



## Stories from a *'Teacher of Geography'*

George Hull

### TEACHER OF GEOGRAPHY

This is a temporary, full-time position for one year, from 1st September 2005. The post may require the teaching of Geography up to AS level.

*Applicants should:*

- have a good Honours degree in a relevant discipline
- be qualified teachers, i.e. have a PGCE or equivalent
- be committed to contributing to the extra-curricular life of the school.

The ability and willingness to assist with the coaching of Rowing could be an advantage.

*Written applications with a full C.V. and the names of two referees should be sent to the Headmaster by Wednesday 13th April 2005.*

**Coleraine Academical Institution**  
**Castlerock Road, Coleraine BT51 3LA**  
**Tel. 028 7034 4331**

As a not so young Newly Qualified Teacher in 2005, I spotted an advertisement for a temporary post teaching Geography in Coleraine Inst. Being a past pupil of Limavady Grammar School I had been on the wrong end of many a rugby result at the hands of Inst but to be honest I knew very little about their history in rowing. This may not seem like a big deal but the advertisement specified that "the ability and willingness to assist with the coaching of Rowing could be an advantage". Not to be deterred by this I spoke to Declan Doherty the Captain at City of Derry Boat Club. Declan outlined the success of Inst's oarsmen over the years and how at one

stage the club was a major force in rowing in Ireland. It was at this point that I was first introduced to the name of Bobby Platt. Declan explained that Bobby had been drafted in to help coach at Inst many years before and, despite being in his eighties, was now running their Boat Club almost single handedly since the retirement of their last "Rowing Master". After submitting my application I was shortlisted for interview. When it came to the inevitable question about extra-curricular activities I outlined my experience of rugby, cricket and the Duke of Edinburgh's Award but was mindful of the rowing requirement. Declan had

advised me that a lot of rowing training actually takes place on the land rather than water and that my knowledge of different sports would mean that I could look after fitness elements of rowing. I mentioned this to my interviewers and expressed a willingness to help with rowing if required, thinking this would be the last I heard of it. Later that evening Mr Quigg, the Headmaster at the time, phoned to offer me the position.

In September 2005, I started work in Inst and found a couple of games periods on my timetable. One afternoon I would take charge of the Under 14 XV forwards whilst on another I would help the

mentioned Bobby Platt with the rowers during senior games. From my first games session with the rowers I immediately developed a connection with them and an admiration for what they did. The boathouse was archaic, cold and damp but for them it was "home" and somewhere they cherished. The oarsmen trained fanatically all year round yet, in comparison to any sport I had been familiar with, competed very little. The young and the old trained together, and although there was a club hierarchy the mix of age groups worked fantastically with older oarsmen looking out for their younger club mates and often, without knowing it, became role models to them. My lack of rowing experience and knowledge never seemed to be an issue and the fact that I was willing to take an interest ensured that I was very quickly made feel welcome by not only the oarsmen but by their parents and the COBRA members.

Anyone reading this article will be well aware of COBRA and their role in supporting rowing at Inst and now in Coleraine Grammar School. However, when I first became involved in rowing in 2005 I think it is fair to say that rowing in Inst could not have survived without their input. I witnessed a sense of ownership from COBRA members that I have yet to see in another sport or club, and a loyalty to Bobby that meant every Saturday and on numerous afternoons during the week he was ably assisted by volunteer coaches. COBRA's input is not limited to coaching with their fundraising providing money for boats, oars and ergs over the years. Their fundraising has taken on many forms with one of the highlights being a group of them running, cycling and rowing from the source of the River Bann to the Barmouth. On another occasion I was lucky enough to join 5 of them on their final day of a three-day cycle from Mizen Head to Malin Head.

