

TALES OF THE RIVERMAN 103

The Glasgow Razor



George Parsonage in the “Razor” right. Ann Parsonage in “Razor”



Georges’s son, Ben Parsonage in the “Razor”

Ben

This is the story of a single sculling boat designed in Glasgow, built in London (possibly by George Sims) and sculled in Glasgow. The boat was innovative, but impractical, yet in the hands of an expert Waterman Ben, (George’s Dad), it proved the old saying that it is not the boat but the “engine” (the rower) that makes it to go fast. It is likely that this boat, is the only one of this type, in the world.

Around the time this boat was built, Professional Scullers used three different lengths of sculling boats. 32ft for long distance, 27ft for middle distance, and 18ft for sprint. (approx. lengths).

The 32ft scull was built very narrow with some boats being only 9 inches and many V sectioned. The 18ft sprint boats were built quite wide with some being 34inches wide. The 27ft boat was semi-circular in section and varied between 10 and 14 inches wide. Most craft of this age were of “cigar” shape which meant that the bow section was made slightly wider than the stern section to compensate for the weight of the sculler when at back stops and to assist with the “lift” of the bow.

To the best of my knowledge, the boat “Razor” is single skin yellow pine. The wooden seat and clogs of the boat are incredibly light.

The London firm built this sculling boat to a Scottish design.

The idea was to design a sprint boat as narrow as the 32ft boat.

The resulting boat, was too narrow for its length. Every time the sculler would come to front stops the stern canvas would go under

water and every time the sculler went to back stops the bow canvass would be under water. The boat rocked.

An extra 1-inch freeboard was added to the bow and stern, but made little difference. The boat was extremely unsteady. If let go without the oars in the gates the boat turned over.

The boat riggers are solid steel.

Somehow this boat ended up being used by Glasgow University Rowing Club. A large number of would-be scullers fell into the river from this boat, some on their first stroke. Dozens were capsizing and being fished out/rescued by Ben. The boat was more or less declared useless and finally ended up in Ben's ownership.

Ben became exceptionally competent in the rowing of this boat. It was the only racing type boat he had access to, so, he said, he just had to get used to it. There are many stories of Ben's expertise. There are reports of his having rowed this boat downriver ahead of four oared races, clearing the hiring boats from the course. Forby being the Greater Glasgow Lifeboat Officer, Ben hired out boats. There were several other boat hirers on the river and while Ben (for safety reasons), did not hire during regattas, others did. As Commodore/Clerk of the Course for Regattas, Ben looked after safety. So, Ben was to be seen dressed in his working clothes, usually a pair of Dungarees, keys etc in the pockets and his trademark "Bunnet" or flat cap, a whistle in his mouth, sculling down the course ahead of races, clearing the course, making sure that no hiring boats would get in the way of the racing crews.

Sadly, there are no photographs of Ben in this boat.

At five-foot one inch in height and around 10 stone in weight, the immensely strong Ben has been referred to as a "pocket dynamo" Over a course of roughly 110 yards Ben, in the "Razor" set average times (up and down) of 17.5 sec. Son George, the champion sculler could only manage a fastest time of 19.5 sec downstream. It was said that at the same height and weight Ben would have been a safe bet against anyone in the World.

Part of the reason why Ben became so strong and so fast in a boat, was that he would row a 14ft fixed seat workboat with a 24stone man sitting at the stern, downriver through the weir at high tide, down for, maybe 8 miles, continue to row the boat all day on search work, then row back upstream through the weir at the next suitable tide. Unfortunately, when Ben became the Lifeboat Officer, he was immediately classified a professional and was not allowed to enter boat races.

Repairs have been made to the “Razor” over the years. The deck and saxboards have been replaced as has the seat, runners and clogs to allow George and his son Ben the occasional row in it. George once took this boat to Runcorn when he was chief coach for a north east of England training weekend, to show that any old boat could be used for training.

When cracks appeared in the skin of the sculling boat, Ben used the following method of repair. The boat was scraped free of varnish at the area of the crack. A piece of muslin or silk was cut to the necessary size. The area cleaned was covered with shellac or yellow polish and the muslin/silk placed over it and pressed onto it. More shellac/yellow polish was later applied. These “patches” were so effective that after nearly 100yrs they are still on the sculling boat, show no signs of deterioration and the boat functions perfectly.

Because of the very sharp V section of the boat, it became known as the “Razor” A friend of Ben’s put the name “Razor” on the bows of the boat.

Several 18ft long 32inch wide boats existed in Scotland until the 1960’s but all have sadly, been destroyed.

A 32 ft boat belonging to the World Champion E A Ted Phelps was purchased by a Scot, but after some time, being single skinned, the boat became badly damaged, and was sadly, destroyed.



Original single action slides



Original seat and clogs



Original clog bracket.



View from bow.

The question I now have, is whether this boat should remain in Glasgow in the hope that there is a river museum built, or should it go to the Henley Museum? It is a one off.