

Pauline Churcher (née Baillie Reynolds)

Getting into rowing

“She took one look at how tall I was, marched me down to the boat club and told me that I wanted to row,” Pauline remembers.

Her first win was possibly in a private match against King’s College London in November 1954 when she was in RUWBC’s second four, but she also remembers winning the Style Cup that was awarded by the university to the best freshers crew to ensure good technique early on, to which she has always attributed the club’s reputation for rowing well. Incidentally, the University Women’s Rowing Association regatta also offered a Style Cup and she feels that it’s an idea which should be used more today.

In 1955 she gained an official Reading University ‘blazer’, and noted excitedly in her rowing album that this was, “The first time I’ve had colours!” The back story to this was that she had hardly even done any sport at school because she had been “a rather poorly sort of child who wore glasses and couldn’t run very well,” according to an interview with her published in *The Times* (24 June 1999) in which she added, “My mother died of pneumonia and at the end of the war I also had it, so my father was horrified when I took up rowing.” In 1958 she gained a Reading ‘shell’ (the equivalent of a blue from Oxford or Cambridge, and so named because there are shells in the University’s coat of arms).

PBR (far right) and some of her RUWBC crewmates en route to Durham in 1958 where they won the University Women’s Rowing Association Fours Championship. Her Morris Traveller car ‘Virginia’ went on to carry oars and oarswomen all over Britain and abroad. (Photo: Pauline Churcher’s personal collection.)

She also did a little sculling whilst at university and remembers doing one sculling race there, which she won, although admits that it was against a cox. “It worked quite well when I got both blades in the water at the same time and could pull,” she remembers. Her UU crewmate Frances Bigg, who kept detailed notes of all the club’s activities, recorded a similarly tentative performance at Reading Working Men’s Regatta in August 1959:

[The entire regatta] was an incredible affair, the programme bore no relation to the entries at all. The secretary would love to know who entered two novice scullers from the club because she certainly didn’t...PBR thought it a pity to waste the novice entries so lightheartedly entered the sculls. To her dismay she won the heat and had to do it again. In the final none of the three scullers could steer and collided twice with great skill. The starters were a trifle irate by this time and were even more so when they found that PBR and Grace Etherington had changed stakeboats and were quite incapable of getting back on their own. In a fury, they were restarted about 50 yards from the finishing line which PBR crossed broadside on as she was terrified of falling in if she used both hands!

After five years rowing at Reading (she stayed on to do a Masters’ degree which, she says, she never wrote up because she spent too much time rowing), Pauline moved to London in the Autumn of 1959 to do teacher training and joined the United Universities Women’s BC .

She was in the right place at the right time for her rowing career to take off.(<https://rowingstory.wordpress.com/stuff/united-universities-womens-boat-club/>)

International career

The United Universities group were a massive presence in domestic and international British women's rowing throughout the 1960s but particularly from 1960-1965, providing a level of continuity in GB crews that is rarely even achieved today in larger boats, with Pauline, Barbara Philipson, Jill Ferguson, Marrian Yates and cox Margaret 'Mac' McKendrick either as 'outside four' of the eight or in the coxed four on five occasions.

Her best memory of rowing in GB crews is from one of their pre-Championships training camps: *We had a habit of using this scouts hall or whatever as a basis of operations and putting camp beds up there and so on, so we were practically on top of the river. And we kept the boat in Weybridge Ladies overnight. Frank [Harry] was coming to take us for an outing. And we'd been down to the bottom of the cut and were coming back and wanted to do a start, a start and 10. And cox gave us the start and it was one of those times when everything is EXACTLY right and we just did a start and 10 and cox said, 'Easy all,' and we sat just letting the boat run and then cox said, 'Drop,' and we were under the bridge, and there was Mr Harry looking over the rail at us and saying, 'That was probably the best bit of rowing we'd ever done.' But unfortunately we couldn't repeat it at suitable moments.*

Later rowing

She continued to row at club and veteran level for many years after retiring from international competition, becoming a stalwart (and Vice-President) of Thames RC after UU merged with that club in 1973.

Rowing administration

Despite her pioneering international rowing activities, Pauline is probably best known as a rowing administrator – her off-water career has certainly been much longer than her on-water one was.

She freely admits that she was only able to do as much as she did in rowing administration because of the benevolence of her employers; although her early career had been as a history teacher, she had later gone to work at Kew Gardens, where she became the directors' PA. As she describes it, she wasn't overburdened with things to do, and the directors were perfectly happy for her to spend chunks of her working day on rowing matters so long as she got their work done first. The value of 'hidden' sponsorship of rowing in Britain by all sorts of employers cannot be underestimated!

Pauline was also an **umpire** for 36 years from 1968-2004. When she gained her multi-lane endorsement in 1978 she remembers being 'tested' at the National Championships – although she was scheduled to take an 'easy' race between three coxed fours (coxed boats generally staying neatly in lane in buoyed courses), she was told to swap with a well-known and highly experienced male umpire who was down to cover six J16 pairs (who can be more directionally

challenged and are quite capable of getting out of lane quickly). Pauline handled them fine, “It was just a case of zooming over to two crews who are getting too close and glaring at them till they straightened out”, she recalls, but was highly amused to discover later that in the so-called easy race, two of the coxed fours had clashed and the third had hit the bank. “Mind you,” she adds, “After 11am, gin had quite an effect on him.” (NB this story carries no suggestion that any umpire would perform their duties under the influence of alcohol nowadays.)



Pauline has a 'Marilyn Monroe moment' whilst umpiring at an early Henley Women's Regatta (raced downstream in 1988-1990). (Photo © John Shore.)

When Pauline took her FISA umpire exam in Hazewinkel 1985 she was put through the usual 'tabletop exercise'. The Austrian examiner queried why she put had flag up vertically after warning crews. She explained that even though this wasn't in the rules, it was the practice in Britain, because it acknowledged that the crew had responded. But she thought she'd "blown it," and Bernard said she looked green when he came out. However, she passed, and became Britain's first female FISA-umpire.

One of her more traumatic umpiring experiences was at Ghent, where it's done from cars but there were so many bicycles following the race she couldn't see the crew through them and had to stand up and look through sunroof of the car. (NB this story carries no suggestion that Ghent regatta encourages or permits unsafe umpiring practices.)

She became Chair of the **Women's Rowing Committee** from 1976 and also a **Selector**, which she didn't enjoy and hadn't actually wanted to do but took it on because she realised that someone needed to when Eleanor Lester stepped down. It got very difficult once the squad started, she says, because there were no rules specifying what the athletes had to do to be selected, and she was very relieved when she could give it up.

In 1987 Pauline was awarded the ARA Medal of Honour for services to rowing and in 1988 was one of the founding group that launched Henley Women's Regatta.

Pauline died in 2023, some 22 years after her husband Bernard.