My first years involved with the club were under the direction of Bobby. It would be an understatement to say the least to

describe the great man as a character. Never before have I witnessed such energy and enthusiasm from an octogenarian. I can recall one day as we were climbing out of the coaching launch he remarked that he was a bit stiff. I enquired if he was feeling OK and he replied yes "it's just from the rowing machine this morning" – he was closer to 90 than 80 at this stage! Travelling with Bobby to heads of the river or regattas was an experience, and with him on board you could park wherever you wanted and gain access to just about anywhere, you really were in the presence of rowing royalty. The respect in which he was held in rowing circles was abundantly evident as you walked about events with people from all parts of Ireland and beyond stopping to speak to him and often to reminisce about years gone by. As a result of my involvement with rowing at Inst, I have been fortunate to meet probably three of the biggest names in rowing – Sir Steve Redgrave, Sir Matthew Pinsent and James Cracknell. I meet them all whilst in Bobby's company. Our meeting with James Cracknell will always stand out as it was when I had the honour of travelling to the 2009 BBC Sports Personality of the Year Awards in Sheffield with Bobby who was in the running for the Unsung Hero Award.

Around this time success at the highest level domestically for the school boys was

limited to what had become known as "the quad" of Jonathan Mitchell, Jamie McBurney, Michael McNaul and Robert Hart picking up silver at the Irish Championship Regatta in 2008. This crew was respected throughout Ireland with many onlookers commenting on the quality of their sculling, and they turned down the opportunity to row at Henley in pursuit of success at The Champs. Mitchell and McNaul went on to Represent Ireland at underage level. The Olympic Games in Beijing 2008 saw three of our old boys, Richard Archibald, Richard Chambers and Alan Campbell row at the highest level and it is unsurprising that all three credit Bobby with helping them start their rowing careers.

2009 saw Bobby, now in his nineties, understandably decide it was time to retire and spend more time with his wife Roberta and their grandchildren. The last remnants of "the quad" which had supplied a steady stream of medals in recent years had now moved on. The junior boys outnumbered the seniors considerably and subsequently experienced oarsmen where in short supply. The club was to enter a period of transition which everyone involved knew would be difficult. Given the lack of a teacher with sufficient rowing knowledge to run the club the school set about appointing its first dedicated rowing coach. Colin Lawson filled the position for



a few months in the 2009/10 season but unfortunately had departed before the regatta season took off. Colin was followed by two old boys of the club in Chris Black and then Jonathan Mitchell. Both knew the workings of the school and the boat club and provided a period of stability and continuity up until 2015.

The London Olympics in 2012 saw Alan Campbell and Richard Chambers represent GB. Not many schools can claim to have two former pupils competing in the same games, never mind for them to medal, with Alan picking up bronze in the single scull and Richard, along with his younger brother Peter, claiming silver in the lightweight four. The school has been delighted to welcome both oarsmen back as prize day guests to pass on their fascinating stories. Richard Archibald was the school's most recent prize day guest and all in attendance would agree that his words, like his contemporaries, were truly inspirational.

2012 also saw the building of our new boathouse or the River Pavilion as it was officially named and opened in 2013. The new facility was developed on the same level as the 1<sup>st</sup> XV rugby pitch and off the flood plain that the previous boathouse had occupied. Our current rowers are no longer exposed to periodic flooding and the arduous clean-up operations that followed – which they would have been

expected to do – and we no longer have to replace corroded erg screens on a monthly basis. One of the first visitors to the new boathouse was Richard Chambers, complete with his Olympic medal, when he kindly agreed to come back to school for the day and take oarsmen through what was his typical day. We started with a water session at 08.00 followed by breakfast in the boathouse. The second water session of the day was then followed by a weights session. To finish the day off Richard's wife, a physiotherapist, took the oarsman through a session on stretching and injury prevention.

August 2015 saw the amalgamation of the Inst and Coleraine High School. Jonathan Mitchell had left the school to start his own business and at a time of unprecedented upheaval the boat club was without a coach. As they had done in the past the old boys stepped up and provided coaches for Saturdays but mid-week was proving problematic with large number of keen young men, and for the first time in the club's history ladies, being largely confined to land based sessions. Prior to Christmas of that year I was at a Careers event in Loreto College. I happened to get talking to Maja Johnston and I was aware that she had a connection with Bann Rowing Club. I mentioned that we had no coach and she said that it was a role that her recently retired husband

might be interested in, but perhaps in about a year's time. A few days later when considering how we could move the club forward I thought I would give Maja's husband Jeremy a ring to see if he would be interested, all be it earlier than Maja had indicated. To cut a long story short Jeremy was interested in the post and agreed to do some coaching in the afternoons with COBRA members looking after Saturdays. Fortunately for us circumstances changed and Jeremy was able to take on the position of coach in January of 2016.

