

Malcolm's Memories

I first became aware of the Society during the early 1950's. My father used to take me along to the lake on an August Bank Holiday to see the boats. In 1952 I started at St.Albans Boy's Grammar School in Brampton road. I lived in Radlett and got to school by train. One of the routes to school from the City Station took me past a model shop (An offshoot of a plumbing shop I seem to remember). Kiel Kraft "Flying Scale" kits were bought and made – very few flew well and most crashed. At that time the "All Britain Rally" at the Handley Page aerodrome Radlett (actually in Park Street/Frogmore) was an annual event and I used to be taken there in the morning, and collected in the evening. I used to really enjoy seeing all the different types of model planes being flown. One thing I did notice was that the prevailing wind blew from the airfield, over the main St.Pancras line and on over some gravel pits the far side. There was a continuous stream of people going over the fence, crossing the railway and disappearing into the gravel pits – and there never seemed to be nearly as many coming back. I have never liked running or climbing trees, and my dad suggested to me that model boats would be a better bet as they took time to sink, and I would be more likely to be able to get them back.

So I made a boat- a "Spraymaster" which was an open speedboat about 2 feet long and powered with an ED Racer. This was an air cooled diesel engine of 2.5cc which I converted to a marine version used our newly acquired lathe to make a water jacket and flywheel. About this time the school held a summer fete. I can still remember going up the stairs to the art room and finding lots of steam engines on a board all running on compressed air. There were probably other models, but it was the moving bits that caught my imagination. In charge was Bert Saunders (father of David) and he put up with me for the whole afternoon asking question (no doubt many of them dumb). The result was that I joined the very next meeting.

At that time the Society used to meet in Thrales Café just by the old town hall. Peter Lambert was secretary, and Bert Saunders was chairman. I discovered a friendly bunch only too willing to help a raw young beginner. I soon realised that there were a number of leading lights in the hydroplane world among the members.

Stan Clifford who, pre WW2 had run the well known "Chatterbox" series of class A flash steam hydros was now competing with "Polyester". As the name suggests, this was a fibreglass boat. It was of much more streamlined shape, incorporating the twin sponsons in a single moulding. It had a 30cc two-stroke glo-plug engine of Stan's own design, and unusually for those days used a reed valve. For the uninitiated, this type of valve is operated by the suction produced in the crankcase rather than being mechanically driven. The result is that the engine will run in either direction. I well remember one occasion when the engine having been started, gave a pop, then continued revving hard. The propeller was shoved into the water as usual, but instead of a huge rooster tail, the two surprised operators were drenched – the pop was the engine stopping and then starting in reverse.

Ken Hyder ran a C restricted class hydro – that was for commercially made engines up to 10cc. At that time he was running "Slipper 5" which was the British record holder at just over 70 mph. In those days, the competitor had to nominate half, one and a half or two and a half laps before timing was started. Ken always nominated two and a half, and for two laps the boat would trundle round probably at about 30 mph much to the derision of the spectating public. During the next half lap it appeared to almost throw itself out of the water, and as the timing started it was up to 70+ mph. Very spectacular and accompanied by lots of OOs and AHAs from said public.

Dick Phillips had a C class hydro. C class was for home made engines up to 10cc. Dick's boat "Foz2" had a copy of a Dooling 61 engine, and held the British record also at just over 70 mph.

Both Dick and Ken could be relied upon to produce competitive runs and usually it was one or the other who ended up with the fastest run of the day.



Photo taken in the late 1950's at Verulamium showing L to R
Dick Phillips with *Foz 2*
Stan Clifford and *Polyester*
Ken Hyder holding *Slipper 5*
Frank Waterton with *Tally Ho*

Memories of two other boats stick in my mind. Both were from visiting competitors. There was a twin hulled C class boat, "Babs"? that year after year always seemed to manage to take off and loop the loop, always ending in diving below the surface except on one occasion where it continued to run and then performed another loop a couple of laps later. The other was a B class hydro belonging to Dr.Daley (I've probably spelt that wrong). He had a small "flag" geared down from the engine at 250:1 so he could check how fast the engine was revving during the run.

