

A Blue Plaque for Abel Beesley at 4 Upper Fisher Row

26th June 2021

Abel Beesley was born on 24th May 1851 at 16 Upper Fisher Row. Other than for a 20yr spell at 28 Middle Fisher Row, Abel lived all his life here in Upper Fisher Row.

Abel was born at a time when waterway trades were in decline. The arrival of the railways during the 1840s and 1850s had a devastating impact. Trains were not only able to transport goods more quickly than by barge but they also brought regular and plentiful supplies of sea fish.

Upper Fisher Row therefore, suffered a double whammy since both boat and fishing trades were badly affected. Many families, who for generations had depended on water trades, moved away.

So, with the traditional trades having been lost, any thought Abel might have had of becoming a fisherman like his father or a bargeman like his grandfather was unrealistic, and he became a waterman for the University Humane Society.

The coming of the railways, however, had an upside for Abel. The decline of trade meant that barges and leisure activities no longer competed for access to the rivers. As a result, there was a rapid increase in pleasure traffic in the 1870s and 1880s and punting became hugely popular. Punt racing also became a recognised sport at this time.

Because of his growing reputation, undergraduates sought punting lessons from Abel. His most famous pupil was William Grenfell (later Lord Desborough) and the two had many fine battles with each other. This was no mean feat since Grenfell was a superb all-round athlete. Grenfell not only became English Amateur Punting Champion, but also: rowed in the boat race; climbed the Matterhorn three times; twice swam the Niagara rapids; won an Olympic silver medal for fencing; etc.

The reason we're here today of course is that Abel enjoyed unparalleled success as a puntsman himself. In 1878, after successes at local regattas, Abel challenged, the reigning champion, Ned Andrews, for the title of Professional Punting Champion of England.

The event was held on the Thames at Maidenhead on Thursday 27th June. The contest was eagerly awaited since both men were previously undefeated.

Jacksons Oxford Journal records that the river was lined with spectators. There were also many row boats and steam launches moored along the river banks and Abel was supported by a large Oxford contingent.

The contest was run over a mile-long course, the first half mile being downstream before turning and then a half mile upstream. Abel was already a length up at the turning point and forged ahead to win by 60–70 yds.

Abel thus became England's professional punting champion, a title he held for 13 years. The considered view was that Abel was in a class of his own and invincible.

Jacksons Oxford Journal lamented that if England only had a sculler of equal ability, we would rule the universe in that sport too.

Indeed, some felt that with Abel being unbeatable, he was discouraging potential challengers. So, after another successful title defence in 1890, and still unbeaten, Grenfell persuaded him to retire for the good of the sport.

The Thames Punting Club agreed to offer Abel a testimonial "In recognition of the impetus he'd given to the art of punting" and "that the popularity of punting was in no small degree due to him".

He was later presented with a carved oak casket containing gold to the value of £68. Though he participated in a number of other, sometimes rather bizarre, punting challenges thereafter, Abel abstained from the Championship.

And as the famous Taunt photos show, Abel never gave up his day jobs.

Abel died on 9th Dec 1921, so this year will mark the centenary of his death.

Abel Beesley was therefore, a remarkable sportsman.

The association of punting with Oxford is known the world over and its continuing popularity is Abel's lasting legacy.

It therefore, gives me great pleasure to unveil this blue plaque as a tribute to Abel Beesley, the invincible punting champion.