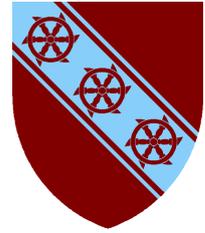


St Catherine's College Rowing Society
St Catherine's College, Oxford OX1 3UJ



President: Colin Smith
 Vice-Presidents: Neil Chugani, Sir Matthew Pinsent CBE,
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8th February, 2026

In this issue . . .

Let's start with some bright news. A couple of weeks ago it was announced that 2025 was Oxford's sunniest year on record, and that record began in 1880 (or Year 4 on the Boat Club calendar). I'll leave you to ponder how sunshine was recorded a full 12 years before electricity reached Oxford, let alone photo-electric cells.

But there's no escaping the bucket in the room. It's been wet. Not wet in the sense of the Thames sloshing across the streets of Oxford, or even the towpath, but just *persistently* wet. The red flag went up at the start of 0th week and seems nailed on for another 7 days at least, taking us up to the end of 4th week. Prospects for Torpids (4-7 March), in any form, are not good but, as St Francis might have said had he bothered to learn some mathematics as a youth rather than waste his time partying: 'Where there is despair, let's see if we can put a number on that'.

At least the University crews are getting some rowing done, albeit not at their Wallingford base. They've been testing themselves in side-by-side racing against Tideway clubs. At last count we had one triallist still standing.

In the light of recent events, you may be feeling some relief that we have, as a rule, chosen not to name our boats after eminent alumni. So I thought I'd take a look at the names that we have been using instead.

We pick up the events of 150 years ago, both home and abroad, now moving into 1876.

Finally, we've decided against a RS dinner this term but will instead attempt a grander affair after Eights (by which time the College Hall should be back in use) to celebrate the Boat Club's 150th year and also 50 years since the first women's crew.

Results

Oxford Trial VIIIs, 19th December

Women's B race
Biles bt Kildunne by 3.5 L*

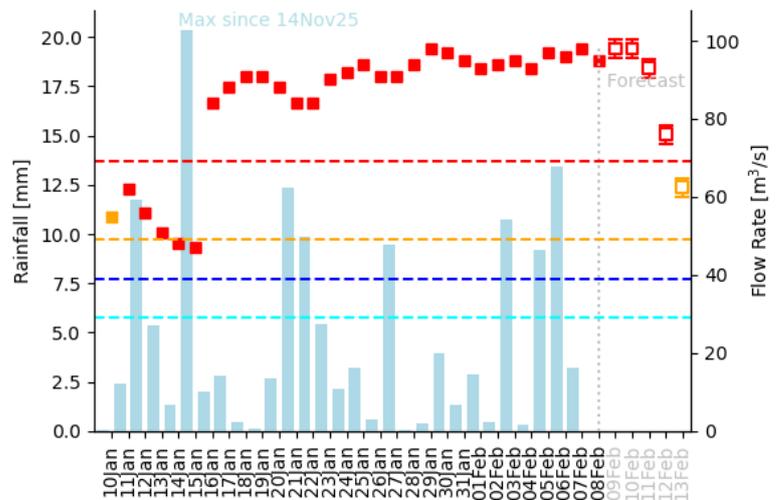
*Ophelia Lanfranchi at no.7

University Crews

The Trial Eights race, in December, used to be the main selection process from which the Oxford and Cambridge coaches picked their best 9 men from 18 to compete in the Boat Race.

Nowadays selection is later, usually after their New Year training camps, and the squads are larger so that each club runs 4 Trial Eights races: men's and women's A and B races, with the B races primarily for the lightweights. Cambridge and Oxford ran their races on consecutive days, but Cambridge got the miserable, wet day. And while the coaches attempt to select matched crews in the hope of tight racing, most races this year — both Oxford and Cambridge — were decided within the first 5 minutes.

At least Oxford had the numbers for a full men's B race this time.. Last year they pulled in a local school to provide the opposition for their lightweights.



Rainfall (blue columns) and river level and flag (symbols) for the past 30 days. 0th week started on 11th January.

Ophelia Lanfranchi was Catz only representative on the day, rowing at no.7 in the winning *Biles* crew in the women's B race (the Oxford women's crews this year were named after 'inspiring' sportswomen, although I'm not sure that the England rugby player would appreciate being described as having been 'beaten' by the undoubtedly talented, but diminutive, US gymnast).

Over the New Year the entire Oxford squad went to Spain for their training camp Cambridge went their separate ways: the men to Portugal and the women to Italy.

There have been a few private fixtures so far. On 18th January the Cambridge women's squad took on Thames RC. The A crews were well-matched, Thames took the B and C crew races (Cambridge women are still running 4 VIIIs) while the Cambridge lightweights matched Thames D with one win apiece.

Last weekend all 6 Oxford boats took on London RC crews and, apart from the men's lightweights, came out on top (although I notice that Ophelia *wasn't* listed in the Oxford lightweight VIII).

Also last weekend the Cambridge lightweight men gave Vesta A a fairly comprehensive thrashing, but we already know they're quick from their performances in the Fours Head.

