

P. 78

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ROYAL WEST OF SCOTLAND  
AMATEUR BOAT CLUB.

DIAMOND JUBILEE.

BY JOHN DONALD,

*Author of*

*"Collections and Recollections of a Greenockian," &c.*

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## DIAMOND JUBILEE.

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Sixty years of existence without serious accident; sixty years of boating by hundreds of members without loss of life or limb—with no greater mishap than such as might cause a laugh. That is the record of the Royal West of Scotland Amateur Boat Club which celebrates its diamond jubilee in the present year of grace.

It seems strange to say that the inception of the club was due to the construction of the Albert Harbour, yet that must be inferred from a statement by a gentleman who is now, perhaps, the oldest member. Before the Esplanade was built, a rough boulder-strewn beach approached to within a few yards of the wall now forming the south line of the promenade. The space between the beach and the wall (a mere pathway) was called West Clyde Street from Forsyth Street to Whitefarland Point, the eastward portion as far as Ker Street being known as Clyde Crescent (the Bay of Quick district). All, or almost all, of the householders along West Clyde Street owned rowing boats—many had boathouses erected on their feus, some of which are still standing—and when the Esplanade

was formed from the material excavated to make the Albert Harbour those householders were deprived of direct access to the shore. The inconvenience which they then experienced quickened the younger men of the families to find a means of indulging in the favourite pastimes of rowing and fishing with greater comfort, and the institution of a boat club seemed the best way to accomplish their desire.

From the realm of thought to the field of action was but a quick step with those enthusiasts. Note the rapid progress of events. The triangular piece of ground between the end of the Esplanade and the east wall of Fort Matilda was recognised as a suitable site for a clubhouse. Application to the Superior, Sir Michael Robert Shaw Stewart, found that gentleman sympathetic, and he granted the club the use of the ground during his pleasure at a (nominal) annual rent, with permission to erect the necessary buildings. A meeting was then convened, the minute of which may, because of its brevity and its importance as the minute of the first meeting, be quoted in full as follows:

Greenock, 16th February, 1866.

A meeting of gentlemen was held in the White Hart Hotel to consider the best steps to be taken towards the formation of a rowing club. Newton J. Smith, Stewart Caird, John Jamieson, and Charles Shannon were appointed a com-

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mittee to get plans of a suitable house drawn out, and obtain estimates for the erection of the same, to be submitted to a meeting to be convened at a future date.

(Signed) CHARLES SHANNON.

That was a committee of hustlers, for only twelve days later the plans of a boat-house to cost about £165 were submitted to the next meeting and provisionally approved.

The dimensions of the "boating shed," says the "Greenock Advertiser," of 15th February, 1866, "will be 40ft. in length and 33ft. in breadth, and it will be capable of accommodating about 40 craft. In addition, a dressing-room of large size will be provided."

At this meeting (28th February) it was also decided that the name of the club should be the "West of Scotland Amateur Boat Club"; that the subscription for the first year should be one guinea; and that Messrs R. A. Baird, Duncan Shaw, James MacCunn, Capt. Millar, William O. Leitch, John Neill, Jr., and John Ross should enrol members and solicit donations. Those gentlemen, apparently, determined not to be behind the former committee in prompt and effective action; for just seven weeks later (on 18th April) Mr James MacCunn, as chairman of a special meeting, announced that £122 had been subscribed and 80 members enrolled.

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**THE FIRST OFFICE-BEARERS**

were then appointed as follows:—President, Sir M. R. Shaw Stewart, Bart.; vice-president, Hugh Lyon Tennent, Esq., Sheriff-Substitute; secretary, Mr Charles Shannon; treasurer, Mr James MacCunn; Committee of Management, Messrs Alex. Ross, Wm. O. Leitch, Samuel Nicol, Duncan Shaw, and William Newton, with power to add to their number. (Mr John Jamieson and Mr Robert W. M'Nab were added shortly afterwards.) It was further agreed that the club should be provided with—1 barge, about 30ft.; 2 pleasure boats, 23ft.; 2 racing jolly boats, 23ft.; and 1 racing boat about 30ft. long, 6 boats in all; but other 9 were added before the club was formally opened.