Anyone that has visited the boathouse recently will know immediately the massive impact that Jeremy has made. He currently has over 100 rowers training on a weekly basis and the club is the most vibrant that I have seen it since my involvement began in 2005. Jeremy has introduced an annual club dinner which this year attracted over 150 rowers and their parents. Each year he has sourced an inspirational speaker to appeal to our young athletes and their parents alike – where do you find a qualified doctor who rows for Ireland, models for Abercrombie and Fitch and can inspire young people!!? Jeremy has reached out to parents and staff and began running weekly evening erg sessions for them. This has developed to water sessions in the new touring quad. This boat is ideal for beginners and more recreational rowers and is one of the many pieces of equipment Jeremy has managed to secure through sponsorship and fundraising. The volunteer coaching team has also grown under Jeremy's guidance, COBRA members continue to play a crucial role whilst parents are now also contributing significantly in a variety of ways. Coaches are judged on the success of their charges and this is an area that Jeremy and his team can rightly be proud of. Morning erg and strength and conditioning sessions in addition to mileage on the water are paying handsome dividends with results improving with each event attended. At the time of writing the club's most recent



event was Carrick-on-Shannon Head of the River with the 8 crews entered recording three first and three second place finishes. Although I am reluctant to single out individuals it would be remiss of me not to mention one pupil. Molly Curry, whilst still a Junior 16, won gold in the Junior 18 single sculls in this year's Irish Championship Regatta before going on to represent Ireland at the Coupe de la Jeunesse. Molly started her rowing career at CGS under Jeremy's guidance and I am sure that given her natural talent and outstanding work ethic it will not be long before we are seeing her competing at the highest level.



It is evident that the boat club is currently in good hands under Jeremy's control and he is ably assisted by an extremely dedicated group of volunteers. Parents too have to forgo a Saturday morning lie-in to get their children to the boathouse for 08.00, or 05.00 as it was last week to travel to Carrick-on-Shannon. It is fair to say that the club could not function without the support of volunteers and

parents and on behalf of the school I would like to pass on my thanks to everyone who helps in their own individual way, I can assure you all it is very much appreciated.

The amalgamation of CAI and CHS in 2015 is still something that many of us are trying to get used to and the split site creates challenges. However, rowing

since the amalgamation has flourished with our young male and female rowers undoubtedly being benefactors. I am tremendously proud to be associated with rowing at Inst and now CGS and look forward to the years ahead when the wider rowing community marvels at how a small school on the north coast of Ireland continues to produce top class rowers.

## From the other side of the motor boat

He might not have realised it at the time, but when he first made the long, after-school walk down to Coleraine Academical Institution Boat Club, **Richard Chambers** was about to introduce his body and mind to an addiction which he hasn't been able to shake to this day.

After spending months pushing your body to the limit on a daily basis through the depths of winter, on the dreaded rowing machines or on choppy, fast-flowing tidal rivers, it's hard to beat the adrenaline rush from crossing the line ahead of the opposition in your season-defining regatta.

The first win acts as a catalyst for the next, the thrill from winning making you work even harder to push on and challenge yourself at a higher level. From winning the Craig Cup for CAIBC in 2001 (the Ulster

Championship for Junior 16 eights), Richard went on to represent Ireland at Junior 18 level after a hugely successful season with Bann RC, and then break into Oxford Brooke's top eight in 2004. While many COBRA member's rowing careers peaked at university level, Richard's addiction to winning made him push even further.

The big breakthrough at GB level was becoming World Under 23 Silver Medallist in the lightweight men's quadruple scull in 2005. But once again, this only served to make Richard work harder in the pursuit of bigger and better prizes. Whilst the immense achievement of a World silver medal would be enough for many of us to hang up the oars proud in the knowledge that we had done something that few others could ever dream of, once again,

Richard's thirst for victory made him train even harder. Anyone coached by the late Bobby Platt can empathise with this 'Where's the Gold?' mentality.

