

## The Battle for The Coneries 1980 – Bob Burton

When I joined Long Eaton Sailing Club, as it then was, we were based on the River Trent. Access was through Trent Meadows (a corporation tip) down onto the flood plain to the compound. Dinghies were taken from the compound to the river on their launching trolleys.

The river sailing was not always as good as one might imagine, although we were never troubled with ice, light winds could be much more of a problem as there was always a brisk current flowing and if you were not careful you could finish up at Beeston S.C. or Barton Island. Winter floods were also a problem as in those circumstances it could be downright dangerous.



From here on I can't remember the dates but the facts are clear. We were notified by what was then R.M.C. that it was their intention to drive an extension to the barge canal to start aggregate extraction in Southlands. This they duly did and separated us from our sailing water on the river. In an attempt to keep things alive we did at one point sail a full season on the barge canal. It was very narrow in places and not what you would call passable sailing water and led to some interesting rule changes in the form of Sailing Instructions. At this time most of the members had moved to other clubs and our membership was hardly into double figures.

After further negotiation the gravel company provided us with the pontoon, equipped at both ends with a ramp which could be raised and lowered by means of winches. How we never lost any fingers using that, remains a mystery, however we did lose several winch handles as when the brakes failed they flew off at a lethal speed. The logic of this was that we would load our dinghies via one ramp onto the pontoon, tow it across the barge canal and off load them via the second ramp onto the river bank thus giving us access to our original launching ramp. This worked after a fashion but was extremely hard work for what was supposedly a family sailing club.



We were then offered Clifton Pond as new sailing water. This on the face of it sounded ideal with access from Barton Lane however it was only used once. We attempted to hold a Graduate Open Meeting on it and found it to be mainly too shallow for sailing.

The next offer was the Coneries, but we were forbidden to use Barton Lane. Our boats were still at the old Trent Meadows compound so we would load up the rescue boats with all the marks, a blackboard, several flasks of tea and coffee, the first aid kit and off we would go the race officer down the barge canal and into the Coneries to set a course. The fleet would then set out to follow but would all have to capsize their boats under the footbridge, which crossed the canal. On arrival at the lagoon we would draw our boats up onto an island to have the race officer's briefing. After the racing we would have to do it all over again in reverse. Again this was hardly family sailing but the shallows were fewer. At the end of the summer series the Frostbite was cancelled and the club decided to grasp the nettle and move during the winter whilst at the same time seeking planning consent for the change of use of the lagoon to sailing water.

## The Move.

The move onto the Coneries is already well documented in pictures; however there were certain issues which had to be addressed. We had very few movable assets. Our compound fence was of concrete posts, concreted in, and wire. The posts were not reclaimable. Our clubhouse was constructed on an R.S.J. steel frame which was welded and concreted in, also not reclaimable. The only movable asset was Spicer's Cabin, a sectional timber building dating back to the club's formation as International Combustion Sailing Club, supported on timber sleepers, all of which were reclaimable.

Our first objective was to create a secure compound at the new site. We *acquired* some screwed pipe and angle iron along with several rolls of second hand chain link fencing. There followed many evenings of drilling and welding to convert the pipe into fence posts with angle cranks on the top. These were concreted in on a line creating a compound much smaller than the present one. Add to this, chain link fencing, three strands of barbed wire, a pair of sub station gates, also *acquired*, and "hey presto" we had a compound. This was achieved in blizzard conditions by a team including several eminent doctors, engineers etc. You can imagine how the conversation went.

Spicer's was carefully taken down and loaded onto the pontoon, thoughtfully provided by R.M.C. (Butterly Aggregates and now CEMEX), along with boat trailers and launching trolleys then towed down to the new site by the rescue boat. We had arrived! The first job was to provide ourselves with some shelter and so Spicer's was re-erected with the floor level marginally above the level of the rail line at the Erewash Bridge. This was to ensure we were above any flood level (unless most of Chilwell was under as well). We had heard that Severn and Trent had objected to our proposals on the grounds that we would be an obstruction on the Trent flood plain. Having constructed our new clubhouse we set about a launching ramp. This was pretty much where the present ramp is, but not as good. We excavated, with shovels, a ramp down to the waters edge and constructed a coffer dam to a depth of about two feet using old doors, turf, clay, in fact anything which might keep the water out. The ramp





was then concreted (*cement, aggregate, and mixer also acquired*) the area inside the coffer dam being drained by some very fit and enthusiastic, wet suited members forming a bucket chain. It lasted just long enough to get the concrete in. We had a ramp! The "opposition" then removed two boards from the weir, which controls the water level in the lagoons, which immediately made our ramp too short. Not only that but it exposed three sunken tree stumps in the way of our launching and recovery also exacerbating the problem of the shallows, a problem which stayed with us for many years. However, we had two boilerplates at the old location,



which were recovered and placed at the foot of the concrete ramp. Some sterling work with shovels and a Turfer moved the trees. We were in business again.

The recovery of the plates is worth a mention as the river was fairly high at this time and the plates were bolted down, underwater. It took one member on his knees up to his nose in the Trent with another member sitting on his shoulders to hold him down to get the bolts loose. We now had shelter, a compound, a launching ramp and a nightmare access but we could sail. Initially we sailed on both the North and South lagoons but with problems with shallows, and safety issues where boats were out of sight for considerable periods, resulted in the South lagoon being abandoned after the first season.