The offers of the contractors for the clubhouse were accepted on 23rd April—White-law & Co. for the brickwork and "Guthrie" (Robert Guthrie?) for the joinerwork—no record appears as to the slating, plumbing, painting, or other work. Messrs Shannon, Alex. Ross, and MacCunn were appointed to "fix on the site and position of the house and other matters to facilitate despatch of the work." The building of the boathouse was commenced towards the end of April and before the end of June it stood completed and stocked with boats at a total cost of about £328.

The final touch to the institution of the club was given on 8th June when "a code of rules was adopted for its government";



and it is only right to name the gentlemen to whose exertions that institution was chiefly due, who may, indeed, be regarded as the founders of the club.

They were:—

Charles Shannon, son of Mr Archibald Shannon, collector of Harbour dues;

James MacCunn, son of Mr John MacCunn, merchant and shipowner (Mr James MacCunn was the father of Hamish MacCunn, the composer); and

John Jamieson, who resided in Glen Road, and afterwards settled in London, where he was interested in the oil business.

Nothing now remained but to signalise the inauguration, and Saturday, 16th June, was selected as the opening day when the public were to be treated to a grand aquatic procession, after which the members would meet to celebrate the occasion in due and ancient form. But the best laid schemes gang aft agley, and the chosen date had to be postponed for a fortnight because the boat and boat-house were not quite ready for use.

#### THE OPENING DAY.

When the 30th of June arrived it was so wet in the forenoon that a further postponement was, very reluctantly, agreed to; but during the afternoon the weather cleared up a little, and it was decided to carry out the programme. Accordingly, about four o'clock, the crews previously appointed

launched and manned their respective boats—gigs, jolly boats, out-rigger skiffs, etc., a dozen at least—formed into line opposite the Battery, and, at a given signal, off they went, rowing easily up the river to the sound of lively music and the fluttering of many coloured flags; for the band of the old 1st R.R.V. in a boat led the procession, while Sheriff Tennent, the vice-president (who was in command), and other office-bearers on board of the gaily decorated barge, brought up the rear. Despite the unfavourable weather the display was impressive as the boats passed and evoked cheers from the concourse of spectators who lined the Esplanade—and who immediately after scampered for shelter from a heavy shower. The procession passed round H.M.S. Lion, then Guardship at the Tail-of-the-Bank, and by that time the number of boats had increased to about twenty. After leaving the Guardship, the line was broken, and the boats engaged in an animated race for the starting point. It was intended to continue the procession round Gourock Bay, but the idea was abandoned on account of the weather.

#### IN THE BOAT-HOUSE.

After the boats had been safely housed, the members to the number of about eighty, met in the dressing-room of the boat-house, where a plentiful supply of refreshment awaited them. Sheriff Tennent presided o'er the scene. After the usual loyal and patriotic toasts he proposed "Success and Prosperity to the West of Scotland Amateur

Boat Club," and in doing so took occasion to warn the members of "three rocks ahead — be-r, 'bacey, and overtraining" — the learned Sheriff was himself, in his University days, an enthusiastic oarsman. He also referred to the zeal and assiduity of Mr Charles Shannon in connection with the establishment of the Club, and to his services as interim-secretary since its inception, and proposed that gentleman's health, a compliment which Mr Shannon acknowledged very nicely. The Rifle Band played at intervals during the pleasant entertainment, and no doubt the general enjoyment was enhanced by the announcement that Captain Alexander Taylor, of Clyde House, had gifted £20 to the funds of the club. Some of the younger and more boisterous spirits wound up the list of events by an impromptu dance in the loft (confined to males, we presume) to the music of the band, where, according to a local paper, they demonstrated their ability "to wallop the floor as well as handle an oar." "The incidents of this day" (says the report in the minute book) "must be vivid to the recollection of those members who were so fortunate as to be present on the occasion."

