

HISTORY OF FAIRFIELD CANOE CLUB

A brief history from 1919 - 1964

By Tom Ohman, Nov 1999

The Club was formed at the Fairfield Park Boat Shed (opposite the pipes) in 1919, but friction with the proprietor soon had members thinking of their own club house. One bone of contention was the necessity of hanging the club boats from the trees outside the building as no storage facilities were available for them.

The purchasing of the land at the Esplanade was the start. Debentures were sold and the grand plan started. The club house was completed in 1926 and our great era of canoeing started.

One highlight was the annual Henley Competition for fun decorated canoes at the Vic Championship for C4's at the annual Henley Regatta.

All racing was in 18 foot Canadian canoes for single and pairs races and 26 foot for C4 events, although C2 championship races were in the 26 foot canoes.

All C1, C2 and C4 championships were over 440 yards with seven and ten mile races for C1 and C2. Clubs of this era were: Victorian, Fairfield, Essendon, Elwood (sea), Hawthorn, Hawthorn Glen, Twickenham, Brighton (sea), Burnley, Melbourne and Riversdale although not all were affiliated with the VACA.

Prominent names of this era were Harry De la Rue, Claire Williams, Alf Lucky, Bob Burgan and Fred Taylor.

Alf Lucky was an outstanding member - building a high ended C4 which was unbeatable for many years and working day and night to complete the club building, the trolley system to take the canoes up and down to the river was his 'baby'. He built and tried to introduce a C2 of about 22 foot in length to racing in the 1930's - he was well before his time!

He often built a new canoe and sold it immediately if someone admired it and wished to purchase it. He often remarked, "That's not a canoe if it has not got high ends!". His skills in canoe building were lost to us when he withdrew from the club in the 1940s. The canoes he built were extremely light and shapely.

Financial problems

Up until the great depression canoeing was in great shape but financial problems then caused the club to go downhill and finally go bankrupt (even a plan to turn the club into flats was suggested).

The answer to this was to form the Heidelberg City Rowing Club, a loan of £5000 was obtained, many rowing boats purchased and canoeing took second place at the club.

The 1934 flood almost wiped out the club house as there was about two feet of water over the dance floor. It also caused the demise of many of the other canoe clubs whose club houses were washed away.

2nd World War

As the 2nd World War got under way, the VACA went into recess. Almost 100% of canoeing members went into the services and rowing was only a Sunday morning exercise.

The main activity was a Sunday morning row with a few fundraising drinks afterward - mainly organised by Harry De la Rue. This and similar fundraising keep the club financial - but only just!

Early in 1942 a few engineering apprentices joined the Rowing Club but soon started canoeing. One of the guys, Tom Ohman, borrowed £10 from his brother in the army to purchase his first canoe.

This period consisted of mainly long paddles from the Heidelberg Bridge to Dight's Falls and Easter trips to Warrantdyte. No road transport was available due to petrol rationing.

As the war drew to a close a quiet period of member rebuilding started but as canoeing flourished, rowing didn't.

Only one member of the canoeing side, Ted Pedley, returned to racing and rowing. John Ohman (straight out of the army) claimed that Tom put a paddle in his hand and told him to kneel in the back, keep in time and steer. He has not stopped since or given the paddle back!

FCC - ours at last!

At this time the mortgage holder's solicitor decided that it was time to 'call in the loan'. We had gone about 10 years with only paying interest - in fact the interest payments added up to about three times the capital but we still owed the original £5,000.

As canoeing was booming but rowing was very quiet, a decision was made to sell off the rowing boats which were in short supply. This finalised the loan and made the club ours at last!

We renamed the club 'The Fairfield Canoe Club'. The VACA was reformed and Fairfield was the centre of canoeing in Victoria - we won many championships, flags, state titles, etc.

Some names of this era were: John and Jennifer Ohman, Tom Ohman, Frank and Gwen Ettwell, Ken and Margaret Day, Les and Dorothy Hart, The Little Girls (Myra, Ronda and Joyce), Ron Ford, Ted and Essy Pedley, Arthur and Leslie Graham, Rubin and Tom Collins, Ron Yeats, Keith and Ray Tanner, Arthur Holmes, Billy Smith, Gordon Day and Dick McEwan.

We toured the Goulburn and Snowy Rivers every Spring. With high river waters we cruised the rapids from Yarra Glen to Fairfield.

Lead up to the 1956 Olympics

In the early 1950's wet summers caused a slow down of canoeing and the sport slowly changed from a recreational to a mainly racing sport. With the prospect of the 1956 games we had to change the length of our canoes to Olympic standards and the length of races was changed also.

The Australian Canoe Federation was formed about 1951. Although, Fairfield and most of Victoria was still only racing in Canadian Canoes.

Ross Chenoworth of Ivanhoe imported the first Swedish K1 and K2 Kayaks - he won Australian titles in these kayaks but the NSW surf paddlers soon imported kayaks and became the leading paddlers in this field.

The importing of Swedish C1 and C2 canoes in 1955 soon showed our old canoes to be sub-standard.

After many different paddler combinations were tried, the Olympic trials produced the following paddlers for the Canadian events.

Tom Ohman - Fairfield CC, C2 1000m / 10,000m

Bill Jones - Essendon CC

R Collins - Fairfield CC, Reserves C2 events

K Jackson - Ivanhoe CC (ex FCC)

B Harper - Kew CC, C1 1000m / 10,000m

All kayak events went to NSW paddlers.

The 1956 Olympic Games was our high point to that date with Bill and Tom placed 5th - 1000 metres and 7th - 10,000 metres, with Green and Brown's Bronze Medal in the 10,000 metres K2.

These results were considered outstanding by all observers as we had not competed internationally before - also beating the highly regarded Canadian and USA paddlers comfortably.

Post 1956

Tom Ohman changes over to kayaks and a shortage of canoes meant that he spent a lot of time teaching paddlers in his kayak whilst he paddled alongside in a Canadian.

The shortage of kayaks was overcome by G. Varcoe and Tom Ohman financing the purchase of moulds for several models of K1 (racing and touring), a short run of K2s and a touring Canadian. Other moulds were purchased from NSW and this made canoeing a better and larger sport. Naturally as paddlers advanced they purchased overseas craft.

1960 Olympics

Heidi Sager (soon Beard) - Fairfield CC K1 / K2

Adrian Powell - Fairfield CC C1

1964 Olympics

Margaret Buck - Fairfield CC K1 / K2

Vid Juriskay - Fairfield CC C2

Fred Wasmer - Fairfield CC