



NORWICH FROSTBITE SAILING CLUB - 75 YEARS OF WINTER SAILING

It all started 75 years ago on Friday, 29th September, 1933, when four young men, "working men", as the now-defunct Sunday Graphic put it, met in Charlie Pitts' pub, the Rifleman, for a discussion. The Rifleman was a 17th-century inn which stood at the corner of Cross Lane and Calvert Street, and its chief claim to fame was that it was the 'local' of Old Crome, the leader of the Norwich School of Painting.

The subject was a proposal by one of them, E.D.P. reporter Ted Chamberlin, to sail dinghies in the winter on the only day in the week that they were free — Sunday, and on the Yare, which had been ignored by yachtsmen for many years.

Each Friday this little band met to discuss their plans until on Sunday, 19th November, the idea was tried out. The 12ft dinghies used were lent free of charge by Alfred Ward, a local boatyard owner and World War I pilot.

The club was inaugurated on Thursday, 14th December, when eight sat down to a meal provided by Mrs. Pitts. Ted Chamberlin was elected Commodore, George Levine, Vice-Commodore and Treasurer, and Claude Heath was Secretary. Ted proposed the objects of the club, to be called the Norwich Frostbite Sailing Club. The subscription was one shilling a week, used to keep the borrowed dinghies in good trim.

Thus was formed the first provincial winter sailing club in England. The name, according to the Eastern Evening News, was borrowed from an American yacht club which formed a dinghy section to sail through the winter and called themselves "Frost-Bites".

Races were started from the railway embankment near the bridge and later from the present site. The course was laid on "Thorpe Broad" as it was called, for the first season's racing. It was not all plain sailing, however. Of the three boats sailing on 17th December, two hit the mark and retired - the third failed even to reach the mark. On January 17th, 1934, they had to reef; the next week a gale stopped racing and the following week racing was cancelled due to lack of wind. All this was from a muddy marsh bank without shelter, and it's not surprising that heavy rain would sometimes stop them sailing at all.

All the early club races were on a handicap basis, as a motley collection of boats were used. The original four dinghies were soon joined by a Snipe, a half-decker, two half-raters and a Norfolk Dinghy, Fay (B7) now sadly broken up. There were also two 14ft Cooper dinghies, owned by the club, but sailed only by those members who had subscribed to the cost. They were sold to club members in 1937 for £6 and £6.10s respectively. Windy (B1) joined the fleet in 1936.

In June, 1935 the club was responsible for reviving Coldham Hall Regatta which had lapsed for over 20 years. Summer racing was held at Reedham and also from there to Breydon and back. Len Ramuz, the President, used his cruiser. "Why Not", as committee boat, and occasionally races were held on Breydon as well. Reedham Regatta was successfully revived in 1937 and held again in 1938. The 1939 regatta was scheduled for September 3rd, but was cancelled due to the outbreak of war.

In 1938 the present club plot was leased from Len Ramuz for £8 a year with an option to buy, a slipway was dug out and the first boatsheds erected. The following year the club took the lease of an old drainage mill standing just downstream of Reedham Ferry for use as a summer headquarters. It was re-roofed, a verandah and french windows built, a slipway dug and a bridge over the mooring dyke - all for £56.19s.6d. The millwright provided an outside lavatory for an extra £2 - obviously not a specialist!

The club went into abeyance at the outbreak of war, although unofficial racing continued for a short time and the affairs of the club were left in the hands of H. T. Percival and George Levine. Things soon picked up after the war ended and in 1947 the club plot was purchased on generous terms. In 1949 it was piled - for £50! - and the present clubhouse erected, with material assistance from members, for only £135. More boatsheds were built and the club which was formed "to bring racing within the reach of those of limited means" was now the proud possessor of its own site and clubhouse - probably the only one in Broadland at that time.

Racing carried on at Reedham for several summers after the war, but gradually interest dropped off and the remainder of the lease was surrendered in 1954. Henceforth the Frostbites were to remain true to their name as winter sailors.

A licensed bar was included in 1954, the clubhouse was extended in 1958 and mains water and toilet facilities were installed in 1962." Later that year, the present car park was purchased and it is difficult to imagine today how we could manage without it. In 1975, the starters' box was raised to first floor level and the river end of the clubhouse was fully glazed.

Of the original founders, Claude Heath died in 1969 and his wife Greeba was elected President for a year as a tribute; George Levine died in 1979 and Ted Chamberlin, two years later. Ted was undoubtedly the moving spirit of the club's formation and many of its later activities. President in 1962, he held that office at his death at the age of 74. He was torpedoed in February, 1942, spending nine hours in the bitterly cold Atlantic and this must have affected his health.

His successor as President, Jack Parfitt, marked the club's 50th anniversary by presenting a 13ft. Dell Quay dory specially adapted for use as a rescue boat.

Over the next 25 years the Club continued to thrive but, as always, there were changes. The large Enterprise fleet slowly dwindled as helms moved to other classes, some into Norfolk's, but many into classes unsuitable for Frostbites' waters. Unfortunately, apart from short periods when Bitterns, Lasers and Splashes raced in the Mixed fleet, the fleet now has all but disappeared. The Norfolk's, however, have gone from strength to strength, and now about 30 of these traditional boats are berthed at the Club, with turnouts for racing requiring a split start most weekends.

Other external factors have had their effect. Concerns about silting up continue with little signs of any dredging occurring in our Reaches. Tree growth is also a problem, with the development of the Whitlingham Country Park opposite the Club, this has become a serious problem which no degree of lobbying and discussion seems to solve. A more recent problem has been the number of illegally moored live-aboards which line some of the banks on our racing reaches.

Whilst these problems keep the Committee busy the activities of the Club continue. Thoughts of improving or rebuilding the Clubhouse have taken up much Committee time and the possibility of this has become more probable with the purchase of land from Norwich Union (Aviva plc.) to the North of the Clubhouse, so that the whole corner from Clubhouse to Dyke and back to the Dyke slip is now Club owned including the land under the Boatsheds previously leased from Norwich Union.

Throughout this period the Club was lead by long-serving President, Jack Parfitt. Jack passed away in early 2006 and another Club stalwart, Alan Mitchell was elected as President.

The Frostbites, from such small beginnings 75 years ago, are still thriving and much respected. A flat calm or a frozen river, but very little else prevents the Frostbites from racing on winter Sundays and we look forward with confidence to the centenary celebrations.