

# The Duck Club

## Tina McDonald

Most Richmond residents are familiar with the town's Duck Club and are well aware of its charitable contributions to the town. Its annual Duck Race, now attracting visitors from far and wide, as well as residents in droves, is, for many, its most significant event, and one which appears to explain the club's curious name. However, the name comfortably pre-dates its famous race and how it came about is no less intriguing. Sadly, written records of the club's early days are scarce but something of its history can be pieced together from the memories and reminiscences of its members, passed down with pride over decades.

The club was started around 1900 by a group of small business owners and master tradesmen. Their aim, to provide an annual outing for members and a sports day for the children of the town, was financed by regularly collecting small amounts of money from members. Their halfpennies and farthings eventually mounted into useable sums. Early outings involved the hiring of an open top charabanc, its forty seats thus restricting club membership to the same number. The charabanc (from the French *char à bancs*, meaning carriage with wooden benches) originated in France in the early nineteenth century. Then horse-driven, the first one in England was presented to Queen Victoria by Louis Philippe of France in 1844. Motorised versions became available in the early 1900s. One early photograph of the club shows proud members alongside a horse-driven charabanc. However, a further photograph dated 1912 shows an improved motorised version outside the Buck Hotel in Newbiggin.

Early trips were probably to the nearest resort town, seaside or picturesque villages. Peter Harrison, a former member of the club, traced one photograph to Barnard Castle, a reasonable journey in a vehicle capable of achieving only 12 mph. These outings must have been a source of great



*An early club outing by charabanc*



*A club outing by motorised transport, 1910. Outside The Buck Inn, Newbiggin.*

pleasure at a time when annual paid leave was not yet established and days off were rare.

Motorised transport was generally used only by the wealthy, so the charabanc, with its exotic name must have seemed like luxury indeed, even though its wooden seats, solid tyres and primitive springs could hardly have provided a comfortable ride.

Legend has it that, as the charabanc proceeded along Newbiggin, the overhanging branches in this tree-lined road caused many cries of, "Duck!". This chorus would continue as the charabanc encountered low bridges and the inevitable overhanging branches of minor roads. Eventually, it was decided that the constant cries of "Duck!" having caused much hilarity but been of such real purpose, would be the ideal name for the club: so, Duck Club it became.

The Duck Race, which eventually followed, arrived in the same, largely incidental but amusing way. Two members of the club saw a consignment of rubber ducks for sale and bought it for the club on a whim. After all, it was called The Duck Club! George Tempest, secretary and treasurer at the time, was annoyed that they had acted without consultation, but suggested that the ducks could be sold at a pound each and thus make something of a profit for their charitable funds.

However, a better idea emerged and thus the famous Duck Race came into operation. The Duck Race was, and is, one of the Duck Club's main events of the year and takes place on the first May Bank Holiday. The two thousand ducks bought all those years ago have, of course, been added to over time; worn out ducks have been retired and modern replacements acquired.

Now, over two and a half thousand ducks are tipped into the River Swale from the Green Bridge, cheered on their way by the many visitors and residents, who never tire of this spectacular sight. Excited spectators follow the race along the course of the river, as ducks crash over the Falls to the finishing line at the Batts, near Station Bridge. Club members and volunteers use canoes, kayaks, nets and sticks to ensure that no duck gets stranded or abandoned. Money is raised through ticket sales, each ticket

with a corresponding duck, and generous prizes are awarded for 1st, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup>, with a consolation prize for the last duck home.

When the Town Council asked the Duck Club to take on responsibility for the Christmas lights, the club responded with characteristic enthusiasm and generosity, and the switching on of the lights has become another important event in Richmond's calendar. Large crowds gather in Friary Gardens for the official 'Switch On' by the mayor; people dress up in Christmas costumes, wear Santa hats and even Father Christmas puts in an appearance. The delighted faces of so many children must greatly gratify the Duck Club and its volunteers, who put in so much hard work and effort to make this event such a success.

Like much of the Duck Club's history, the acquisition of the lights has more than a little humour attached. In order to add to the council's lights, the Chamber of Trade bought a consignment of unwanted stock from Blackpool Corporation. The purchase, while not necessarily festive, provided an economic way of enhancing the town's display. Finding a parrot in the bargain pack of lights might have led some organisations to abandon that particular item, or sell it on. The Duck Club, with characteristic humour, instead incorporated it as part of their display. Though there was some initial reluctance from residents, it eventually became a firm and much loved feature, the more so when immortalised by Tom Carr in a specially written book, *The Christmas Parrot*. Such is the parrot's fame, she has been kidnapped on several occasions. As the Duck Club refuses ever to pay a ransom, and given the extreme fragility of this now elderly parrot, it is the club's fervent hope that no more kidnapping attempts will be made!

The Duck Race is one of the club's biggest earners and, remaining true to its original aim of providing for the children of the town, the club has extended its fundraising activities over time, using raffles, collecting boxes and sponsorship.

The now famous Sports Day is held each year at Richmond Cricket Club on August Bank Holiday. Children and, indeed, parents take part in traditional games and races, and spectators as well as contestants enjoy an afternoon of true community spirit and real family fun. An early trophy which used to be awarded is now stored for safe keeping in the Museum.



*Duck Club Sports Day, 1902*



*Duck Club Sports Day, twenty-first century*

All these events, which punctuate Richmond's calendar so well and provide the town's children with so much fun, stay true to the original aims. However, over the years their reach has extended far beyond providing entertainment for the children of the town (and, indeed, the parents) to supporting a great number of sporting activities, providing equipment, prizes, sportswear and trophies.

Throughout the years, junior football clubs have been presented with new strip, clubs have been awarded substantial amounts for improvements to pitches and contributions made to the costs of coaching. Junior Sports Awards are made to the best, all-round, male and female 14-16 year olds and recently the club gave a generous donation to Richmond Triathlon Club for the purchase of safety equipment. Indeed, last year saw over four thousand pounds given to worthy causes in the town and their promise is that no disadvantaged child will ever be overlooked.

When the news is full of the plight of so many children, throughout the country, who are denied sporting and recreational activities, we are lucky, indeed, to have in Richmond a dedicated organisation for whom the needs of young people are paramount. The Duck Club members work quietly but effectively to support them, while, at the same time, providing colour and entertainment for the rest of us. Early members would be proud to see how their organisation has developed to become such an intrinsic and worthwhile part of Richmond life.