The club had opened so late in the season of 1866 that the members had few opportunities of testing their ability against crews from other clubs. Nevertheless, they succeeded in carrying off a first prize at Crossowen Regatta, where, too, a crew of their youngest members made a distinctly creditable appearance, pressing a crack

Glasgow combination very hard for a premier place. Another first prize was gained at Gourock Regatta, and the subsequently famous John Ross distinguished himself at Glasgow by winning the DalGLISH Challenge Cup. This cup only became the property of the winner after he had won two consecutive contests for it, and as Mr Ross won it again in 1867, he became its possessor. Some years later, he presented it to the club.

It is interesting to note that the flagpole was made from a spar gifted by Messrs Andrew Munro and Company, and that the stones on which it rests were supplied without charge by Mr York, contractor for the formation of the Albert Harbour. When it is added that Mr James MacCunn presented a handsome skiff to the club the chief events of the first year of its existence have been chronicled. Subsequent events, however interesting, may only be glanced at in this necessarily brief sketch.

The first members to be elected by ballot according to rule were Wm. H. Gunn, Walter B. Grieve and John Brymner, on 6th August, 1866. The first boatman, William Harvey, was appointed on 6th April 1867, although a man named Cowdall had looked after the boathouse during the preceding winter. Harvey was succeeded in the following year (16th March) by Richard Ross, who filled the position until the end of the 1876 season, when age and infirmity compelled his retirement.

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SMITH, THE PRODIGY.

The third boatman was the great and only John Smith who had served on board of H.M. ships, nominally as a carpenter but really ("for he himself hath said it") as the Commanding Officer's right-hand man and trusted adviser! Whenever the Admiral was in doubt or difficulty, he said, "Send for Smith," or "What does Smith say about it?" John was a famous storyteller, and carried his hearers with him unto the uttermost parts of the earth. He told how, during a sanguinary engagement with Chinese pirates on the Yalu River, progress was so impeded by corpses that he had to go down with his adze, and hew out a passage for the ship. That wonderful adze, too, played effectively on the coast of Labrador. A party of officers who had gone ashore to fish were quite unsuccessful, and, of course, John was sent for. "Stand to one side, gentlemen, and watch me," said he. Wading into the river with long sea-boots, he swung his adze, and, cleaving the water—right and left—soon became invisible through the tumultuous spray, while the amazed watchers on the bank were forced to back away from the shower of monstrous salmon struck out of the stream.

It would take too long to tell how his elopement with a beautiful Countess in the north of Ireland had been frustrated by the jealous Earl, her husband, who seemed to think he should have had a say in the arrangement. With such simple tales did

honest Jack beguile the evening hours in the boathouse, for an admiring group who gasped and whispered, "What a brilliant liar!" John was an excellent boatman, and had charge of the craft for twenty-six years.

#### NOTED OARSMEN.

In its early days the club relied on John Ross (youngest brother of the late Col. Wm. Ross, 1st R.R.V.), and Charles Shannon (previously mentioned), to uphold its honour, and nobly did they discharge the trust, their repeated victories in England and at Glasgow, Greenock, Rothesay, and other places throwing a glorious search-light on their club, and establishing its fame. Mr Shannon emigrated to Australia towards the end of 1869; but during the summer of that year he carried off the championship for amateur sculls at the National Scottish Regatta at Clynder, and in conjunction with John Ross won the trophy of the Amateur Champion pairs for Great Britain in a great race on the Thames. Both gentlemen were elected to the life membership of their club in appreciation of their achievements. Mr Ross, after a temporary retiral, re-asserted his supremacy in 1874 by winning the cup for Senior Amateur Sculls at Stockton-on-Tees "against some of the first oarsmen in England." Ross and Shannon were succeeded by the Gilchrist brothers (Alex. M., John E., and George W.), and John M'Kirby, with a long list of notable vic-