The gold medals soon followed, and testament to his dedication and determination, there was a sense of inevitability around the flow of World Championship podium appearances and Olympic regattas that followed over the next decade.

After 10 years at the top of international lightweight rowing, the 2016 Rio Olympic Games was Richard's final international regatta. It was time to move on and try something different. But leaving rowing behind would mean giving up the adrenaline of the struggle and the victory.

So it was perhaps unsurprising that shortly



ensure that April 2018 wouldn't be eight in a row for Isis. 'What does not kill us can only make us stronger' and all that!

Using all his experience from a decade at the top of his sport, Richard put the CUBC squad through their paces in preparation for the April 2018 Boat Race, a regime which is renowned worldwide for its intensity and severity. This regime, built around roughly 14 sessions a week, alongside an ongoing university course, is equally difficult for both the Oxford and Cambridge squads. It is the fine margins that make the difference between winning and losing on the day. In the depths of winter training, months away from race day, the motivation and encouragement from a coach to make you push harder than you think possible can be that difference. If the coach expects nothing less than victory, that drive will be instilled into the squad.

to win, and managed to break the trend and overturn their opposition ISIS by 2.5 lengths. This serial winner tasted victory once again.

With the Boat Race season wrapped up for the year, Richard was named Crew Coach for the Great Britain Men's Under 23 eight this summer, a reflection of the excellent work he is doing at CUBC. History has a habit of repeating itself, with Richard's first U23 World Championships as a coach finishing in the same result as his first appearance as a rower 11 years previously – a podium finish and a silver medal.

Everyone at COBRA has thoroughly enjoyed following Richard's long career as a top international rower and look forward to hearing about his continued success as an international coach.

*Philip Hamill*

after announcing his retirement in 2016, Richard was named as Assistant Coach at Cambridge University Boat Club. In this high-profile and unique position, Richard holds a key supporting role in preparing the CUBC squad for the annual University Boat Race, as well as National Trials and summer regattas. He also has specific responsibility for coaching Goldie, the CUBC Reserve Crew for the Boat Race – one of the biggest events in the rowing calendar. Once again, Richard wanted to test himself at the highest level, giving him the opportunity to continue feeding his addiction - albeit from the other side of the motor boat.

Richard's first year in the role saw Isis defeat Goldie by 2.5 lengths in the April 2017 Reserve Race. This wasn't unexpected or out of trend – it was the 7<sup>th</sup> win on the trot for Isis, but crucially the margin of defeat was significantly lower than the 13 lengths experienced several years earlier. But this wasn't enough for Richard - he was in the habit of winning and that competitive streak gave him the motivation to use the next 12 months to

In the April 2018 Boat Race Richard's Goldie crew reflected their coach's desire



## Funding Update

In 2018, we successfully applied for our first Gift Aid application since becoming officially registered last year. We received just over £2000 from backdated donation, and all future donations where we receive from UK tax payers is worth 25% more to us. If

you have not already, please fill in a gift aid form that allows us to claim your donations from HMRC. Contact us via [cobarowing.com](http://cobarowing.com) if you would like more information.

In a recent Coleraine Sports Council

awards ceremony, hosted by Causeway Coast and Glens Council, CGSRC were delighted to receive the inaugural Bobby Plat Bursary. The money will go to much needed rowing equipment.

# Coleraine Grammar 2017-18

The 137 members of CGS Rowing Club enjoyed an outstanding season both on and off the water.

October saw our second Rowing Club dinner hosted in the Royal Court Hotel, Portrush. Guest speaker and Irish Rowing Olympian, Sanita Puspure delivered an enthralling speech of rowing hardship in her native Latvia through to Olympic representation for Ireland at both the London and Rio Olympics. Sanita has since become the ladies' World Champion aged 37 and has promised to come back to tell us about her experiences in the Tokyo Olympics 2020.

November and December were months of hard training with success for our crews at Bann Head of the River and a financial boost through the generosity of 'McDonald's' restaurant coming on board as a major sponsor.