### **The Planning Application**

It was evident from the start that we would need planning permission for a change of use for the Coneries Lagoon. The original permission for gravel extraction involved infilling and return to arable use.

A comprehensive survey of the peninsular where we were going to base ourselves was carried out and a plan drawn up of our proposals. These were very simple and did not include a clubhouse as we simply didn't have the money to build one at that stage. So far we had done everything for next to nothing, which was pretty much what was in the kitty. The proposals included Spicer's, the ramp, dinghy parking, the fence, removal of the mounds, and a small brick and concrete bunker for petrol and engine storage. This was submitted with great optimism to Broxtowe Council for approval. What on earth could be wrong with that?

I would imagine that British Nuclear Fuels would have created less of a stir had they wished to build a power station. It was evident from the beginning that there was considerable opposition to our using that water, as several organisations registered their objections. Sadly most of it was based on misinformation that was freely available to anyone who would listen. Amongst the principal objectors were :-

- Attenborough Village Environmental Protection Association
- Severn and Trent Water Authority
- British Rail
- Trent Valley Bird Watchers
- Bramcote Women's Institute
- Broxtowe Highways Department

It was clear we had some work to do.

The planning authority called a public meeting which as I recall was extremely well attended where the objectors were invited to speak. Bramcote W.I. painted a vivid picture when they said that "water fowl would be cut in half by racing boats". Yes, that was actually said in the meeting. British Rail foresaw major safety issues arising from boats on trailers using the unmanned crossing on Barton Lane. The bird watchers were concerned that we would drive away the Blue Tern which nested on the islands. However we did modify our proposal to prohibit members from landing on the islands except in emergency and offering to arrange our sailing programme to avoid the nesting season. Broxtowe Highways Dept objected on the grounds that cars towing boat trailers would create a hazard at the Barton Lane, Chilwell Road Junction. As I recall we were not permitted to respond.

Two of the then committee arranged some evening meetings with the main objectors to try to explain our aims and objectives and what we were really about.

We met a local Councillor at his home in Attenborough who listened courteously as we explained that we would provide a sporting facility within the area, which was then not then available. We intended to provide teaching and training for those who wished to use the facility and to provide sailing experience to disabled children, (we did have some excellent Mencap days in the months that followed). It has to be said that he did not appear to be opposed to our proposals but neither was he enthusiastic. He did raise the unmanned crossing issue.

Our next meeting was with an officer of Attenborough Village Environmental Association who's name escapes me.

Here we did the same talk but the reception was much less cordial. We were informed that water samples had been taken and were found to contain traces of faeces, which of course would present a health risk. We retired bruised but not yet beaten. We subsequently had water samples taken and tested. The Coneries water exceeded the E.U. requirements for recreational water.

Prior to the planning meeting to resolve the application the council decided to have a site meeting where the local Councillor not only narrowly escaped a drenching, but spoke against the proposal. At the next planning meeting the application was rejected.

Meanwhile sailing continued on the Coneries as we believed that we could use the venue up to 22 times a year without planning consent. So we did, give or take a hundred or so uses (who's counting).

We then lodged an appeal with the Department of the Environment under Michael Heseltine (bless him) who found in our favour. Their judgement was that we should sail for a period of 12 months to establish the environmental impact, and of course there was none. At this point the serious opposition seemed to melt away. Had we won???? We still had to gain access down the tip road from Trent Meadows as we could not use Barton Lane, but even that objection was eventually withdrawn when the new junction with Chilwell Road was planned.

## The Clubhouse

Our membership had slowly been rising and it was clear that Spicer's was now totally inadequate for our needs. The problem was that we had no funds. We were already negotiating a rent holiday with our landlords, Butterly Aggregates and we were unlikely to get planning consent to build anything on the flood plane anyway. Probably, after the last battle, we were unlikely to get planning permission to build anything. The committee wrestled with the problem for several months whilst we sought Sports Council Grants etc. then someone had the bright idea of building a floating clubhouse (no planning permission required).

A sketch was produced (it's still in the archives) and we took it to several narrow boat constructors to obtain prices. Eventually our financial wizards on the committee decided we could afford it with grants from the Sports Council and Broxtowe Council so a contract was entered into. The barge was constructed, delivered by road and lifted in to the Coneries. A very important milestone for the club but a fairly unremarkable event except that it nearly took the crane into the pond with it. We now had a floating tin box. Now the scrounging department really came into its own, we *acquired* timber for the landing stages, Tong & Groove boarding for the roof, a maple dance floor was obtained from a golf club for the walls. Rackhams in Birmingham were refurbishing their coffee bar so here came the green leather seats and stools. We came across some teak which made the handrails and some plywood and carpet tiles for the floor. We also *acquired* some ship lap cladding and framing which one member with the appropriate skills turned into a bar. Take all of this, mix with an enthusiastic membership and we had a clubhouse. Fitting out cost next to nothing.

Having been invited back to the club after many years it is a delight to see how subsequent committees and membership have taken the ball and run with it to make the club what it is now. It really is what we had in mind at the beginning and it really was worth doing. Don't run away with the idea that it was all hard graft, trial and tribulation. There was some of that but I can say without doubt we enjoyed every minute of it and we were not going to let them win.