One of our wealthier members, Frank Kroll ("Old King Kroll" as he was known in our household) apart from being an excellent engineer was also interested in photography. When hydroplanes were due to be run, he would take a table out beyond the circle, place a chair and tripod mounted camera on it and photograph the hydros as they passed in front of their owner (in those days, the person running the hydro would stay in the water just outside the circle, and when the boat had finished it's run, would hold out a stick to knock the shut-off valve closed). The photos he produced were superb – blown up to about A4 size they would show the hydroplane in front of the owner, and behind it a rising line of water drops thrown up as each blade of the prop came out of the water. This was



presented with the comment that "you know the length of the boat, the pitch of the prop and you can measure the distance between the drops of water and determine the slip. You also know how fast it was going and so can work out how fast the engine is going" All useful information. The photo shows Ken Hyder's Slipper 5 at around the 70mph mark.

Another member who had a superb piece of engineering hidden away in his straight running launch was Frank Waterton. The boat was a hard chine cabin launch with a stepped hull about 4½ feet long

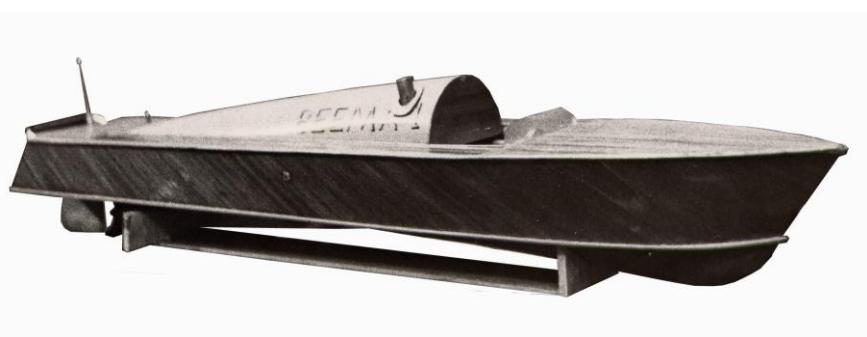
with a 30cc 6 cylinder twin overhead camshaft engine in it – looked just like a miniature Jaguar engine. He gave a talk about it one evening, and someone commented that one big end looked rather close to the oil pump. “There’s two thou clearance! What do you want?” was the response. It was described in a series of three articles in the Model Engineer during June and July 1953. He also ran an A class hydroplane “Tally Ho” which although very reliable and fast could never quite manage to beat “Polyester”.

In the '50's the small lake was the "paddling pool", and we were not allowed to use it for model boats, so all the regattas were run on the large lake between the two islands. The straight running course was run across the lake, the start line being on the opposite side to the river. Just beyond the finish line were the "catchers". Occasionally a boat would get away and continue to the opposite concrete bank – this could be quite damaging, but usually a member of the spectating public would manage to stop it. Peter Lambert used to run "Sea Devil" in the straight running and nomination events. Sea Devil was a destroyer somewhat over five foot long and heavy! Powered by a Stuart Double 10 with a petrol fired Scott boiler working at about 120 psi. It was an awesome machine tearing along with the stern almost below the water and followed by a huge wave. Stopping this animal needed a special technique – using both hands, the bows were shoved down to bring up the stern otherwise the following wave would inundate it. Occasionally Sea Devil would evade the catchers. Now it was down to a member of the public to stop it. Usually at the last moment they realised that a hand put in front of the bow was not a good idea, once, however, a trip to hospital was needed to mend a broken hand. For several years I used to run the bank to catch wayward craft. On one occasion I well remember diving onto my stomach between the erstwhile catcher's legs to stop Sea Devil.

