Lancaster Civic Vision

Celebrating our Heritage – Enhancing our Environment – Shaping our Future

ROWING AND RIVALRIES

Lancaster Civic Vision Guide 100





(Source: Author, both)

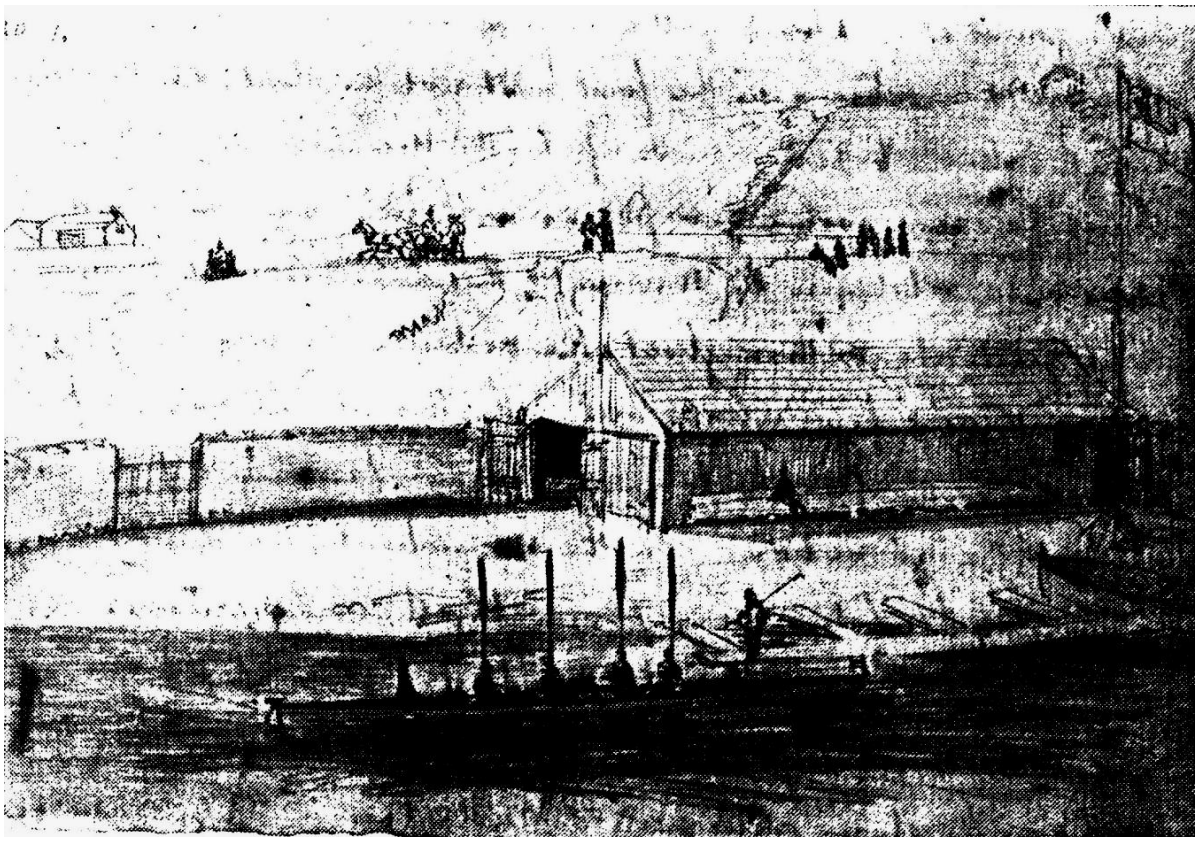
There is a long history of rowing as a sport in the Lancaster area – on Morecambe Bay among the fishing communities there and on the River Lune in Lancaster. Early records show there was gig racing on the Bay (including one race for women). Gigs were light rowing boats, built for speed. On the Lune there were often events based at Snatchems Inn featuring races between different types of boat and also competitions and stalls on dry land. These attracted large, boisterous crowds, the competitors were local, there were cash prizes and some thought it was poorly organised.

This early regatta was unappealing to those who wanted to row as amateurs in a well-run, polite, private club. The rowing clubs at Oxford and Cambridge colleges were the model for a rowing club among those who had been to those universities. The Lancaster Rowing Club was founded in 1842, new members being proposed and seconded by existing members and, if voted in, having to pay an entrance fee and an annual subscription.

