
ATHLUNKARD BOAT CLUB

by W.W. Gleeson

Though not by any means the oldest rowing club in Limerick, Athlunkard Boat Club has won more championship races than any other. They seemed to come as easy as A B C. But the beginnings of A.B.C. were not by any means easy. Away back in the September of 1897, when the club was only an idea in the minds of Jack Gilligan, Larry Shanahan and Bryan O'Connor, a lot of back-breaking work had to be accomplished before the shed that was the original club premises was built.

That was the first ambition they achieved on the Abbeyside. And from it their crews went out and achieved even greater ambitions on regatta courses throughout Ireland. Athlunkard has a glorious past.

How did it all begin? It was September, 1897, when a bunch of the Parish boys decided to start a boat club. Cash in hand amounted to 30/-, and with this Jack Gilligan, Larry Shanahan and Bryan O'Connor went to Ebrill's yard and bought a job lot of timber. In a short time a rectangular shed took shape.

One day, seeing the ungraceful building, the then Bishop of Limerick, Dr. O'Dwyer, suggested that a more worthy structure be erected. A subscription list was started, and a 150 yards stretch of swamp and refuse dump was converted into the beautifully laid-out grounds we know to-day.

Voluntary labour and the late summer of 1898 saw a one-story clubhouse and boathouse completed. It was called Athlunkard Boat Club. The founders were John Shanahan, Jack Gilligan, Jack, Thade, Bryan and Joe O'Connor, Pierce Hartney, Joe Hegarty, Larry Shanahan; William "Loo" Ahern, Denis Murnane, Richard Hartney, Jim Shanahan (afterwards Brother Sebastian, O.F.M.), Charlie Harty, Joe Gubbins, Stephen and John "Mullagh" Clancy and Tom Bernard.

Next problem was the provision of racing craft, pleasure boats, and oars. And here Limerick Boat Club was an early benefactor. Spontaneously, they presented a clinker eight and oars.

In 1899 the wearers of the blue and crimson competed at Limerick Regatta for the Quin Cup. And they won it, easily. It was their first victory, and club captain, Charley Harty, entered the crew for Trinity and the Metropolitan regattas. And there again the eight rowed away with the Dodder and Liffey Challenge Cups. The winning crews were made up of Bryan O'Connor, R. Hartney, T.O'Connor, Joe O'Connor, Paddy Healy, J. Hegarty, D. Griffin, Jim Healy, J. Hegarty, Jim Shanahan, D. Murnane, S. Clancy, J. Clancy, P. Byrnes (cox). J. deCourcy was coach. The following year at Limerick regatta the club won the Subscribers Cup, then an event for second senior eights.

At the dawn of this century the three-year-old club had registered wins at all venues in Ireland. The premier award came in 1913, when, at Limerick, the club won the I.A.R.U. Cup. Ten years later the great victory was repeated at Cork. In addition to countless trophies, A.B.C. have won all rowing championships; a record without equal in Southern Ireland.

Among the early stalwarts who did great work for the club on and off the water must be mentioned Messrs Cantrell, Costelloe, Earlie, Forde, Glynn, Griffin, Guerin, Halpin, Keane, McConkey, the O'Connors (Mike and Bryan), O'Shaughnessy, Quin, Quinlivan, Reid and Vaughn. And that famous octet of coxswains, Byrne, Clancy, Crowe, Henn, Howard, Keane, Quinlivan and Storan, that steered so many crews to victory.

Few of the old brigade are left who will remember the remarkable race for the Ladies Plate in 1904, when Alec and John McConkey, were rowing with T. Earlie (stk.), and J. Griffin (bow). Paddy Byrnes was cox, and he was so carried away in the excitement of the race that he stood up in the boat to give more force to his exhortations. It was the first time anything like it happened. And one of the club's prized possessions is a photograph of the actual event. The crew, of course, came from behind to win.

The club's earliest coaches were Limerickman John de

Courcy and an English professional coach, John Tarrier. In 1913 the club won the Union Cup. And, in repeating the victory in 1923, rowing history was made. Three of the 1913 crew, Morgan Costelloe, Stephen Clancy and Jim Keane, also rowed in the 1923 crew. Athlunkard is the only Limerick club that has won the Senior Union Cup twice.

In 1941, with Enda McNamara as stroke, the club won the Junior Union Cup, and in 1946 Teddy McLoughlin stroked the winning Maiden Union Cup crew. The Championship list was completed in 1952 when W. Henn stroked the winners of the Inter-Provincial Championships, leaving Athlunkard a comfortable margin as the premier Limerick club in class events.

Some outstanding officials included John Shanahan, Tom Bernard, James O'Farrell, Michael Hanley, James O'Mahony, James Keane, James Reidy, James O'Donovan, John Crowe, Michael O'Halloran and Dan O'Connor. And we must not forget honest John Roche, faithful and dutiful caretaker who looked after the club's property for over 30 years.

The new and spacious club premises were erected in 1925. On the walls hang many interesting and historical photographs and letters, all of which are highly valued by the members. And there, too, is a life-size photograph of the club's first patron and Life President, Father Denis Shanahan, P.P., St. Mary's. He was pastor when the club was founded and it was he who, when asked by a number of parishioners to re-establish the temperance society, replied:- "What do you want a temperance society for? Haven't you Athlunkard Boat Club?" (Yes; and to-day a 7-day licensed bar ... thrown in for good measure!)

And what of the present? Clubs, anymore than anyone else cannot live in the past, however much they may learn from it.

Came the year 1974 and with it a lean period for the wearers of the Blue and Crimson; stock was low; the once-bright lights had been dimmed - but not extinguished! A new generation had taken over.

A group of young Parish maidens, anxious to prove their prowess on the water, and thus help to keep the flag flying (in rowing parlance), joined up.

Under the captaincy of Johnny O'Dwyer, and tutored by coaches Willie Henn and Paddy O'Brien, it wasn't long until eights and fours, manned by ladies was a common sight on the Abbey river.

There were three grades: Senior Elite, Intermediate, Novice. Crews competed at the following regattas and "walked" away with major prizes on at least 24 occasions: Athlone, Blessington, Cappoquin, Craigavon, Dungarvon, Galway, In-sicarn, Islandbridge, Killarney, Marina (Cork), Tinarana.

Competing for the first time in the Senior Elite at Craigavon, Belfast, in 1979, the A.B.C. crews were unlucky to be beaten by two feet in the final by the local crew, Cragavon. A bare three weeks later, at the Marina, the result was reversed, the Limerick ladies winning by a distance.

The following made up the panel: Maxine Murphy, Joan Masterson, Eileen Meehan, Una O'Driscoll, Ann Marie Moore, Siobhan Reynolds (cox), Mary Moran (cox), Bernadette Mullins, Claire Murphy, Valerie Murphy, Mary McMahan, Miriam Murnane, Bernie Masterson, Yvonne Masterson, Bridie Cronin. Note: A new cox has been added: It's that wonder-boy Paul O'Driscoll.

And the prospects for 1981? Time alone will tell!

Such is the alpha of Athlunkard Boat Club, and there are many great things to come before the omega be written.

So, if Athlunkard is not the oldest club as rowing clubs go, no one can say it is not a vigorous one.