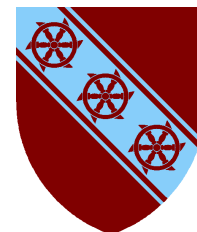




# St Catherine's College Rowing Society

St Catherine's College, Oxford OX1 3UJ



President: Colin Smith  
 Vice-Presidents: Neil Chugani,  
 Sir Matthew Pinsent CBE, Zoe de Toledo,  
 Andrew Triggs Hodge OBE.

9th February, 2025

## In this issue . . .

The Red Flag was up for most of 2nd week (Storm Eowyn) but, apart from that, there has actually been a decent amount of rowing this term.

Catz passed on the opportunity to enter the IWL at the end of 1st week (although that was in any case aborted after the failure of a safety launch) but in the 2nd IWL event, this afternoon, Catz' crews finally had their first race, exactly half-way through the academic year (I apologise for the poor quality of the images — I really should have read the manual for my new camera).

There is an update on the Boat Race crews although, with the withdrawal of our single (OUWBC) triallist, there are no longer any Catz participants.

Our records of 75 years ago feature several well-known characters who were also active in setting up the Rowing Society. I have only just discovered that one of these, Ben Sylvester, died almost a year ago (at the age of 99). He had been a Vice-President of the Rowing Society almost since its inception. We include an obituary.

Finally, and with a sharp intake of breath, the prospects for Torpids.



The Women's 1st VIII about to push off to race in IWL-D this afternoon.

## Isis Winter League D, 9th February

69 crews raced

1st	4:37.0	Wolfson A	1st/33 M8
20th	5:47.5	Linacre A	1st/31 W8
=26th	6:02.5	St Catz A	24th/33 M8
42nd	6:35.0	St Catz A	14th/31 W8
51st	6:50.5	St Catz B	30th/33 M8
60th	7:22.5	St Catz B	26th/31 W8

## University Crews

It was announced last October, with some fanfare, that the 2025 race would be branded The CHANEL J12 Boat Race. However, I'm not sure the PR people were aware that, in the rowing world, J12 refers to a very junior category of competitor. For whatever reason, that branding has yet to make its way to the official Boat Race web-site.

With the Tideway Fours Head cancelled due to high winds (storm Bert), the December Trial VI-IIs were the only opportunity for the University triallists to do any serious racing, albeit within their squads. As last year, the format was Oxford and Cambridge splitting their men's and women's, heavy and lightweight groups into two nominally matched crews and racing them down the Boat Race course one after the other. Well, that's the idea although I notice that the Oxford lightweight men were racing Upper Latymer School, suggesting that they may be low on numbers.

The water was a little choppy in places but nothing like as dramatic as last year, much to the relief of the rowers but no doubt to the regret of the publicists.

Despite the crews supposedly being equally matched, the only race that wasn't done and dusted by Hammersmith was the Oxford men's heavyweights, which was only finally resolved approaching Barnes.

Catz' only representation on the water on Boat Race day is likely to be our (now) senior Vice President, Matt Pinsent, who will be umpiring the Women's Boat Race, although another RSVP, Zoe de Toledo, often gets called in for TV commentary duties.



The St Catherine's crew which won the 'Junior VIIIs' event at Marlow Regatta in 1949, featuring a number of people mentioned in the following article. From left to right, back row: Victor Bunting (3), Robert Wedderburn (2), Ben Sylvester (4), Arthur Simpson (B); front row: Ian Barker (6), Geoffrey Swarder (S), Graham Kaye (C), Donald Barton (7), Trevor Coulson (5).

## 75 Years Ago

During the summer of 1949 George Orwell's *1984* was published (yes, he may have written in 1948, but these things take time); the world's first passenger jet, a de Havilland Comet, made its maiden flight; the Berlin Airlift came to an end but the Korean war started. Clement Attlee's post-war Labour Government was in power, although their majority was reduced after the 1950 General Election (held the day after Torpids finished).

The Captain was Geoffrey Swarder and the Secretary, who I assume wrote the entries from the Minute Book, was Donald Barton. The humour seems to reflect his style in later life.

### Minute Book, 11th October, 1949

During the Captain's report several newcomers were seen to look anxiously out of the Barge windows at a steady stream of tub pairs forging through a deluge of rain. The Captain announced that Dr. John Marsh who had coached Club eights over a number of years, had been appointed Professor of Theology at Nottingham University. It was agreed to present him with a suitably inscribed tankard: the 1949 1st VIII would provide a crate of best bottled beer to go with it.

