

Pioneers on the Paddington Arm

The West London Motor Cruising Club's moorings on the Paddington Arm at Alperton in North West London. Tony and Margaret Clapham top up the water tanks in their 27-foot steel cruiser *White Thistle*.



Ian Mackersey describes the early days of the West London Motor Cruising Club, which is believed to be the oldest club on the Grand Union Canal.

At the Pleasure Boat Inn, alongside the Paddington Arm of the Grand Union Canal at Alperton in London's north-west suburbs, five men held a meeting. Their names were P. M. Myers, P. G. Gullford, A. W. Phillips, J. B. Rudge and V. L. Squire – and they each owned a boat of some description. Because they lived locally they wanted somewhere convenient on non-tidal waters to moor their boats. The date was 20th October, 1938. That evening the five men formed the West London Motor Cruising Club. It is still flourishing and today, in the absence of any evidence to the contrary, believes itself to be the oldest cruising club on the Grand Union.

It began life at moorings, provided free by the Grand Union Canal Company, at Abbey Road canal bridge, Park Royal, on the 21-mile pound of the Paddington Arm and Regent's Canal which stretches from Camden Town to Uxbridge. The only condition was that the club be responsible for fencing and security. It was unattractive industrial wasteland, and for the privilege of mooring there the boat owning members paid an annual subscription of 2 guineas plus one shilling a month toward a watchman's wages. The latter, the club minutes soon recorded however, failed to earn his 'bob a boat' and was dismissed.

In 1940 the club moved 1½ miles west to its present site at Clifford Road, Alperton. Here, beside the Wembley burial ground, near the foot of Horsenden Hill, about 900 feet of moorings were leased from the Grand Union company for £10 a year. The bank was piled high with rolling mounds of dried mud dredgings and rusting iron debris. Almost immediately war intervened. There was suddenly no petrol for the boats and the members went off to wartime endeavours. From time to time they returned to visit their boats and somehow the club's bills continued to be paid.

In 1946 the club became active again. There was an influx of new members and soon there were around 20 boats. The owners included a builder, plumber, fireman, motor mechanic, doctor, garage owner, railway clerk, bank official and a clergyman.

War Surplus Boats

Most of the boats were war surplus craft built of wood for economy and a short life. They were mainly small landing craft, some with huge 100hp Chrysler engines, and plywood invasion beach-head pontoons, to which engines and cabins were added. A landing craft could be had for £70. And for £30 more you could pick up a ship's lifeboat. Purpose-built canal leisure craft didn't exist.

The casualty rate among those early boats was high. Built of unseasoned timber, many sank at their moorings. Their owners, disillusioned, would lose interest in their derelict craft and in the club. The committee was kept busy raising wrecks and burning them in ritual bonfires.

The Paddington Arm in the late 1940s was busy with commercial traffic carrying coal, timber and refuse. Some of it was still horse-drawn. Private boats were few and far between.

Safety in Numbers

So unreliable were most of the club's boats that members invariably went cruising in small flotillas. A day trip to Cowley on the Grand Union main line, 13 miles away, was an adventure which usually concluded with several boats being towed home.

Retired company director Doug Johnson is a Vice-Commodore of the club and was for many years its secretary. He joined in 1947 bringing up from the Thames a two-berth 20-foot wooden river cruiser for which he paid £250. It was powered by a converted Austin Seven car engine. The club's longest serving member, Doug has nostalgic memories of those early days.

"We were the pioneers. And what camaraderie there was", he said. "It

was a carry-over of the wartime spirit. Everybody helped everybody else. Whatever job you needed doing, from starting your engine to pulling your boat out up our mud slipways, all the members would rally round and help.

"We spent much more time on the mooring than we did cruising. It was not unusual for a chap to take three hours, swinging his heart out, trying to crank start his pre-war petrol engine. We didn't risk going very far afield; Tring was about our northern limit in the late 'forties.

By 1950 the club had 30 boats. And that year the British Transport Commission put the site rent up from £10 to £100. There was a 3 guineas cruising licence for boats up to 25 feet; above that it was 4 guineas. The biggest problem of the 'fifties was abandoned ships' lifeboats. After two or three years of unsuccessful conversion attempts dispirited owners

would often disappear. In the big freeze-up of 1963 fifteen inches of ice formed on the canal and eight boats sank.

The 'sixties marked a turning point in the club's development. Reliable purpose-built boats began to come along. The canal cruising boom was under way. Members began to explore the length of the waterways system with longer holidays and craft that would get them home again. GRP and steel boats appeared. By now British Waterways Board was the landlord and the mud-heaped banks had concrete piling, gardens, hard-standings, electricity and water.

Today the club has 31 boat owners. The moorings have been extended to 1,100 feet and a converted Thames lighter, *Weston*, has become the headquarters. To maximise income to pay the rates and the BWB lease - now £3,000 a year - boats are limited to 36 feet.

The greatest threat to its existence has not changed in over 40 years: mindless vandalism. Boats are broken into, cut adrift, stolen, occupied by tramps, set on fire, windows stoned. Youths drop bricks onto craft as they pass under bridges. Towpath air rifle marksmen loose off pellets at helmsmen. But these things don't happen every week. And the members have come to accept this way of canal life. They add locks and chains and sophisticated boat alarms.

The club continues very much in the spirit with which it began. Definitely not a social club. Emphatically one where the most important thing is to work on and cruise your boat. And to help one another by sharing a score of different skills.

And if any of those five men who met in the Pleasure Boat Inn that night back in 1938 are still around - well, they would be welcome to revisit the club they created.



Ian Mackenzie