



Humble Beginnings - Dolly Fisher

It was 1964 and word spread that Greenwich Council were considering building a new clubhouse south of the river. It was soon realised that this would have a devastating affect on Poplar membership. John Skelton went to visit Club President, Dorothea Woodward-Fisher and together they made a plan to raise enough money to build a new clubhouse. They enlisted the help of some members and together they discussed how they could raise enough money for the project. Finally the club members approved the proposal at the 1964 General Meeting.

Meetings were held at her home in Belmont Hill and Mrs Woodward-Fisher enlisted the help of Doug Somerfield who was subsequently made Vice President of the club. Plans were made to acquire the land to build on and Mr Somerfield negotiated a ninety nine year lease on Calders Wharf. He also took charge of the building project whilst Mrs Woodward-Fisher took charge of raising the £75,000 building fund.

She had contacts and enlisted the help of other acquaintances including the Ex-Mayor of London, Lord Rothchilds, Lord Cottlesloe and other charities. Fundraising was her priority and with the help of members a number of events were undertaken including boxing events, race nights, charity rows, taking part in the Battersea Easter Parade. Mrs Woodward-Fisher even arranged a marquee in Battersea Park and Mr Summerfield arranged for the James Bond Aston Martin to be displayed and the then famous DJ, Alan Freeman, played music. Before long, and after great effort £60,000 was raised and £14,000 was negotiated by a loan from Tower Hamlets with 1% interest payable over the next fourteen years. The final £1000 was a grant from the council.

The Boathouse, thanks to the hard work of members led by Dorothea Woodward-Fisher and Doug Summerfield, finally opened in September 1970.

In 1966, Mrs Woodward-Fisher summarised the clubs position in her letter below.

Poplar Blackwall & District Rowing Club

From records this club was formed roughly about 1854 by a group of young boys who wanted to row a boat. They could of course have been called "Would be oarsmen". These young lads, and possibly their fathers, cadged from all and sundry and got one or two old boats together. They made their headquarters a pub known as the "Lifeboat" - later pulled down for the new tunnel (Blackwall). The boys evidently kept their boats in publicans backyards, and the boats were launched at Chalkstone Bouys, Millwall Stairs and the Dust Shute at Poplar Dock Causeway, before it was closed, and sometimes at the upper end of South Dock.

My late husband (the Governor) joined the club sixty years ago. We made an arrangement with Samudas Wharf and the Dockland Settlement, Farm Road. My late husband won the Doggets Coat and Badge in 1911, whilst of course, still a member of the club.



About 30 years ago the members were able to obtain permission from a Mr Calder, who owned Calders Wharf, Millwall, to build a ramp -which the boys did themselves. At a later date Mr Calder kindly gave them a little more room and there was an old railway station at the back of Calders Wharf and they got permission to still have a little more land and they built between themselves a Heath Robinson building of a boat house. The Governor and I put in showers and ascot heaters etc. First of all Mr Calder charged them 10s.0d. a week rent - this eventually increased to £4. 10s. 0d. a week plus rates.

In 1956 - 57 we heard that Messrs. Calders were willing to sell the wharf. There was some correspondence about it all, but the figure asked was too high for us. Many approaches were made to the Poplar Borough Council, the L.C.C. (London County Council) and the N.E London Youth Service. Everybody has been very sympathetic and kind, but seemingly unable to help. However, the Governor and I fought on.

Absolutely adjacent to Calders Wharf is a draw dock known as Johnson's Draw Dock. In the old, old days large barges and small ships were discharged there with bricks for taking away by the horses and carts, but that type of trade has ceased for many years, and the draw dock has been "adopted" by a man named Pitman to break up old and derelict barges. We approached the Port of London Authorities to know if we could have use of this draw dock, pointing out that as it was so adjacent to our rented ramp from Calders pieces of scrap iron often damaged our craft and, as you know, need to be treated with due care. The Governor and I have for the last twenty years insured all boats and owing to the scrap iron unseen, often sticking out, we had so many claims on our underwriters that our premiums were doubled. I have seen Mr Pitman many times and he has tried to be helpful, but he has had to employ people, and these said people were not always too careful, as you will appreciate. As you probably know we are all lightermen really, and eventually Calders Wharf was sold to a very fine Company known as Summerfield & Sons, who gave us the same concessions as Calders had done. Purely coincidentally, but very helpfully, I got Mr D Summerfield very interested in the club, and he granted then further amenities without any increase in rent.

