

NORWICH FROSTBITE SAILING CLUB 75 YEARS OLD AND GOING STRONG.

On Sunday 7th December 2008 Norwich Frostbite SC held a special regatta to celebrate the club's 75 anniversary. It started when, on Friday 29th September 1933, four young men met at the Rifleman PH on the corner of Calvert Street and Cross Lane, a pub best remembered for its association with John Crome. The reason was a proposal by one of them, Ted Chamberlin, an EDP reporter, to race dinghies on the Yare during the winter.

The meetings continued on a weekly basis until the idea was tested on Sunday 19th November, using 12ft dinghies loaned by local boatyard owner Alfred Ward. Scarcely a month later the club was inaugurated at a dinner provided by Mrs Pitts, when Ted Chamberlin was elected Commodore, George Levine Vice Commodore and Treasurer, and Claude Heath Secretary. The proposed name was the Norwich Frostbite Sailing Club, the name apparently inspired by an American club which formed a dinghy section to sail through the winter and styled themselves "Frost-Bites". The subscription of one shilling (5p.) per week was used to keep the borrowed dinghies in good condition, and the primary objective of the club was, and remains, "To foster small boat sailing all year round and to bring racing within the reach of those of limited means". Thus was formed what is believed to be the first dedicated winter sailing club in Great Britain, if not the world.

In the early days racing was on a handicap basis, using a varied collection of boats, Races were started and finished on a line on the railway embankment until the present site was made available a little later. It was hardly a smooth start, the first race on 17th December involved three boats, two of which hit the mark (and according to the rules then in force had to retire, the third never got that far! Nonetheless the club continued to thrive, with Norfolk B7 Fay, now broken up, becoming the first Norfolk dinghy to join.

Initially the club did not confine itself to winter sailing. In 1935 they were responsible for reviving Coldham Hall Regatta, with which they are still associated and nowadays run in conjunction with Coldham Hall SC, and two years later revived Reedham Regatta. This was sailed again in 1938, but the 1939 date co-incided with the outbreak of war and suspension of all activity for 7 years. Following the resumption of sailing in 1946 the club continued to run summer events for some years, based on the mill near Reedham, but interest tailed off and the lease was surrendered in 1954. Thereafter, barring a couple of team matches annually, the club remained a "winter only" activity.

Curiously enough, Frostbites seem not to have caught the eye of the EDP's "Yachting Correspondent", the incomparable Frank Carrodus, until 29th January 1937, when, luxuriating in far more space than accorded his present day successor, he waxed lyrical:
"This Frostbite business over the Whitlingham course is a curious development. Not only is it a break into the close season but the wilder the weather the better

it seems to thrive, and from 6 members at its formation the club has grown to nearly 70....The members are an adventurous crowd and their spirits seem to rise defiantly in proportion to the howling of the wind and the downfall of rain and sleet. Col. And Mrs Richardson, who know a good deal about hard-weather sailing, have been over to investigate this queer paradoxical outcrop for themselves....Women spectators as well, some of whom had crewed in the summer racing, and one, Diana-like, led to the scene a remarkably fine Airedale. The club might well have extended an invitation to the observant engine-driver who in December raised an alarm at Thorpe Station having, as he thought, seen two men clinging on to a raft in the river. It was just a momentary glimpse of the last of four capsizes that day.

The younger section of the Norfolk Dinghy Club have much in common with the Frostbites...Mr James Clabburn was in the leading boat in three of the four races... and Mr Robert Bond was also a winner. In the heaviest gusts a good deal of water was shipped and, finding no baler aboard Mr Bond, as crew to Mr W H Crane, heroically used his shoe. That was in the true spirit of a Frostbiter”

Forty years later an anonymous Frostbiter commented “Well, we’ve been called some strange things in our time, such as masochists, but I never imagined we’d be thought of as a queer paradoxical outcrop”

