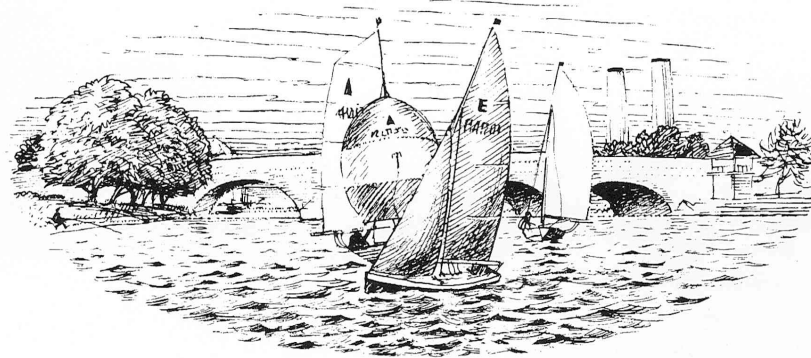




Minima Yacht Club



*One Hundred Years
on
Kingston Reach*



The history of Minima, one of the oldest dinghy sailing clubs in the country, has never been fully chronicled. So what better moment than our 100th anniversary to delve into the records?

In doing so we inevitably found gaps. Some documents covering part of the club's history even disappeared to South Africa! So there will be a few errors and omissions for which we offer humble apologies.

Special thanks go to all those who dipped into memories and files to fill in some of the gaps. We are also particularly grateful to the untiring team behind the Centenary Fund without whose efforts this publication would not have appeared.

To the hundreds of dinghy sailors who have raced from Minima up and down the Kingston Reach since 1889 and many more who, we trust, will grapple in future with its wayward winds, we dedicate this little book.

Commodore 1989.



On the Line 1937. Joan, Hornwink, Wagtail, Moewe.

Minima Yacht Club was born in 1889, not at Kingston but some 60 miles to the South on the River Hamble near Southampton. During its early years it grew rapidly, establishing divisions along the coast at Plymouth, The Solent, Saundersfoot, Dartmouth, Southend, Walton-on-the-Naze and Falmouth.

Small boat sailors at Kingston heard about the new club and were allowed to form their own division, known as Subiton.

Surviving records do not reveal just when Surbiton division was established. All we know is that by October 1896 one William Vallance was representing Surbiton on the club's central body. This was presided over by a Commodore while each division was headed by a captain. The names of those early Commodores are recorded on the club's role of flag officers dating back to 1889.

Minima staged its first races on the Hamble that summer. Across The Solent Kaiser William II was spending his summer holiday with Queen Victoria at Osborne House on the Isle of Wight. They may have even spotted the sails of the competing boats — craft of all sizes in those days as class racing was not to be adopted by Minima for many decades.



1937.

And in the grand manner of the last century Minima's declared aims were full of territorial ambition: "To establish divisions all round the coast of the British Isles for the promotion of yacht and small boat racing in such a way as to secure for the members the greatest amount of sport at low cost."

Time has taken its toll of that early pledge but at least we have remained true to the latter part: good dinghy sailing at a price all can afford.

By 1896 Minima had six thriving divisions with a total membership of about 560, including a "foreign list". Prizes awarded that year were worth £300, then a considerable sum. By the turn of the Century Minima's central body was holding meetings in the City at 1 Water Lane, Great Tower Street.

Minima had an international reputation in its early days. In 1895 the Americans established the Seawanhaka International Challenge Cup "to promote small yacht racing and develop the Corinthian spirit among yachtsmen." The trophy was a mini-America's Cup for smaller boats.

England was represented by a Minima helmsman when the Cup was first sailed for at Long Island Sound on September 21, 1895. Sailing a 15ft scow Spruce IV, Minima's J. Arthur Brand lost to C. J. Friend of the USA sailing Ethelwin. A year later America lost the Cup to the Canadian St. Lawrence YC. In 1898 Minima sponsored a challenge against the Canadians by the race never took place. More recently it has been competed for in six metre yachts. During 1989 it was being contested for in races at Sandheim, Sweden.



Whitsun Handicap. 1940



Club members outside the Nuttall's Clubhouse circa 1930.

Meanwhile Kingston members had established headquarters at the Oak Hotel. Then in 1903 they moved nearer the river to a new clubhouse behind the Sun Hotel in the Market Place, a site now occupied by Woolworths. An early visitor to the Sun was almost certainly Jerome K. Jerome. His *Three Men In A Boat*, published in the year of our foundation, has the merry trio and their dog setting off for Oxford from "just below Kingston Bridge."

In 1899 the Hamble division was closed on the retirement of our first Commodore Admiral F.W. Hallowes. The Solent division appeared soon after so it is possible they moved to new quarters with a change of name.

Within the next 20 years other Minima divisions withered away, their demise hastened by the Great War. By 1919 only Plymouth, Surbiton and The Solent are thought to have survived. They took turns to act as the central body and provide a Commodore.