The Christmas season allowed for some essential fund raising through bag packing at Tesco's Coleraine and a highly enjoyable 'fun day's racing courtesy of Coleraine Old Boys Rowing Associations (COBRA).

There was no let-up in training in the new year and toward the end of January the Irish indoor rowing championships were held in Limerick; pupil Molly Curry became

the junior 16 champion of Ireland.

Bad weather and flooding cancelled many events in the first few months of the year so it was April before the crews faced opposition for the first time in 2018.

At Commercial regatta on the river Liffey in Dublin the crews enjoyed numerous victories with the most outstanding being the girls' 16 eight beating a previously unbeaten Commercial crew on home water.

The Irish Schools Championship followed two weeks later in Limerick we had such a collective number of wins that the school finished a joint third out of the 77 schools entered. CGS can boast Irish school champions in the following categories:

- Junior 15 & 16 Eights
- Junior 16 Four
- Junior 15 Single Scull
- Under 23 Single Scull

As recognition of this success the Mayor of Coleraine invited the rowing club and coaches to a celebration buffet at Cloonavin Council offices, an event that was enjoyed by all present.

In May, single sculler Molly Curry flew the flag for the school at the British Schools



Regatta at Eton Dorney London. Despite being 2 years younger than the other 66 competitors she finished in 7th place overall.

June saw further funds raised and along with generosity from the 'Coleraine Old Boys,' the purchase of two much needed new boats for the club came to fruition. One of these boats was named John Stevenson in memory of the ex-school Governor. A moving boat naming ceremony took place with both Mr Stevenson's daughters present.

The winning, and in a few cases losing, continued at Belfast, Portadown, Carlow and Craigavon Regattas where the newly purchased gazebo provided shelter from the blistering sunshine (whoever would have thought this would happen in Northern Ireland)!

The travelling band of supporters particularly enjoyed the overnight stay at Carlow regatta and the hospitality shown by Carlow Rowing Club who provided entertainment into the early hours of the morning.

Towards the end of June we had a fun days racing and barbequing at home when



many parents and teachers, including the Headmaster, enjoyed the exhilaration of rowing in the boys eight.

When school broke at the end of June many went on holiday with the exception of a hardy bunch of 22 athletes who had eyes firmly fixed on the Irish Championships occurring in mid-July, what an event the Irish Championship turned out to be, with racing from Friday through to Sunday.



On the Friday when pupil Hugh Moore finished an amazing 7th place out of all the single scullers in Ireland the tone was set for the weekend. On Saturday the boys sixteen eight excelled by winning the semi-final and ultimately finished in a very creditable 5th place in Ireland. The girls 16 eight having been unbeaten all season had a bad row (by their high standards) and finished 4th in the final, just out of the medals. Rachel Bradley became the junior 15 single sculls champion and both Fergus Bryce and Georgie McClenaghan finished in silver medal positions in the junior 14 single sculls.

Hugh Moore and his doubles partner Matthew Boyce qualified through quarter finals and semi-finals to finish an absolutely outstanding 5th position in the final it cannot be under estimated what an achievement this was for these two young athletes.

Molly Curry competed in the junior 18 single scull category of the Irish Rowing Championship of Ireland. Despite being two years younger than the rest of the field, she was one of the favourites having been selected to represent Ireland at the 'Coupe de la Jeunesse' - a European Regatta taking place later in the month.

The firm favourite for the event was a Miss Keating from the now famous Skibbereen club and home of the Olympic silver medallists the O'Donovan's.

Keating, like her Olympic club mates, displayed a blisteringly fast last 250 meters in the semi-final, When Molly lined up against Keating in the final, race instructions were simple, 'go out hard and stay as far away from Keating as possible'. Molly for one so young, executed the race plan to perfection and lead from start to finish. When Keating came like a train in the final 200 meters Molly was sufficiently clear to make this final valiant attack fruitless.

To put this success in

perspective, a junior men's four last won the Championship for Coleraine Academical Institution in 1990 twelve years before Molly was born.