tories as single sculls, pairs, and fours. Mr Herbert Gilchrist, a younger member of the Gilchrist family, and a successful oarsman, came into the limelight a few years later. Then there were the brothers Andrew and Robert Richardson, James Bridie, Charles S. Hall (also a well-known song writer); John and Wm. F. Leckie; R. G., Dan, and P. B. H. Adam; R. and J. Ferguson; the Steels; Charles J. Mill; J. H. and T. Ballantine; Malcom Dunlop; J. V. Leitch; the notable quartette, H. P. W. Walker, Charles W. Stewart, Wm. Wyllie, and Wm. S. M'Culloch (stroke), a capital crew who, in 1903, almost broke the record for wins in one season; and many others.

#### "THE QUEEN'S GIG."

When Queen Victoria visited Loch Maree in 1877 the club had the honour of providing Her Majesty with a gig described in the Press as "the handsomest gig procurable in the West of Scotland," and in which the Royal Lady was "rowed through the still waters of Loch Maree by six stalwart Highlanders." This incident brought the club into more extended public notice.

#### ROYAL RECOGNITION.

It may be recorded here that on 3rd June, 1885, the secretary, Mr Arch. N. Lindsay, was notified by the Home Office that the Queen had been pleased to grant permission to the club to assume the prefix "Royal," and to command that the club

should thereafter be styled the "Royal West of Scotland Amateur Boat Club." Permission was also given to display the Crown on the club flag. Mr John Neill, vice-president, in announcing the Royal patronage, acknowledged the indebtedness of the club to Mr (afterwards Sir) Thomas Sutherland, M.P., whose influence and active support contributed very greatly to the gratifying result, and his proposal that Mr Sutherland should be elected an honorary life member was carried with acclamation.

The prosperous state of affairs in 1878, when the club reached its zenith in point of membership and finance, led to the erection in that year of the main portion (the wings being added afterwards) of the present commodious and comfortable clubhouse instead of the original structure. Its advantages need not be detailed here; but what rare good-fellowship—in addition to smoking concerts, ladies' nights, etc.—is enjoyed as the members gather cosily together on a winter evening, and what stories are told! Let me merely indicate one. A lively young Greenockian, at a great Melbourne Exhibition, seeing some familiar faces in the crowd, thought he would have a bit of fun. Slipping behind a pillar he shouted: "This way for Kirn, Dunoon, Innellan, and Rothesay," and was immediately surrounded by a numerous and clamorous body of Scots from Greenock and Clydeside claiming a kind of kinship.



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The torchlight processions, suppers and balls, have been in abeyance for some years, but these may be revived.

#### ADMINISTRATIVE.

There have been 15 honorary vice-presidents, of whom Mr John Neill held office longest—1874-1888. His only predecessor, Sheriff Tennent (1866) acted for eight years, Messrs Robert Kerr (1888), James MacCunn (1892), A. N. Lindsay (1903), and Hugh M. Ross (1916) for 4 years each, the others occupying the chair for 3 years or less. Of the 19 honorary secretaries, Mr John M. Thomson served longest—13 years, from 1869—while Messrs W. H. Carmichael (1899) and 1905), and J. V. Leitch (1914) held the post for about five years, and the others for shorter periods. Special mention should be made of the excellent administrative work of Mr Henry King from 1869 to 1885, when he retired from the committee, and that of Messrs Andrew Carmichael (secretary, 1882; vice-president, 1901) and V. C. Meyer (vice-president, 1910).

The present office-bearers are—Hon. president, Sir Michael Hugh Shaw Stewart, Bart.; hon. vice-president, Mr Chas. W. Stewart; hon. treasurer, Mr T. S. Black; hon. secretary, Mr Robert M. Watson, solicitor, 2 Church Place.