A turning point came for the Kingston members when, for the first time, they hosted the central body on March 21st 1921. Around two years later Solent and Plymouth severed formal links with the club, leaving Surbiton to fly the MYC pennant.

Plymouth continued as a separate Minima club until its premises on the old Plymouth Pier were destroyed in the Blitz on the city. After the last war many of its members, and some of its assets, were transferred to the Royal Plymouth Corinthian Yacht Club. When that club's new dinghy park was completed in 1959 it was named the Minima Dinghy Park in memory of the old club. A plaque on the wall commemorates the former Plymouth division. Among the trophies inherited by RPCYC is a large silver Minima cup dating from 1908 and now known affectionately as the "F.A. Cup."



Summer party at Nuttall's Clubhouse 1939, seated right foreground, Jimmy Ledwith.



Temporary headquarters at Thames S.C. during 1939-45 war.

One of Surbiton's greatest personalities was Walter Fair who presented the Fair Average Cup still competed for today. He was an officer of the club in 1901 and continued to steer the club in various capacities until he stood down in 1939! In our Jubilee year he resigned after 15 years as Commodore. In a fitting gesture MYC then chose the veteran W. J. Ryland as its next Commodore. He had sailed in that first race on the Hamble back in 1889 in a canoe Yawl!

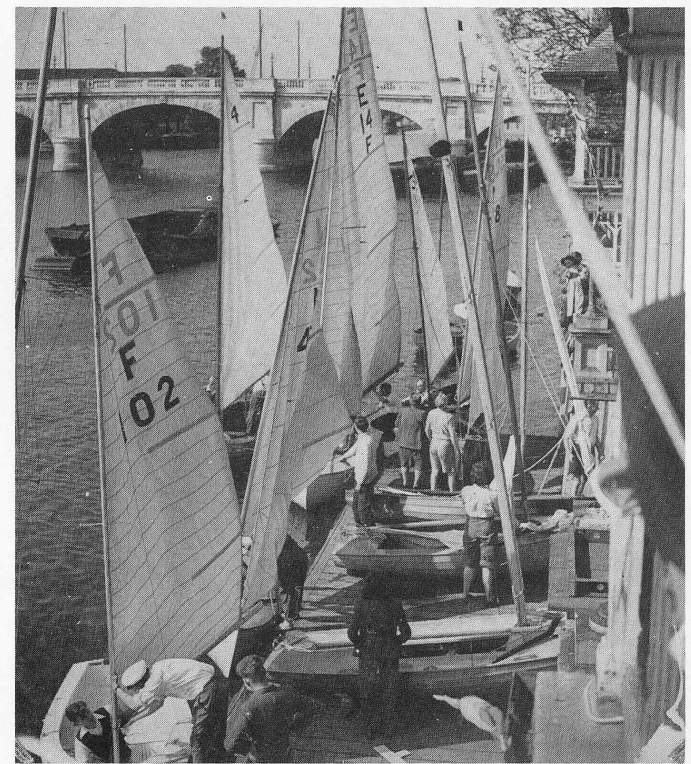
In 1921 Admiral-of-the-Fleet Lord Beatty became patron of Surbiton. That autumn he captained a three boat team sent to challenge the Solent division for the Flemmich Cup. Records show that train fares for the crews and boats cost £18. 15s 1d (£18.75).

Morgan Giles, whose reputation as a boat designer lives on, was commissioned by MYC to design a dinghy specially for the Flemmich Cup contest. Built by Turks it was later raffled at ten shillings (50p) a ticket.

The Yacht Racing Association (later RYA) recognised Minima early in its life, but the YRA was doubtful about including Surbiton as we raced on non-tidal water. MYC persisted for some years before becoming, in the early twenties, the first Upper Thames club to be accepted in the RYA.



Lifting a Merlin down the old club steps 1953.



Old club landing stage 1947.



Old Clubhouse, dinghy park and gazebo.



Final regatta at the old Clubhouse.

Around this time another important barrier was broken down. In its early days MYC had been reluctant to accept women members. But in 1923, after much debate, Surbiton allowed women members "for the present and without fee." We had to wait another 58 years before electing our first woman Commodore, Jo Mayes, in 1981.

In 1924 MYC entered another period of insecurity when the Sun Hotel gave us notice to quit. We lingered on there until 1930 before moving again. Our new home was an ex-army hut in the grounds of Nuttall's restaurant, later the site of British Home Stores and now Millets. Rent was £12 per year, although it was soon doubled. Quarters were cramped and soon our records begin to show signs of the members wanting to move to bigger premises. Itchenor up river was considered and so was Tagg's Island.

Matters improved when MYC was allowed the use of two gazebos which now grace the garden of the pub of that name. They became changing rooms and the starting box for races. However, the place was not ideal. At the end of racing boats had to be lifted up a flight of steps. We consoled ourselves with the thought that club spirit was generated through communal suffering!