A new recruit, a chemist, sought an assurance that rowing would not take up too much of his time; the Captain said that no one would be called upon more than six afternoons a week.

### Minute Book, 30th Nov, 1949

Two Cat's crews having competed in the Long Distance Race; the 1st finished 14th out of 23 first crews, the second 31st, but hampered by a broken rigger and a stuck slide, the meeting was held in the evening after a singularly atrocious Hall dinner.

*The Long Distance Race was an annual time-trial over a 3 mile course downstream from Sandford Lock, the fastest crews typically taking over 16 min to complete the course.*

### The Times, Thu 16th Feb, 1950

The Oxford University Torpid races revert this year to six afternoons, instead of four as last year. The races begin to-day. The weather has of late been troublesome for practice, and one or two

boats have been lost because of swollen streams and blustering winds. [...] As there is no Isis crew this year more experienced oarsmen have been available to coach the Torpid crews. Fifty-one crews are entered, one more than last year.

### Minute Book, March, 1950

The Captain said that the 1st Torpid was better than expected [+5], the 2nd disappointing [-4], and the 3rd satisfactory [+2]. Introducing the matter of the annual Boat Club Dinner, his eyes took on a glassy expression as he recalled the gastronomic delights of last year's function. Mr. Sylvester proposed that we seek to acquire the chart of the Eights course at present decorating a wall of the Union men's urinal<sup>1</sup>. He also proposed that Dean Kendrew be asked to coach the Schools VIII; it would be a nice gesture. Mr. Hancox said that since there was little prospect of his accepting, we might as well ask him.

*Wilfred George Kendrew was an eminent climatologist who was Dean of the St Catherine's Society until his retirement in 1950. His son, John Kendrew, won the 1962 Nobel Prize for Chemistry.*

*Tony Hancox was Boat Club captain in 1952 and represented England in the 1958 Empire & Commonwealth Games. Both he and Don Barton were active in the early days of the Rowing Society.*

<sup>1</sup>An approach was made, but rejected.



The 1950 St Catherine's 3rd Eight. From left to right, back row: Yinka Olumide (4), B. P. Green (3), Alex Currie (2), Ian Heslop (B); middle: David Daniell (6), John Bradshaw (S), Donald Barton (coach), Leslie Phillips (7), Desmond Hackett (5); front: Raymond Taylor (C). The crew gained 8 places, bumping on all six days including an overbump. It has also been pointed out that five of this crew were reading Theology.

### **The Times, Thu 19th May, 1950**

There is little question that seven divisions are more than the Isis can cope with; five would be nearer the mark. It may brighten the prospect of Eights Week to have a few 'schools' and 'rugger' eights, bedecked in top hats and coloured jerseys, but it contributes little to Oxford rowing. Very few of the men in the college third and fourth eights, let alone fifth eights, are destined to move up next year, and in the meantime they make it even harder for the serious crews to get uninterrupted practice on the already over-short course.

### **The Times, Thu 25th May, 1950**

There has been little in the past week to remind one of the glories of pre-war Eights weeks. Attendances have been only moderate, and the sartorial effort, or lack of effort, of the spectators has not helped to brighten the scene.

### **The Wheel, 1950–51**

During the last year the Boat Club has competed in a variety of races, at times with great success. In 1950, the first Torpid crew deservedly won their oars by making five bumps, which brought them in sight of the first division. The 2nd Torpid suffered from lack of cohesion and went down four places.

The third boat, consisting entirely of novices, showed promise in making two bumps.

A record number of crews [4] was entered by us for Summer Eights. The 1st VIII failed to come up to expectations, and although it made two bumps, it steadily deteriorated until it was itself bumped on the last day. The three other crews did very well: the 3rd VIII had phenomenal success in going up no less than eight places. They and the Schools VIII both qualified for their oars, the 2nd VIII failing to do so by only one bump.

### **Benjamin F. Sylvester Jr, 1924–2024**

Ben Sylvester was a Harvard graduate who rowed in the St Catherine's 1st VIII in 1949–1950 (and the Schools VIII in 1951). Returning to the US, he kept in contact with fellow oarsmen Tony Hancox and Don Barton and when they

helped establish the Rowing Society in the 1980s he was appointed as one of its Vice-Presidents. He remained an enthusiastic supporter of the College, and the Boat Club in particular, and made a substantial donation to the Longbridges Boathouse project.