They held their first, new-style regatta over two days in 1842, rowing on the first day and sailing on the second. They used as their course the stretch of the Lune from the Custom House on St George's Quay to Snatchems and back. The inns and warehouses on the Quay offered changing facilities and storage for some of the boats.

By the 1845 Regatta they had secured a simple wooden shed as a boathouse on the north bank of the Lune above Skerton Mill, and the High Sheriff of Lancashire attended. The Regatta had quickly become a major part of Lancaster's social season. The course was then upstream from Skerton to Halton Hall and back.

Edmund Sharpe (a key founder of the Club) was the Secretary of the North Western Railway Company and so would have known how to secure the use of trains, which allowed Lancaster boats to compete in other regattas in North-West England and they brought in other crews for Lancaster's regatta. The new-style regatta was a very different affair from the pre-1842 ones.



A sketch of the Lancaster Rowing Club's 1845 boathouse at Skerton
(Source: Wigglesworth 1992, p10 (see below), gratefully acknowledged)

The first Chairman and Captain of the Club was Edmund Sharpe, Lancaster's leading architect, engineer, entrepreneur and a leading light in many aspects of the town's life – see Guide 32 in this series for more details about Sharpe.

Other Club members were drawn from the professions (like Sharpe's architect partner E.G. Paley), university graduates, leading businessmen and the Governor of Lancaster Castle. In 1848 the Club was advised to admit 'gentlemen amateurs' and 'master tradesmen' but not 'journeymen or mechanics'.

It was one thing to found the Club, it was another to run a regatta at a profit and to attract enough younger members as competitive rowers. After several years of losses the regatta did not run in 1849, it was revived in 1859 and then had a gap till 1866.

By the following year, 1867, the Club had ceased, probably partly as fall-out from the General Election scandal in Lancaster in 1865 and the subsequent Royal Commission that unearthed widespread voter bribery. Club members may have been implicated.

In 1867 rival factions in the old club set up two new rowing clubs – a new Lancaster Rowing Club (Tory by inclination) and the John O'Gaunt Rowing Club (more Liberal and open to a wider range of members).

The latter club took over the Skerton boathouse and its boats. The new Lancaster Rowing Club had to build a new boathouse on the south bank of the Lune upstream near the Lancaster Canal Aqueduct, a smaller and far less accessible site. However, it had a healthier membership and funds.

By the mid-1870s the new John O'Gaunt Club was in financial trouble and could not afford the site's rent. However, they were saved by the industrialist, James Williamson the future Lord Ashton, who bought the land and boathouse and leased them to the club at a very low rent.

In 1883 the Club could now afford to build a new boathouse. They revived the Lancaster Regatta between 1884 and 1889 and since 1897 it has been run annually apart from 1900, the war years and 2020 (COVID).

The Lancaster Rowing Club did not have a Williamson-type benefactor and they struggled with recruitment, finally closing in 1931, so ending decades of rivalry. As the city's only rowing club, it was renamed the Lancaster John O'Gaunt Rowing Club. The current John O'Gaunt boathouse was built in 1983 on Halton Road, the site of the original 1845 boathouse.



The boathouse of Lancaster John O'Gaunt Rowing Club, Halton Road (Source: Author)

Over the decades both clubs had periods of sporting triumph and others that were less successful. The 1920s were competitively successful for the John O'Gaunt Club and in the 1930s the Lancaster Regatta became a key fixture in the calendar of rowing competitions in the north of England. The City of Lancaster Regatta is still held annually from a base by Halton Training Camp.

In 1948 the Lancaster Royal Grammar School Boat Club was founded, based first at the upstream boathouse of the defunct Lancaster Rowing Club, and later joining the John O'Gaunt Club at Skerton for several years. It is now based at the Halton Training Camp.

In 1964 the Lancaster University Boat Club was set up, based first at Skerton and from 1966 at in the former Halton railway station.

Lancaster's rowing tradition continues to thrive, the Lancaster John O'Gaunt Rowing Club being the fifth oldest surviving rowing club in the UK outside the universities.

Much of the information in this leaflet has been taken from Neil Wigglesworth's booklet on *A History of Rowing in Lancaster* (1992) Lancaster City Museum, to which the author is indebted.

The current boathouse on Halton Road is at the western end of Lune Bank Gardens, also a gift from Lord Ashton (1903), which are described in Guide 35 in this series.



The boathouse of Lancaster University Boat Club (Source: Author)

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