So that just leaves Cambridge heavyweight men yet to show their hand, which won't be until 21st Feb when they take on Oxford Brookes. They missed the Fours Head last term and as far as I can tell have not raced anyone else so far.

I'm also waiting for some of these fixture opponents to race each other. Sadly Quintin Head (Jan 25th), which normally attracts many of the big Tideway clubs, was cancelled due to the fast stream.

This year the Oxford squad seem to have made a positive decision to race more often, which means they, and everyone else, knows just how fast they are. They competed in Wallingford Head last term and the Oxford women were also entered for Quintin.



Ophelia Lanfranchi
(photo: theboatrace.org)

150 Years Ago

At the start of 1876, Queen Victoria had been on the throne for 38 years with another 25 to go (Prince Albert had died 15 years earlier). Benjamin Disraeli was two years into his second term as Conservative Prime Minister and, at home, all seemed quiet on the political front.

Far, far away, in the ongoing Perak War, nominally fought over British imposition of an abolitionist policy in Malaya, the British forces experienced a setback when they were ambushed on 4th January, but that proved temporary and after a few more months the rebel leaders were captured, British rule was imposed and, presumably, some slaves were liberated.

In the United States, Republican Ulysses S Grant was coming to the end of his second term as President and discovering, like many former generals-turned-politician, that politics is a lot more difficult than war.

On the morning of Monday Feb 14th both Alexander Graham Bell and Elisha Gray submitted patent applications for a new invention, a telephone. That one went to the lawyers. I think we know who won. Four days later, using the existing communications technology, Britain and New Zealand were directly linked by telegraph.

You'll probably know Oxford as the home of the first sub-4 minute mile but it was also the location of the first 6' high jump. This was set by Brasenose student Marshall Brooks on 17th March. Two years earlier he'd also played for England against Scotland in a rugby union match. Brasenose crews were regularly Head of the River in those days, but I have no record of him rowing in a Brasenose boat. Probably just as well, for the rest of us.

The Naming of Boats

The earliest record of the name of any of our boats comes in 1951 when there was a debate as to whether the new shell should be named *St Catherine of Alexandria* or *Kate*. Since the meeting voted for the former, and that the existing clinker VIII should be renamed *Kate*, it looks as though *St Catherine of Alexandria* had been the name of the 1st VIII for some time. (Oriel, with *Hardy Norseman*, and Brasenose with *Child of Hale*, still continue the practice of using the same name for their men's 1st VIII even though the actual boat changes.)

A new clinker VIII was obtained the following year and named *John Brook* after the Censor (i.e. Master). Until around 1970 it was the rule that all Torpids crews had to race in the heavier, but more stable, clinker VIIIs, so colleges required both clinkers

and shells. In 1954 a new shell arrived and it was noted that the Dean was keen on calling it *St Catherine of Alexandria*. One presumes he got his way. But in 1959 it was recorded that a new clinker VIII was named *All Rabbit's Friends and Relations*, without any further explanation, and so started a theme which endures, off-and-on to this day. The widow of Peter Broadbridge (M.58) told me that it was *he* who came up with the name, and for no better reason than that he was a *Winnie the Pooh* fan. In 1983, the Captain (Graham Elliot) wrote

‘For some reason nothing in the Boat Club seems to create more bickering than the name of a new boat; the decision is left to Liz [Ilett, women’s captain] and the lady rowers. A secret ballot is held and *Piglet* comes top. A good choice when paying by the letter.’



Hunting for a Woozle, the name of our most recent boat (chosen by the women 1st VIII).

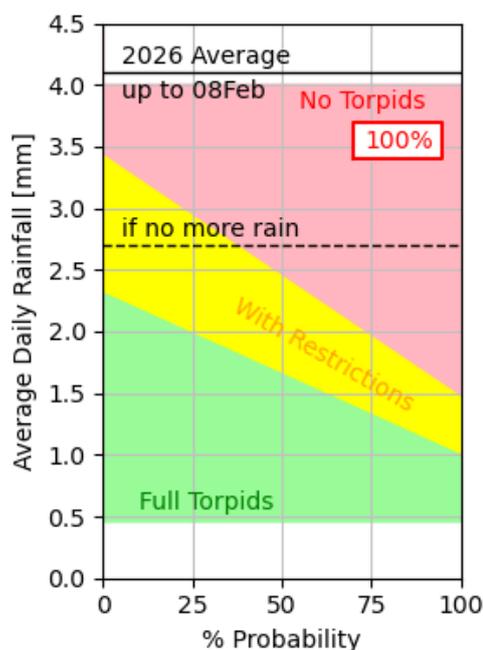
The Current Fleet

2024	W18	<i>Hunting for a Woozle</i>
2019	M4+	<i>Keep the Flag Flying</i>
2019	W4+	<i>March Forward Together</i>
2016	M18	<i>Goblin Cleaver</i>
2015	W28	<i>All Rabbit's Friends and Relations</i>
2008	1x	<i>One of the Fiercer Animals</i>
2005	M28	<i>Catz 22</i>
2005	W38	<i>Catz Me if You Can</i>
2005	M38	<i>Tony Hancox</i>
2003	1x	[unnamed]
1997	2x/-	<i>Tiddley Pom</i>

You may have noticed that *All Rabbit's Friends and Relations* reappears in the list of current boats. That's not entirely coincidental. One of the donors was Prof. David Morris (M.57) and in early January 1959 he was one of those tasked with taking delivery of the original and rowing it from London up to Oxford. Such adventures make an impression.