In 2002, the US alumni established the Ben Sylvester Award, a medal presented annually to the member of the Boat Club who has 'most significantly contributed to enhancing the rowing life of St Catherine's College, Oxford'.

The following is from an obituary notice posted by Guilford Funeral Home.

Benjamin F. Sylvester Jr. of Guilford, a retired history teacher and coach, died February 15, 2024 at age 99 at home. Born in Omaha, Neb., he was the son of Benjamin Sylvester and Ruth Mills Sylvester. A graduate of that city's Central High School, he was elected to the school's Hall of Fame. After Army service in World War II, he earned degrees from Harvard University and from St. Catherine's College, Oxford, England, where he was a championship rower and an annual prize is named after him. Mr. Sylvester taught and coached crew at Choate Rosemary Hall in Wallingford for 40 years; the school's boathouse on Lake Quonnipaug in Guilford is named for him. In 1961, he married the former LeMoyne Dodge, who survives him. He also leaves two children, Benjamin Sylvester III and Nina Healy; and six grandchildren, Ben Sylvester IV, Tyler Sylvester, Toby Sylvester, Norah Healy, Finn Healy, and Aidan Healy.



## Torpids

Torpids is scheduled for Wed–Sat, 26th February until 1st March, which is the 6th week of term. The Women’s Eights Head of the River Race is on 8th March, so the rule is that Torpids gets moved forward a week to allow crews to participate in both. With last year’s Torpids cancelled, the start order is based on the 2023 finish order.

The men’s 1st Torpid, a mixture of last summer’s 2nd Eight and novices, are short of rowing experience and, having finished down well down the field in the IWL, are probably several divisions higher up than other crews of their standard. I notice that there is an on-line stock-market-like game (bumpstrader.com), which currently has them finishing the week down 2 places. I fear that’s very much an optimistic view. In Torpids, of course, there is the extra jeopardy of being bumped multiple times.

The women are in a better position, both in where they are starting (Div III) and in having more experience in the boat. However, apart from St John’s (who weren’t racing), they were slower in the IWL than most of the crews around them. Linacre and St Hilda’s finished 1st and 2nd in the IWL, St Hugh’s 7th and Worcester 9th, still 17 s ahead of Catz. If there is a bump to be had, it may be on Wolfson II, assuming that was the Wolfson B crew that was overtaken by Catz’ B crew.

### Torpids 2025

Starting positions of our 1st Torpids  
and 2023 changes in position

Men’s Div I		Women’s Div III	
1 Christ Church	+1	1 Wolfson II	–4
2 Wolfson	+2	2 Corpus Christi	–2
3 Oriel	–2	3 St Hugh’s	+1
4 Pembroke	+3	4 Worcester	+3
5 University	+4	5 <b>St Catherine’s</b>	–9
6 Keble	+4	6 St John’s	–1
7 Balliol	–2	7 St Hilda’s	+3
8 Merton	+3	8 Linacre	–7
9 <b>St Catherine’s</b>	–6	9 Merton	–1
10 New College	+3	10 Queen’s	+6
11 Wadham	–5	11 University II	+1
12 Hertford	+5	12 Worcester II	+7



The Women’s 2nd Torpid racing in today’s IWL, in pursuit of, and eventually overtaking, Wolfson B.

Catz bumps have indeed been few and far between of late; just two in the last two years (one from W2 in Torpids 2023 and one from M2 in Eights 2023).

The men’s 2nd Torpid have a place in the fixed divisions, starting 6th in Div IV. A boat full of novices, their first-ever race was in today’s IWL and their second will be when the start gun goes on the Wednesday of Torpids. Although they were one of the slowest men’s VIIIs in the IWL it doesn’t look like any of the crews immediately around them in Torpids raced at all. After two years of flooding, I’m assuming everyone is struggling to find enough novices to fill their lower boats.

The women’s 2nd Torpid will have to qualify through Rowing On, in which case they are likely to be starting in Div V. I’m guessing the bar will be quite low this year.

## Coming Up ...

With expectations suitably managed, in the next issue there will be results from Torpids and an update on the University crews. I’m afraid that there is still no confirmation as to whether or not there will be a dinner to go with the AGM on the Saturday of Torpids.

## Diary

26 Feb – 1 Mar 2025	Torpids
1 Mar 2025	RS AGM & Dinner [tbc]
13 Apr 2025	The Boat Races
28–31 May 2025	Eights

Anu Dudhia