During the summer months some of us would meet at the lakeside during a Wednesday evening, sometimes to run hydroplanes and sometimes to practice straight running. On one of the steering evenings, Len Curtis (a stalwart of the society who was always amongst the awards) just could not seem to score a bull. Standing behind him I could see that as he released his boat, it kicked slightly sideways. Being young and full of confidence, I asked if I could have a go. “OK” So rather than line up carefully and releasing from stationary, I gave a good push aiming for the bull – and got it! This was repeated twice more. That was it. I never got to touch that boat again. On one of the hydro evenings, Stan Clifford was trying out “Polyester”. 90mph – wow! 20 faster than ever before. During the following runs, the speed gradually dropped to the normal 70, with no clue as to why that wonderful run had happened.

As you may gather, most of my interest was with the boating side of the society. However I did get the chance to visit the Puffing Field in about 1957. Each year, the owner, Mr Ward, invited society members to come and play at his track. At that time, the overpowering laurels now around the station area were not in evidence, and I remember the whole area being much more open. What sticks out in my memory is putting out fires around the track and Norman Thrale taking a “pricker” from someone – hot end first and not swearing – he must have had cast iron fingers!

During these first few years with the society, the “Spraymaster” gave way to a Vic Smeed designed cabin cruiser which eventually had the cabin replaced by a streamlined top – see photo. I also managed to build three IC engines – all of which ran after a fashion.



At that time, the Model Engineering Exhibition was held at the new Horticultural Halls, and for a couple of years the Society had a stand there. I can't remember too much about them apart from the fact that the press of the crowd was so great at one time that I was actually lifted off my feet and carried a yard or two before gratefully returning to earth.

By now I had passed my driving test, and used to drive Ken Hyder's "Bahdal" van transporting members' boats to various regattas. It may have only been a Commer van based on the Hillman Minx, but it was the height of luxury and performance compared with the converted Morris 8 Post Office van of my fathers that I had learnt in.

By 1959 I had my own car and became interested in motor sport. The following year I bought an MG TD, joined a motor club and started competing. I'm afraid that the modelling took a back seat until the late seventies. By that time I was married and living in Bricket Wood. Motor sport was too expensive, I had been making a bit of silver and gold jewellery for a few years, bought a lathe with the proceeds and model engineering was calling again.

So I started building a 5" gauge "Boxhill". Before long, I decided I should rejoin the St.Albans Society again. A phone call to Peter Lambert (how did I know he was still secretary?) elicited the information that they still met on a Wednesday evening, but now in St.Michaels church hall. Needless to say, I was at the following meeting, discovered that not only was Peter still secretary, but Bert Saunders was still in the Chair. I was greeted as though I had never left (rude comments about the beard notwithstanding), it was wonderful. On the way home to Bricket Wood that evening, I realised that I was following a sportingly driven VW Beetle which I was pretty certain had a society member in it. This later transpired to be Jim Brassett who also lived in Bricket Wood.

Jim has a lot to answer for. He introduced me to steam boats, and since that time, Boxhill hasn't progressed at all. I also discovered that radio control was now cheap and reliable and I became hooked.

So during the intervening 30 or so years the Society had progressed. The monthly gazette was well established; an exhibition was being held each year, and a permanent track had just been built at St.Georges School in Harpenden.

After a few years, the suggestion was made to exhibit as one of the club stands at the Model Engineer exhibition which at that time was being held at Wembley Conference centre. At that time, many clubs just seemed to pile as much onto their stands as possible, so we made the decision that fewer exhibits of high quality and covering the whole range of members' interests would be displayed. We also attempted to supply good information about each model, and encouraged those manning the stand to welcome the punters and be as helpful as possible. All this went down well with the organisers, and over the years we have won the shield for best engineering club stand on numerous occasions.

The Gazette progressed from the duplicated format of the 70's following the various technological changes to high standard desktop publishing methods. That has now been superseded due to increasing production and postage costs by the present website.

Unfortunately our track at St.Georges had to be dismantled as the school wanted the land for building, but the Puffing Park then became available through the generous permission of the present owner.

The exhibition venue has moved from Harpenden Public hall via Marconi's, St.Albans Further Education College in the Hatfield Road, Marlborough School, Francis Bacon School to its present location at Townsend Church of England School.