Rainfall and Torpids

I now have 39 years combined January+February rainfall measurements and in that period Torpids was cancelled 7 times, run as normal 20 times (i.e. more often than not!) and in restricted form the other 12 years. The plot below shows the data graphically, converting total rainfall to a daily average so that it can be compared with the year so far.



Torpids probability as a function of average rainfall in Jan+Feb. Coloured region shows extent of historical data, from a minimum of 0.5 mm/day (2023) to maximum 4.0 mm/day (2014), with a median value of 1.7 mm/day (2015). Solid line is current average for 2026 and dashed line is current Jan+Feb average in the absence of any further rain.

We're currently averaging 4.1 mm/day which is wetter than any year in the dataset and Torpids has never been run when the average is higher than 3.5 mm/day. So, to put a number on the appropriate level of despair, that would be 100%.

At best, i.e. if there were no more rain, we will average 2.7 mm/day, which gives ~35% probability of some form of racing, but still no chance of a full Torpids, which has never happened with more than 2.3 mm/day.

Having said all that, focussing purely on cumulative rainfall takes no account of distribution throughout the two months. If all the rain falls in January and none in February that's obviously a very different situation to the other way around. So, shall we say 80%?

Torpids 2026

Starting positions of our 1st Torpids
and 2025 changes in position

Men's Div II		Women's Div III	
1 L.M.H.	+2	1 St Peter's	-1
2 Magdalen	=	2 Merton	+7
3 Exeter	+2	3 St Hilda's	+4
4 St Hugh's	+2	4 St Catherine's	+1
5 Brasenose	+4	5 St John's	+1
6 Lincoln	+1	6 Linacre	+2
7 St Catherine's	-10	7 Wolfson II	-6
8 Worcester	+6	8 Queen's	+2
9 S.E.H.	-8	9 St Anne's	-13
10 Queen's	-2	10 University II	+1
11 Trinity	=	11 Worcester II	+1
12 St Peter's	=	12 Corpus Christi	-10

Torpids

But enough of cold, hard (and wet) statistics — it's time for some irrational optimism!

Torpids is scheduled for Wed-Sat, 4-7th March, which is the 7th week of term. Last year only the top 3 divisions raced (in 12 half-divisions). Whether full or half divisions, racing will start at 11:45 and finish, with Men's Div I this year, at 5:15. Wolfson head the men's divisions, followed by Oriel, while Pembroke and Christ Church are top of the women's.

Catz men had a rough time last year, dropping 10 places over 4 days; it would probably have been more were it not for a wayward swan resulting in a klaxon. The women, rowing in their new VIII, at least got Catz back into the bumping habit, registering the Boat Club's first bumps in Eights or Torpids since 2023. They actually bumped 3 crews but also got bumped twice in the process.

The table above shows the current starting positions of our 1st VIIIs. In the absence of any racing so far this term there's very little guide to current form, so we'll have to look back to last term's IWL races.

Lincoln men entered IWL-A, where they finished 6th, just 10s behind Oriel, so they were definitely fast then. Catz and Worcester only raced in IWL-B when Worcester finished 7th, 26s ahead of Catz. S.E.H. haven't been seen but Queen's, Trinity and St Peter's all seemed to be around similar speed to Catz in IWL-B.

As for Catz women, they were 3.5s behind St Hilda's in IWL-A, and St John's another 3s ahead of them, so it was all quite close back at the start of November. Merton were another 13s up on St John's, so probably won't feature in Catz' plans for

the week. Catz were the only one of these crews to race in IWL-B, although Queen's showed up for that one and beat Catz by 24s, so they may pop again in the rear-view mirror.

The men's 2nd Torpid are 6th in Div IV, their position at the end of 2023 when this division last raced (2024 Torpids was completely cancelled). Div V and below are the Rowing On divisions so they can keep that position until they actually get to race, or fail to enter.

Unlike the men, the women's 2nd Torpid *did* actually race last year. At least they qualified in Rowing On, before back came the rain and washed the lower divisions out. So they'll have to Row On again this year.

However, by this point I feel 'irrational' no longer sufficiently describes the levels of optimism required to sustain this line of speculation.



The Women's 1st Torpid last year.

Coming up ...

In the next issue the captains will provide their reports on the Boat Club activities over the term, which may or may not include actual rowing. However, I *will* continue with the events of 1876, covering the Boat Club's first bumping races, during which crews had to face 'snow, floods and hurricanes'.

Diary

22 Feb 2026	IWL-E
27 Feb 2026	Rowing On
4-7 Mar 2026	Torpids
7 Mar 2026	RS AGM (online)
3 Apr 2026	Lwt & Vet Boat Races
4 Apr 2026	The Boat Races
27-30 May 2026	Eights

Anu Dudhia