

A HISTORY OF THE BOATHOUSE

IN PADDY FREEMANS PARK (1923-2023)

The “Heaton & District Model Power Boat Club” was formed in 1910 from a group of like-minded men who met at the lake side to sail their home-made steam powered model boats.

With no boathouse or place to shelter, boats had to be carried to the lake for each sailing, which in turn meant that models were generally small so as to be carried as hand luggage on the tram.

The lake was far more open than it appears today with no trees on the Dene side of the lake and no trees between the lake and the playing fields area, so the lack of shelter was an issue from the start.

By 1911 the club was in regular contact with the city Parks Committee with regard to cleaning the lake and the creation of a cinder path on the Dene side of the lake. The possibility of a boathouse must have been discussed with the council as the club minutes note a discussion on how many members would be prepared to commit to renting a storage locker from the council if a boathouse/storage facility was built. At that time eight names were put forward.

Whilst waiting for a boathouse some equipment was stored in the Park Keepers lodge. In December 1911 the club members decided to open a voluntary subscription list for the purpose of obtaining one of the following items, Cruet Stand, Cream Jug & Sugar Basin, or Biscuit Jar & Toast Rack for presentation to the inhabitants of the lodge.

In February 1912 the question of the number of club members prepared to commit to renting a locker was again discussed. It had become a “chicken and egg” situation, the council would not consider building a boathouse without enough names, and the club could not raise enough names for a boathouse that did not yet exist.

At the beginning of 1913 the club again asked the council if they would proceed with a boathouse with no firm outcome. In August of that year, four club members were chosen to form a deputation to speak with the council on the dual subjects of the condition of the lake and need for a boathouse. The deputation drew up a “Petitions & Schedule” to present to the Parks Committee at their meeting on the 14th of September 1913. It is recorded that the deputation was agreeably received, though no boathouse was forthcoming.

Interestingly it was recorded in the minutes of the City Parks Committee meeting that the deputation arrived with a petition from 1500 ratepayers, requesting the council clear the lake of weeds, and that a boathouse be provided so that larger boats could be accommodated to bring it into line with other clubs. Whatever the outcome the club did send a letter of thanks to the council.

The Parks Committee also recorded that another deputation visited them on the 10th March 1914 requesting a boathouse be provided.

In April 1914 another gift was purchased for presentation to the Lodge residents in grateful thanks for their storage of club equipment and the outbreak of the First World War put a hold on any further chance of obtaining a boathouse.

It was not until August 1920 that the club secretary wrote again to the Parks Committee asking about the state of the lake and if a surplus Army hut could be utilised as a boathouse. The response from the City Engineer, a Mr Steele, was luke-warm and no progress was made. It was then decided to write to Alderman A Scott to request a meeting with him to discuss the matter, which again did not apparently go anywhere.

In April 1921 the club intensified its lobbying of the council which resulted firstly in work being done on the lake and later a meeting between a club delegation and the Parks committee. The meeting was recorded as:

“Mr Barnes & Mr Robertson were the speakers for Boat club, Mr H Foster was chairman of Parks Committee. Mr Barnes spoke first & put the need of a boathouse & shelter & the alterations needed to the lake in an able manner & he tried to impress his hearers that the things asked for were long overdue. Mr Robertson followed him & gave of his best in our cause, several questions were asked after the speakers finished, the deputation were then thanked for their attendance”.

In April 1922 The secretary was instructed to write to Alderman H Foster asking for the decision of Council re the boathouse. The outcome was a “Yes”. On the 1st of July 1922 a club committee of 6 members met with the council at Paddy Freemans to survey possible sites for the proposed new boathouse.

On the 12th of September 1922 the Parks Committee recommended that the Council apply for a loan to cover the cost of building the boathouse, estimated at £720. The council asked the Town Clerk to apply for the loan.

On the 23rd of January 1923 the committee accepted the lowest tender for a yacht house from Rutherford & Son for the sum of £428. However, on the 12th of June 1923 a second tender from Alex Anderson for the sum of £430 was accepted, so this could mean the build did not start until June 1923. Either way the boathouse was then constructed on the site agreed with completion in 1923.

