

The Regatta by Fred Davis

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edited by Strahan Soames

We have been pleased to receive from Alan Davis of Nutbourne the following account of an Emsworth Regatta. The date of the regatta is not stated but it must have been before 1905 because this is the year that Fred Davis, who wrote the account, emigrated to Canada; he died at Kamloops in British Columbia in 1955. His father, George Davis, was the miller at Nutbourne and at the Emsworth Quay Mill (now the Emsworth Slipper Sailing Club's headquarters) and had eight sons, who could well have supplied the complete crew of the 'Bulldog' – see below – in which the author rowed. George Davis later opened a bakery and provision shop in Queen Street, Emsworth, and then another in the Square.

On a lovely summer's day at the beginning of the century the folk from many hamlets with musical names in this delightful part of England were coming from Warblington, Woodmancote, Hambrook, Nutbourne and other places, travelling by country road, by sunken bramble-lined lanes and field paths. The gentlefolk and gaitered farmers mingled with the trippers who came by char-à-banc and train from the towns. As the visitors converged on Emsworth Square they were scrutinized by ranks of blue jerseyed fishermen, marching and countermarching in the space in front of the 'Black Dog'; but in stormy weather the fishermen would be parading in the lee of the flour mill down by the water where they could keep a watchful eye on their boats. Just below the 'Blue Bell' and across from the 'Sloop' sits Captain Boutell outside his door, who likes to let the children peer through his telescope.

The incoming tide is entering the little inner harbour as the throng leave South Street at the 'Anchor' and cross the wooden bridge by the mill to the embankment which encloses the millpond. Here many linger to watch the nearly naked urchins dive into the deep water above the floodgates to retrieve coins thrown into the water by the bountiful holiday makers. It was one of those days to be long remembered: there was the balmy air, and there was the marvel of an incoming tide raising and swinging the boats at their moorings.

The Committee and the judges were on board a buxom looking barge, with lines of gay bunting fluttering from her masthead to stem and stern, and with the fiddlers on her deck playing the music of popular songs. The first races were for the youngsters. The boys and girls who at other times searched the mudflats at low tide for cockles and winkles now raced over the seaweed covered stretches of viscous mud with squares of board looped over their feet. The action resembled snow shoeing, but the resulting appearance of the contestants was something better imagined than described.

The races for four oared boats came next: of the teams competing the most favoured were the crews from the Coast Guards and from the navy men on leave from Portsmouth. The other two teams were made up of husky Emsworth tradesmen and of five young fellows from the Sussex side of the county line, being respectively dubbed the Hampshire Hogs and the Sussex Bulldogs. The boats were to circle a barge anchored about a mile down the harbour, but the Bulldog crew knew that on the return leg it was not possible to steer a straight course because of a slight curve in the deep channel.

Bang! They're off! Soon the Coast Guards and the navy men have the lead with their powerful, precision-like strokes; but something then happens to the navy team.

The excitement and the drink have upset the balance of one of their oarsmen; he has caught a crab and bumped the oar of the next man. The boat swings to port towards the Coast Guards, who also swing to port and pull with all their power to keep clear. But it is too late: mingled with the noise of tangled oars and lurid oaths came the noise of a sharp crack of a Coast Guard's tangled oar; and the two most favoured boats were out of the race which had scarcely begun.

At the turning mark the Hampshire Hogs were leading; and, as seemed natural, the cox headed straight for the starting point. The Bulldogs however swung a little to starboard. Both boats ran into the mud, but there was a delay in the Hampshire boat before the crew realised that it would take all of them to drag the boat into deep water. There was no wasted time for the Bulldogs: the crew went sharply overboard two to a side, and the cox did a quick back-flip over the stern. Being in deeper water and nearer the channel they rushed the boat over the shallow spot, with their cox only climbing back in when he was waist deep.

The Hampshire men did their utmost to regain the lead. The sight of this final struggle, with the two coxes standing and swaying to pace their crews, brought cheers from the waving crowd until the Bulldogs were able to raise their oars in salute to the judges' barge as they finished barely a length ahead of their opponents.

As so often when there is not sufficient wind to enable the boats in sailing races to show



Wraight's advertising float in 1953



Patricia Fletcher was Emsworth's Water Carnival Queen in 1953

their qualities, the lethargic movements of the sailing boats and yachts in the light breeze created only mild interest; but the dun coloured sails of the fishing boats and the billowy whiteness of the yachts, as they dotted the sea, were outlined against the green shores of Hayling Island, providing a pleasing, restful sight.

Swimming and diving contests followed; and there was walking the greasy pole and the antics of the human seal pursued by his clowning hunters.

The carnival followed in the evening. Hundreds of lights were placed in coloured glasses round the millpond shore; and they glowed as an illuminated float bearing the Queen of the Carnival and her court led the procession of decorated boats and set pieces. The air of a popular march from a piano on the Queen's barge set the tone for a spontaneous outburst of applause.

After an interval the floats of the Advertising Competition emerged from their station behind the ancient malthouse. And for the finale a grand display of fireworks from boats moored inside the procession of floats. Rockets formed fiery, hissing arches in the darkness, while catherine wheels, fountains of fire and bursts of many coloured stars drew forth Ahs and Ohs from the young and old whose delighted faces framed the lozenge shaped millpond. And with the last flickering of the night lights, and with the flares exhausted, the crowds melted away.