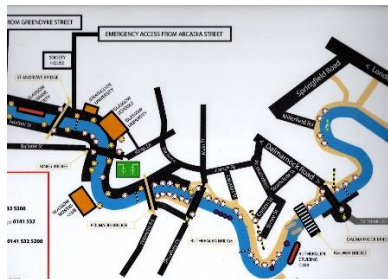


TALES OF THE RIVERMAN 119

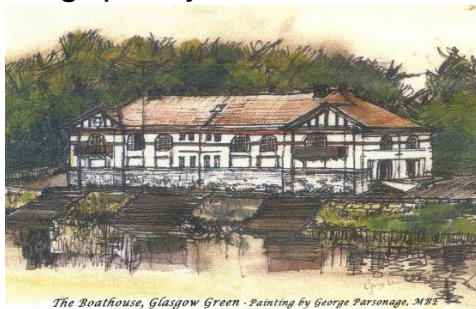
THE DISAPPEARING SCULLER.



One afternoon while working on a boat repair at the wharfage, I was visited by one of my friends, the captain of a local Rowing Club who row from the west boathouse next to the Tidal Weir. He said he was perturbed that a sculler had gone out from the boathouse about three hours ago and had not returned. A scull up to the furthest point people are allowed to row due to shallows making it unsafe to go further, should have taken no more than an hour and a half, and that would be going slow and stopping for rests, he should have returned by now. It was immediately decided that we should make a search upstream.



With the captain on board, I took the launch upstream as far as I could safely go without seeing any sign of the sculler. If he had got into trouble, we should have at least found his boat, unless, surely, he hadn't tried to row up through the shallows. It seemed the only answer. So, what to do. We could get cyclists up the towpath, but they would not see under the overhanging trees and overgrowth on the north banking, and there is no towpath on the south banking. Would we need to alert the Police and have the Force Helicopter check out the upstream section. We did not wish to phone his home and panic his wife. We felt we had to do something quickly in case the sculler had got into difficulties.

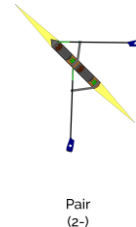


West Boathouse



East Boathouse

At that moment a rower from the east boathouse asked what the problem was. We told him and he fell about laughing. It seemed that the missing sculler had decided to take his boat home to do some repairs in his garage. That day there was an event in the park and people going to the west boathouse had to leave their cars at the east boathouse and walk down. This sculler had rowed his boat from the west to the east boathouse, lifted his boat out, placed it on the rack on his car that he had left there, and driven off home. Unfortunately, he had not had the presence of mind to tell anyone at his club, at the west boathouse what he was going to do. What a panic. At least we had not reported him as a missing person and we had not called out the Force Helicopter. We had a nice run upriver and no one was in trouble. Grrrrr. In some ways it was funny.



A single scull on its side as the pair was when spotted.

Then there was the extremely windy afternoon that a coxless pair with oars in it was spotted lying on its side on the south bank opposite the monument. No sign of any rowers. It was not a boat that I recognised, there was no name on it, and no club markings on the oars, just plain blades. So which clubhouse had it come from? A quick run round the clubs showed all were closed and no one was inside. I now thought we might have two missing persons. Were the rowers lying on the banking somewhere, tired, wet and injured. Heaven forbids, had they drowned. I had no alternative but to notify Force Control.

Police arrived to assist with a search. All Clubhouses, as I had already checked, were verified to be closed. No one had reported seeing a racing boat on the water. With difficulty Police managed to contact key holders for all clubs and they were asked to attend and check if any of their boats were missing or if anyone could identify the pair, the boat that had been found empty. The Police helicopter was making a search of the river and banking as were Police Officers on foot. It was finally ascertained which club had a boat missing.

Now, the key holders were given the job of phoning everyone they could think of to try to find out if any members were missing, did anyone know if any of their club had said they were going rowing today. None were missing and no one had heard of anyone wanting to go rowing today as

it was so windy. The only possible theory that we came up with was that two persons had come down to go rowing, even though as said, the wind was blowing a gale. They had lifted the boat out, placed it on the water, put the oars in the gates, then went to lock up the boathouse. While locking up, the boat blew away up and across the river. The two panicked, they did not know what to do. They obviously did not wish to admit their stupidity that had caused the boat to blow away and turn over. So, they quickly locked up the boathouse and left. Almost unbelievable. Police (and my) enquiries never found out anything about this occurrence. The search and the organisation of the search, had cost a lot of time and money. so no wonder they perpetrators kept quiet. But then, there was the possibility that the club had been left unlocked and that two persons off the street, had lifted the boat out. But then “Joe public” does not know how to put the oars in a gate and screw it up. It baffled me then, and it still does. A mystery that we shall never solve.



If only the Clubs would keep a record of who goes out and when they return. Surely that would not be too difficult.



Left outside then someone threw them into the river.

A similar situation has frequently arisen when old boats left outside clubhouses get thrown into the river by vandals. If a boat or part of a boat is for example thrown in during the night, goes through the weir gates and is seen floating in the harbour next day, people think there has been an accident. Likewise, if the weirman sees a set of blades or parts of a boat lying at his gates, he thinks, that there may have been an accident. I have had to rescue a drunk couple who put old boats left outside the club, onto the river, and were lying on them trying to paddling with their hands.

Perhaps one day, these problems will not arise.