

Punting As A Water Sport *by Peter Brooks*

In the 1970s I undertook day release training to be an MLSO (Medical Laboratory Scientific Officer) in Oxford.

Part of that training took place at what was then OxPoly (Headington Polytechnic), and the course had a government mandated section that was called General Studies, supposedly designed to "balance" our vocational training with something that was not "scientific".

Every term we had what was pompously called a General Studies One Day Conference. To us, it was often an opportunity to take a much needed day off.

One particular term, the lecturer responsible decided to dilute the serious stuff (a studious walk around some of the major college grounds in Oxford city centre) with some relaxation (lunch at the Turf Tavern, followed by an afternoon punting on the river Cherwell at Magdalen Bridge).

The juxtaposition of an alcohol laden pub snack followed by boating on a short stretch of water littered with overhanging tree branches and invisible underwater root systems was, it transpired, a recipe for catastrophe (but not, luckily, disaster).

The day began well enough. Our group of about 18 people, a mix of 20 to 40 year olds, single and married, men and women, were generally already conversant with the history of Oxford and its renowned colleges - we lived and worked in the surrounding area, after all - but we were still curious enough to see if there might be some aspect about which we didn't know, something to whet our appetite for tidbits of the "not-many-people-know-this-but" kind.

We were really looking forward to going punting. This was probably the first time that a conference day was actually attractive and not a total chore.

Quite why the lecturer chose to offer us the opportunity to punt - and at his expense, too - I will probably never know. I do know that by the end of the afternoon he and his wallet had reason to regret the largesse.

Maybe it was because the morning was dull and boring and seemed to drag on for ever, as dry tours of old buildings can, but by the time lunchtime came around we were all

eager for a drink. We walked from our last tour point to the Turf Tavern, an historic inn that still serves mead and mulled wine, but which is tucked away behind so many back alleys that you need to be sober to find your way in.

Probably because we needed something to raise our spirits, the first thing most of us did was to down some spirits. On an empty stomach that is not the smartest of choices. Two friends and I downed a pint of beer each, and looked at the choices for a meal. We weren't hungry, so we continued with the malt sandwiches.

At first we weren't aware of any major change in our abilities, as is often the case with a dose of alcohol. Punting still looked an attractive option, even though few of us had much experience (especially me). Walking from the Turf to Magdalen Bridge didn't seem to present any problems - we weren't weaving all over the place, there was no raucous singing and nobody got lost on the trip out through the alleyways.

I'd never been punting from the bridge before, and now that I saw the river up close (instead of from the road overhead) it looked the very epitome of the Oxford idyll: calm, quiet water, cool trees forming a light green canopy overhead, screening the warm sun so that it wasn't intrusive and muffling the low growls from the traffic above. The only sounds were those of the creaking of wood on wood, the light splashing of paddles and the occasional voices in the distance. This was going to be very relaxing.

Mike, Dave and I selected our punt, and with what was probably exaggerated care we climbed aboard. Tricky things, punts. They have this disconcerting tendency to move away from you just as you put your trust in them. Especially when the alcohol is taking effect.

Somehow the others seemed to sense that it would be better if I took the pole. Either way, I ended up with it. Mike took the paddle and sat in the prow, I stood at the stern proudly holding my badge of office and Dave sat amidships to balance the weight in the vessel. Jolly boating, what?

The first thrust was easy, largely because the boatman who'd held the punt while we

stepped precariously into it also gave us a hefty shove off.

Now when I say I had some punting experience, what I mean is I had once sat in a punt while someone else did all the work. In my new role as Chief Pole Pusher I soon discovered a few Punting Facts Of Life - I'll call them Piffles.

One Piffle is that there's a reason dashing young men poling punts do so in open shirts with sleeves rolled up rather than in a jacket and tie (as I was - in fact, we all were; this was technically a working day, after all).

The process of handling the pole - running it through your hands as you lift it out of the river to make a fresh prod into the riverbed - has the effect of scraping off the considerable amount of water it has gathered on its surface, and because of gravity, that water carefully channels itself along your wrists and arms and up inside any rolled down sleeves you happen to possess at the time.

Since the water performs this almost invisible feat every time you move the pole in and out of the river, in a very short space of time any sleeves become absolutely drenched and so, by association, does the wearer. The water even follows the curve of your armpit and then proceeds down your torso towards your trouser legs. This may be why punting is largely a warm weather pastime.

Another Piffle is that the person holding the paddle needs to be reasonably sober. Mike was reasonably drunk, and demonstrated his state by falling in the river, having caught his paddle on something and having dulled his reflexes sufficiently that he was unable to let go of it in time to stop himself following it.

What was more interesting was that he failed to learn from this lesson and, having awkwardly climbed back on board - bringing considerable quantities of water with him - he promptly fell back in again as the paddle got caught up again.

Oh, how we laughed. But we didn't learn from his experience either - or at least I didn't. The reason Mike's paddle was being snatched so often was that there was a network of tree roots under the water's surface.

Yet another Piffle relates to the coincidence of an underwater tree root and an

overhanging tree branch, which doesn't really affect paddlers as much as it affects Chief Pole Pushers.

Shortly after Mike fell in for the second time and then decided he'd had enough of paddling, I moved to the prow and attempted to control the punt from there. I gave the pole a firm push into the riverbed and then tried to lift it up for the next push. It got caught up in the roots below and the branches overhead and was now locked solidly in position.

Thanks to laws relating to momentum and bodies in motion, the punt was anything but locked in position, and since my reflexes were also dulled, I forgot to let go of the pole and found myself running from one end of the punt to the other, still gripping the useless piece of wood, and trying to brake the boat with my feet. I think I stepped on both Mike and Dave in the process.

But I did, thankfully, manage to bring the craft to a halt before I shot off the end like a character in a Warner Brothers' cartoon. I had visions of being stranded in the middle of the river clinging to the pole as it slowly toppled over under my weight and plunged me into the water.

We made it back to the jetty without further incident, but the owners of the punt were not at all pleased. Awash with inches of muddy water, the boat had to be taken out of service for the rest of the afternoon to drain and dry out before it could be used again.

Piffle number four then presented itself. The deposit that the lecturer had paid as insurance against damage or loss was forfeited, which didn't please him or us. We offered to reimburse him fully but for some reason he insisted on taking the loss alone.

Maybe he'd seen our escapade and he felt the laughter we'd afforded him was worth the price he paid.

I'd like to think that he realised we'd been taught a lesson in life and his lost deposit was a small price to pay for that.

But I don't think anyone is that altruistic.