In June 1923 the club minutes record that: *“With regard to the opening of the boat house it was decided to ask Alderman H Foster to perform the ceremony. Club member Mr W Gardner kindly presented two bronze candlesticks to the club to be in turn presented to Alderman Foster on the occasion”.* This led me to believe the boathouse opened in July as the opening of the boathouse was not mentioned again in the minutes but in fact we now know that the actual ceremony was not until April 1924.

Whilst we can be confident the boathouse was completed in 1923 but it's not clear when the club gained access to the building. At the meeting in December 1923 the secretary was asked to write to the City Engineer to ask for particulars regarding hire of the lockers.

Again, in February 1924 there was a proposal from Mr Gardener, seconded by Mr Hopper that the secretary apply for lockers. After a discussion, Messer's Wood, Robertson and Hopper volunteered to go

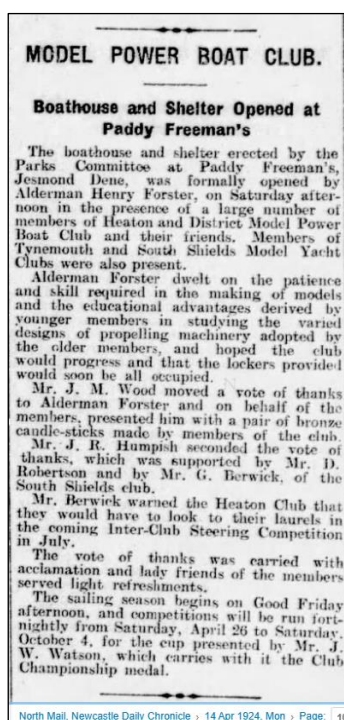
to the Town Hall & rent lockers for the members who were prepared to take them. Furthermore, the secretary was asked to write to Councillor T W Rowe re the opening of the boathouse.

In early March 1924 it was recorded that Messer's Robertson and Wood described how they had been received by Councillor Rowe and that the secretary could now book lockers for members.

It was also recorded that Mr J Callander exchanged his locker for the club's locker suggesting that it was possible the lockers were in use though it might simply have been a change on a paper list. At the same meeting the Secretary was asked to write to Alderman H Foster asking him to fix a date for the opening of the boathouse.

The Parks Committee discussed the opening of the boathouse at their meeting on the 11th of March 1924 and decided that the formal opening would be on either the 5th or 12th of April 1924. In the end the event happened on April 12th 1924.

The Newcastle Daily Chronicle recorded the event for posterity and the article published on the 14th of April 1924 is reproduced below.



MODEL POWER BOAT CLUB

Boathouse and Shelter Opened at Paddy Freeman's

The boathouse and shelter erected by the parks Committee at Paddy Freeman's, Jesmond Dene, was formally opened by Alderman Henry Foster, on Saturday afternoon in the presence of a large number of members of Heaton & District Model Power Boat Club and their friends. Members of Tynemouth and South Shields Model Yacht Clubs were also present.

Alderman Foster dwelt on the patience and skill required in the making of models and the educational advantages derived by younger members in studying the varied designs of propelling machinery adopted by the older members, and hoped the club would progress and that the lockers provided would soon be all occupied.

Mr J M Wood moved a vote of thanks to Alderman Foster and on behalf of the members, presented him with a pair of bronze candlesticks made by members of the club.

Mr J R Humpish seconded the vote of thanks, which was supported by Mr D Robertson and by Mr G Berwick, of the South Shields club.

Mr Berwick warned the Heaton club that they would have to look to their laurels in the coming Inter-Club Steering Competition in July.

The vote of thanks was carried with acclamation and lady friends of the members served light refreshments.

The sailing season begins on Good Friday afternoon, and competitions will be run fort-nightly from Saturday, April 26th to Saturday October 4th, for the cup presented by Mr J W Watson, which carries with it the Club Championship medal.

