

Peter Sly, President of Cygnet Rowing Club (1975-2015)



In 1950, an erstwhile club historian wrote "Cygnet had ever been a club to foster the social side'. No member embodied the spirit of that remark more than Peter Sly, Cygnet's longstanding club president, who passed away on 9th March 2015 at the age of 85. He died as he had lived, surrounded by his family in the peace and tranquility of 'Old Blades', his beloved residence at Henley-on-Thames.

Peter Sly never claimed to be an accomplished oarsman, but he was one of the sport's great extroverts. Nothing pleased him more than 'holding court' at Cygnet lunches and dinners or in the comfort of 'Old Blades', the most select enclosure on the Henley course at regatta time. Indeed, no visit to Henley Royal Regatta was complete without a pilgrimage to 'Old Blades' to be lambasted by Sly for one's shortcomings as a sportsman, a spouse, a club officer or whatever else came to mind.

Courtship rather than sportsmanship initially enticed Peter Sly into the world of rowing. Peter was smitten with Pat Heron, a business associate at Crown Agents (a government procurement agency for governments overseas), who filled her leisure hours coxing the women's first VIII at the Civil Service Ladies Rowing Club (now BBLRC). Sly rapidly concluded that joint enterprise held the key to a deep and meaningful relationship with Ms Heron, so he joined Cygnet, the men's counterpart of CSLRC.

More accustomed to the unscrupulous world of big business than the gentle art of pen pushing, Peter Sly took Cygnet by storm. Norman Cowling, an active member at the time, recounts "Peter had an immediate impact on all aspects of club life". In next to no time, Peter's 'can do' attitude had secured the club its first boat trailer and a new coaching launch, shaken up the club social scene and reorganized the club's finances, entrusting the boat fund to a sleek new merchant bank in the City.



Richard du Parcq, who was doing his first stint as club Treasurer, recalls "I well remember climbing, no staggering, out of Peter's Roller in St James St, after a goodish lunch, for a spot of customer feedback to the bank." Soon afterwards the bank went bust, but not before club funds had been withdrawn in the nick-of-time, following an astute tip-off from Sly.

Never one to let the grass grow under his feet, in 1972 Peter attained an ARA Silver Coaching Award and promptly set about putting it into practice. Success followed a few months later with an easy win for a Cygnet Novice VIII at Worcester. While this would be his only claim to coaching fame, his greatest contribution to the sport lay in the world of women's rowing.

By the mid-1970s, Pat was juggling multiple roles as Mrs Sly, Captain of CSLRC and Secretary for the Womens' (National) Rowing Committee. These were formative times for women's rowing: CSLRC had graduated to the nucleus of the women's national squad, while several CSLRC members would participate in the 1976 Montreal Olympics. Peter was hugely supportive throughout, becoming a serial

cheer leader for women's rowing, a renowned supporter at home and international regattas and a champion of Henley Women's Regatta.

A man for all seasons, Peter Sly was the obvious choice for Cygnet club president, an office he was invited to fill in 1975 and one he held until his dying day, a time span of 40 years. Reputedly the longest serving club president on the Tideway, Peter once quipped that it was the least onerous post he had held in his life, apart from Church Warden. In reality, he moulded the presidency to suit his character and the two were ultimately indistinguishable.

Peter Sly never won a Henley medal, but he had the next best thing: a superior piece of real estate located half way along the Henley course. Suitably lubricated with a glass of wine or two, Peter would happily recount how in 1977 he was alerted at the eleventh hour (by Len Huggett) to the auction of two riverside workmen's cottages close to Remenham. Sly subsequently 'bet the ranch' to acquire the two properties and the builders moved in to transform them into 'Old Blades'.

A high spot of the early years of Peter's presidency was the President's Lunch held in the River Room at Old Blades where momentous decisions were taken, but none remembered. These occasions were always preceded by generous libations at the Flower Pot while Pat was slaving over a hot stove back at base.



Always happy to imbibe with the 'Last of the Summer Wine' set, Peter was equally at home with the younger membership, or quaffing 'Alt' beer with our friends at R G Benrath in Germany. Some members were greater butts of his jokes than others, but he was a shrewd judge of character and had a warm spot in his heart for everyone. 'Old Blades' rarely turned away a deserving waif or stray.

Latterly, Peter was often to be found taking 'walks' along Remenham Lane on his mobility buggy, wearing one of his 'trade mark' wide brim hats. This mode of transport suited him very well and allowed him to arrive in style at the President's Lunch at Remenham Club during regatta week. Following a lunch replete with port and brandy, he would happily motor back up the towpath to 'Old Blades', oblivious to all the regatta goers who had been mown down in his wake.

In sum, to quote Norman Cowling again, "Peter Sly was a genuine life enhancer. You could not have a dull time in Peter's company; he would not allow it." The rowing world will be a poorer place without Peter Sly; at Cygnet he will be sorely missed as the club prepares to celebrate its 125th anniversary, devoid of its most vociferous dignitary.

Paul Rawkins, 20th March 2015