We then heard some 8 - 10 years ago that the L.C.C. intended to buy out Calders Wharf to enlarge the adjacent park on the other side of the wharf. I think that the parks proper name is Island Gardens, but to my husband, who was one of the poor boys from Millwall, it was always known as Scrap Iron Park. When we heard that there was a chance of the L.C.C buying this land we, of course wrote to them. I think that my letter went from pillar to post but never came back, nor did we get a reply. From the efforts of a very good friend, we were able to write another letter that definitely reached the correct source, and in August, 1957 we received a letter from the L.C.C, signed by W Hart Esq, Clerk of the Council, assuring us that in the event of the site, Calders Wharf, ever being purchased to increase the amenities of Island Gardens, due consideration would be given to our need for a club house. This letter was kept very securely in a safe for many years. Sometime around 1961, we again were informed through our good friends Messrs. Summerfield and Sons, that the London County Council were approaching them with an idea to purchase Calders Wharf. Mr Summerfield, The Governor and I "after much" were able to get an interview with the London County Council and this was



the start of many such interviews, and on 7th December 1964 (seven months after we had lost the Governor) the London County Council notified me that they would allow us a 50' River frontage by 240' for 60 years at a rental of £100 per year inclusive.

The one condition was that the club should have a gymnasium and should cater for the poor boys and men of Poplar, Blackwall, Stepney and surrounding Districts. We had never aspired to an up to date gymnasium but, of course we agreed. I then started to work to get the Poplar Blackwall & District Rowing Club registered as a charity and I approached my solicitors - Messrs. Keene Marsland & Company, of 52 Marks Lane, London EC3 -who have been most helpful. I was advised to get trustees and I am proud to say that I was able to ask Mr. Davis Beasant himself to be a trustee. The Trustees names are as follows: D.E.B Besant Esq, C Chataway Esq, Sir Lionel Denny MC, D.W. Summerfield Esq, Admiral Sir Robin Durnford -Slater K.C.B. , Rev. E.S.Michael, The Hon M.S Rothschild, Sir David Burnett BT, MBE, TD. , The Rt. Hon. Lord Cottesloe, GBE. TD. DL , I Mikardo Esq, and Mrs D K E M Woodward-Fisher OBE.

I then approached and encouraged Ian Mikardo, who is Member for Parliament for Poplar, and he has been wonderful and is going to launch the appeal. Meanwhile we are doing all the odd and incidental things to raise money. The club will directly face Greenwich College, and the L.C.C insist that it shall be in the keeping with that particular part of the river.

I personally feel, as a very old English woman loving the river and the sea as I do, that England is after all an island and we are all surely sailors at heart. Also with the 40 hour week and so many home now in flats with no backyards the demand for rowing for the young men of tomorrow is more and more necessary, and I am going to fight hard to get this money. Plans have been passed and I now wait for the ok from the L.C.C and my solicitors to start. Meanwhile I am cadging where ever I can or, if not talking.

The club has :

20 members under 14years of age

57 members between 14 and 20 years

53 members over 20 years of age

There seems to be a bigger demand than ever these days for a club this side of the river basin, we have the Globe and Curlew who seem to cater for the Greenwich side and the Poplar, Blackwall and District Rowing Club caters for all types of boys. We did have some blind boys, and we have even had blind boys trained to row in races, this would have been much safer if we could possible have had our own tanks.

The club now owns 15 boats. We do get help from Up - river clubs at Putney, and this year we are very proud to say that two of our boys J McCarthy and R Easterling competed for the Silver Goblets at Henley and reached the finals. They were beaten by a German crew. This they did entirely at their own expense. Up until 7th July 1966, this year we have has 27 wins at various regattas as far as Birmingham, Evesham, Huntington etc and the club altogether has had 23 winners of the Doggetts Coat and Badge.