By 1939 the Norfolk Dinghy had become one of the principal classes sailed, and the family ethos of the club was established. James (Jimmy) Clabburn continued to race Norfolk Dinghies, and collect a series of trophies until the end of the 1950s, and today his son John is racing a Norfolk. Tom Mackley raced B28 Mayfly to success in the late 1940s, and from 1975 his son David. has been the most successful Norfolk Dinghy helmsman in the club’s history, winning the principal trophies for all but three years since 1980, and in two of those the honours were shared. What’s more, David’s daughter Kate is following faithfully in the family tradition. Tom’s Norfolk, by the way, returned a couple of seasons ago under John Atkinson’s ownership. B1 Windy came to the club in 1936, owned by founder HT “Perci” Percival, and sailed for many years, until his untimely death, by his son Tom. Windy remains in the ownership of the Percival family and this year returned with Perci’s 6 year old grandson James crewing Matthew Thwaites. However the record must go to B53 Twinkle, owned and sailed between `1949 and 1969 by the Bentall family, she then passed to Jack Parfitt, who sailed her until the 1980s when she was sold to Neville Harrison, who in turn sold her to the present owner Jonathan Tyrrell, an unbroken. 60 years.

After the war Frostbites were able to buy the present site, thanks to Len Ramuz’ generosity, and the clubhouse was subsequently built, at a total cost of under £200. Frostbites thereby became one of the few local sailing clubs to own their clubhouse. The building has since been extended and improved, notably by the addition of a licensed bar in 1954, a car park was bought adjoining Yarmouth Road in 1962, and over the years boatsheds to accommodate some 30 dinghies have been built, some on land then owned by Norwich Union.. Most recently land has been acquired from Norwich Union, and the dyke has been quay

headed and piled for additional moorings on race days.

Team racing has long been an important part of Frostbites activities, starting in 1937 when Len and Alec Ramuz presented a trophy for a match between Frostbites and Thames Estuary YC, and early club films include scenes of this contest. The event survived until 1960, and thirteen years later the trophy was allocated to a match against Waveney and Oulton Broad YC. Founder F G Waters presented the Braconash Trophy for competition between Wells SC and Frostbites in 1952, and a year later RO Bond presented one for competition between NBYC and Frostbites. All these matches continue today, sailed over two legs, the Frostbite leg, of course, in Norfolk.. The record shows that Frostbites generally have the edge, except in the case of the NBYC match, but Sailing Secretary Vernon Penketh has several cunning plans to rectify that! Sadly, two matches have not survived, the first involving London Corinthian SC, and the other the Norwich-Rouen twinning match with St Georges YC of Rouen. Rouen presented a magnificent trophy for this event in 1966, won alternately by the two clubs, starting with Frostbites, until 1973, after which wins in 1974 and 1975 secured it for Frostbites outright. Norwich then came up trumps with an equally magnificent trophy, but, sadly, that was contested only four times, Frostbites winning three times, before St Georges YC folded, and, as yet, the club has found no suitable event to which they might be allocated.

Originally conceived as an "Allcomers" club, Frostbites have, perforce, become almost a "one-design" club. This is not through choice. For many years a variety of craft raced, including half-raters, Merlins, Swordfish, Nat 12, and of course the Enterprise, which from the fifties until about 7 years ago turned out a sizeable fleet. Enterprises, Wayfarers, and other dinghies are more than welcome, and races will be laid on for them. One constraint is the excessive growth of trees on the Whitlingham bank, which seriously impairs the sailing water, another the need for dredging, but, despite this, turnouts of Norfolk averaged 11 a year ago, and this season have frequently reached 15-16, with Rum Punch Sunday producing 22. The record is 24 Norfolk many years ago, and, in 1983, a total of 27 boats.

Many distinguished local sailors have sailed at Frostbites over the years, some briefly, others for longer times, and not a few are still members, and are seen in the clubhouse regularly, enjoying the antics of those afloat. Martin Broom, Raymond Jeckells, Mike Evans, John Butcher, Standley Bushell, are only 5 who were involved at some time or other in their sailing careers. Competitors range in age from 80, in the case of club President Alan Mitchell, to 6-year old Elise Carrington. The clubhouse is a vibrant meeting place during and after racing, with refreshments provided by the lady members and probably the most wallet-friendly bar in the county to boot, genially presided over by Commodore Paul Tegerdine and his "Mommadore" Pat. New members are always welcome, come down, or telephone 01603 456567.

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With thanks to NRSC for permission to use material from the history compiled by Paul Tegerdine, and to the Class Captain of the Norfolk Dinghy Class for permission to use material in the Class History "A Real Boat".