The next two photo's show the boathouse in its original form with public shelter at the front complete with some lovely glass panels.



Boathouse circa 1930

The boathouse was constructed on a concrete base entirely from timber with some fine joinery and panelling. Originally the roof was felted with timber gutters and 4 cast iron down-spouts leading to soak-aways.

Internally the boathouse contained a number of storage lockers arranged vertically around the inside of the walls of the main part of the building. Each locker was rented individually by a club member from the city council who sent a rent collector round each year to collect the rents.

Since this was before the days of electricity in the park, the building was lit by natural light via glass panels high up in the eaves at each end of the building and a single row of small glass panes along the top of the back wall. Finally, there was a window opposite the entrance doorway consisting of matching small panes of glass.

In 1929 at the end of the North East Coast Exhibition, the flagpoles that had graced the exhibition were moved to the city parks. Paddy Freeman's received one and as can be seen it was re-erected behind the boathouse. The club flew a flag on competition days in those days, though now the expense and difficulty of replacing the missing rope has stopped this practice.



Boathouse circa 1930

Sadly, being in a public park the building has always been vulnerable to vandalism, burglary and the elements. The first to go were the glass panels in the public shelter. They were certainly missing by the end of the 1930's.

The boathouse has been subjected to the attentions of burglars on a number of occasions over the years leading to various stratagems to strengthen the building and make it difficult to gain access. It's a constant worry given the boathouses location.

The glass panels that light the interior were also the target of stone throwers to the point where the large multi-pane window opposite the entrance doors was permanently boarded over and removable internal wooden shutters were installed to protect the gable end high windows. The remaining single row of high-level glass panes at the rear of the building were blocked off when an additional row of lockers was added on top of the existing lockers. Finally in the 1970's after several attempts by vandals to set light to the public shelter seats it was with regret that the front section, the Public Shelter was boarded up by the council and the internal space that was created by the change used as additional storage for the club.

The building itself has also had to withstand the elements for the past 100 years. By the 1960's the building was leaking badly and the lower sections of the side walls were suffering from rot. The club asked the council to carry out repairs without success for a number of years until finally the council found it had money in the budget at the year end. Those were the days of "spent it or lose it", so to our relief the boathouse gained a new roof and the entire bottom section of the building was replaced with new treated timber. It was just in the nick of time, without that action at that time the building would not be here today.



Boathouse circa 1965

Other notable events in the life of the boathouse include the installation of electricity in 1953 which meant that the building could be used throughout the year. Previously the building was lit by a mixture of paraffin lamps and ex cycle acetylene lights, not ideal in a wooden building.

It was not until the 1970's that the club as an entity took over the rental of the whole building and the practice of renting individual lockers ceased. The cost of collecting individual rents was simply not economic for the council.

As we went into the new millennium the council funding for parks dried up entirely and maintenance of the boathouse and the parks simply ceased. This led to the creation of "Urban Green Newcastle" who are now the landlords of the Boathouse. They clearly have a huge task ahead of them to try and become commercially self-sufficient within 10 years whilst maintaining the neglected parks and buildings, no easy task.

With this in mind the boat club, despite being tenants, took the decision to repaint the exterior of the boathouse to a high standard and install new guttering around the building at our expense. In a few months' time the Boathouse will celebrate its 100th birthday and its fair to say it's in generally good condition and remarkable for its age and location. Long may that continue.



Boathouse circa 2022

Credits

Andrew Humpish (HonSec) Heaton & District Model Power Boat Club Minute book archives.

John Telfer (Friends of Jesmond Dene) Newcastle City Council minutes & Parks Committee minutes.

John Telfer (Friends of Jesmond Dene) Article from the Newcastle Chronicle newspaper archive.

Photos:

<i>1</i>	<i>Facebook</i>
<i>2</i>	<i>H&DMPBC photo archive</i>
<i>3</i>	<i>Facebook</i>
<i>4</i>	<i>H&DMPBC photo archive</i>