At the end of July, Molly Curry set rivalries aside as she teamed up with Miss Keating from Skibbereen to represent Ireland at European level. They formed part of a ladies' team of 16 and, were the only members of the team to medal, winning bronze just behind Switzerland and France.

In August, 6 CGS pupils were selected to represent Northern Ireland at the National UK School Games held in Loughborough, England; all 6 pupils did so with distinction none more so than pupil Georgie McClenaghan who won a silver medal for indoor rowing and had the honour of being presented with her medal by GB Olympian and gold medallist Dame Kathryn Grainger.

The future for school rowing is bright with talent and enthusiasm throughout all age groups and categories. Continued success will be reliant on the continued support both financial and physical by the school, volunteer coaches and parents. The 2018 19 season will be one in which we hope to cement the levels of last year and aim higher and travel further. If you or your business can assist in anyway please contact me directly at [jjohnston360@c2kni.net](mailto:jjohnston360@c2kni.net).

*Jeremy Johnston*  
*Head Rowing Coach*



In past 2 half years, the adult Wednesday rowing program has introduced more than thirty parents and teachers to the joys of on the water rowing and coffee drinking

# In Previous Years...

## 5 years ago - 2014

The 2013 – 14 season was one of repeated disappointment, as due to inclement weather a number of races had to be cancelled including Lagan HOR, Lagan Sculler's HOR, Erne HOR and Queen's Regatta, oftentimes cancelled just the day before the race. When races did go ahead, the school performed well, with a win in the Club Four and close second in the J18 Eights at Portadown Regatta. At Belfast Sprint regatta CAI won the J18 Pairs, J16 Quads, J15 Eights, J14 Quads, and put in strong performances in the other categories they entered.

## 10 years ago - 2009

The 2009 Irish champs saw Jonny Mitchell racing in the Junior single, where he put in a strong performance in the heats and semi-final leading all way. About half an hour before the final the weather worsened. During this time, in boat-sinking conditions, Jonny's boat got over-turned by a freak wave. He gathered himself together and rather than back out, he decided to race the final with far from ideal preparations. Jonathan raced really well and acquitted himself fantastically in the conditions. On the line he was judged to have come sixth only a matter of feet behind the fourth-place boat. Subsequently Jonny was selected to row in the Coupe de la Jeunesse in the Men's Quad, alongside future Olympian Paul O'Donovan, where he finished 3rd.

Back at the champs, a CAI/COBRA composite boat (Jonny Mitchell, Michael McNaul, Robert Hart, Steven Archibald and Peri Stynes) raced the Intermediate coxed four, an event last competed in by the school 12 years previously. In a highly competitive event CAI lined up in their heat against crews from Belfast, Cork, Galway and Dublin, qualifying for the final after placing second behind Galway. In the final, the four made every effort to stay with the race as long as possible, attacking again and again and pushing the top three all the way, but were just not able to claw back the lost ground. The four finished in fourth place, a very admirable position considering the time spent in the boat.

## 15 years ago - 2004

The J18 4+ competed in the Irish Championships, and qualified for the final, where they finished 5th.

The J16 squad had a very successful season, with the 8+ winning a number of races including Lagan Head, Portadown and Belfast Sprints Regatta. The highlight of their season was winning the Craig Cup by 1 length over Methody. Despite MCB taking an early lead of over a length, CAI were up to the task, and gradually pulled through to finish ahead of their Belfast rivals.

## 20 years ago - 1999

A number of wins were recorded at the Ulster Branch Head, as well as a J15 Eights win at Lagan Head. The Irish Sprint Champs held in Belfast saw two close 2nd place finishes for CAIBC in the J18 Coxed Four and the Novice Eights.

For more information on COBRA or rowing past or present at CAI & CGS, visit our website at

[COBRARowing.co.uk](http://COBRARowing.co.uk)

or

[facebook.com/COBRARowing](https://facebook.com/COBRARowing)

**Editor:** Alex Humphrey

If you have any comments or would like to contribute to the next newsletter, please get in touch at [alex.humphrey@gmail.com](mailto:alex.humphrey@gmail.com)

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