional structure, a burgee designed and produced in silk by Gamage's department store and letterheads already printed, before he broached the idea in Model Engineer. He showed



6-metres sailing on the pond in the fishing village of Cellardyke, Fife. The boats are probably from the Perth club as the local club sailed Fifies, based on full sized fishing craft in the area (Subject of a forthcoming article. Ed).