After the Jubilee dinner (25p a head) the war broke out and many of our sailors joined the forces. Soon there came a message wishing Minima "good sailing in 1941" from a member in the RAF who had baled out over Germany. Writing from a prisoner-of-war camp, he added ruefully, "I suppose I count as an overseas member now?". And on September 8, 1940, secretary James Ledwith told the general committee that he had postponed a sailing match against London Corinthian "owing to the present intense enemy air activity."

In 1942 MYC's little hut was commandeered by the Ministry of Aircraft Production. It was taken over by a Mr Pemberton-Billing for experiments with a new type of rescue launch. It was unsuccessful.

R.J. Ledwith had joined in 1935 becoming treasurer and secretary. He was to play a key role in keeping the club alive during the war. Seeking new quarters, he discovered that Thames SC was virtually closed for the duration of hostilities. A deal was struck between flag officers and MYC took over Thames SC for £25 a year.

In the first world war Surbiton division had friendly links with Royal Navy officers stationed at Crystal Palace. This tradition was continued in 1943 when RAF fighter pilots were taught by MYC helmsmen to sail survival dinghies. Pilots drove over from RAF Heston in the evenings "flight operations permitting". The association continued after the war when Minima established friendly links with the RAFA club adjoining our Kingston headquarters.

When the war ended there were talks, held in some secrecy, about a possible merger between Thames SC and MYC. Draft rules were drawn up and the title Thames Minima SC was suggested. But it came to naught and in 1946 Minima returned to its hut at Kingston. Again members hankered for a move. What about setting up on the South Coast again? What about the Welsh Harp? These and other schemes were mulled over and rejected.

Meanwhile, post-war shortages and rationing made it difficult to run the club properly. Kingston food committee was persuaded to allocated food coupons for Sunday teas. And in 1947 plans for a new dinghy were shelved "owing to timber restrictions."

During the war Ledwith and other MYC sailors had visited Ranelagh SC at Putney for winter racing. Here they discovered class racing. Until then MYC had sailed only against a handicap.

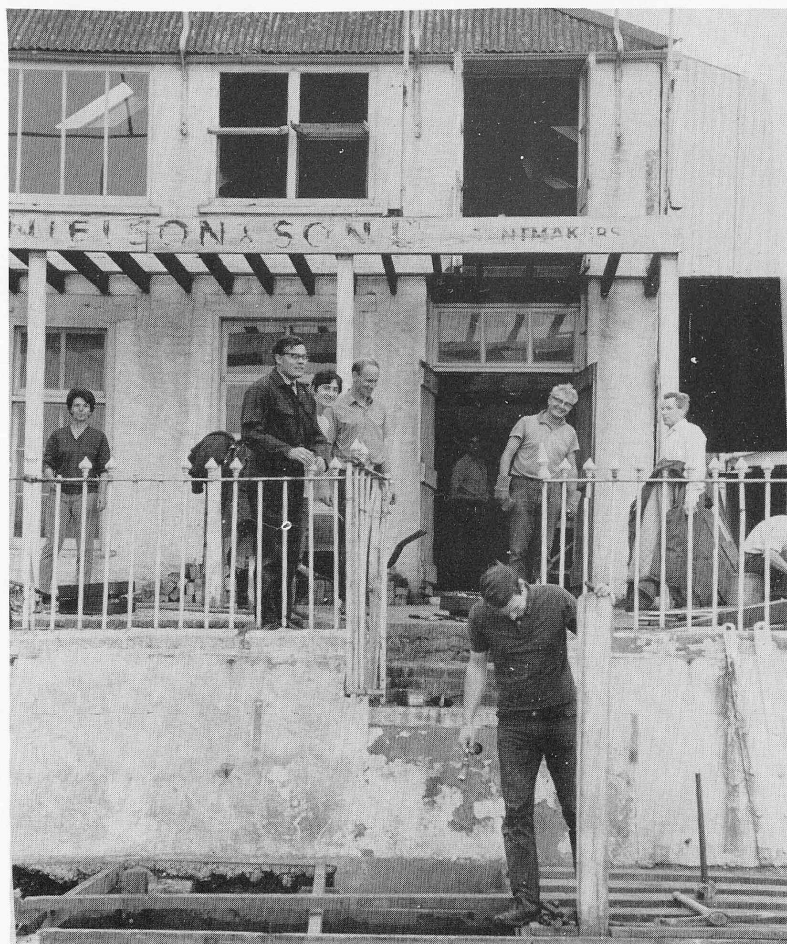
"I was determined to have class racing at Minima", Ledwith recalls. National Twelves were introduced first around 1944 followed by Merlins in 1946. Minima helped pioneer the Merlin class and today a Minima cup is still competed for in the Merlin Rocket Championships. Cadets arrived next and several MYC helmsmen achieved national success in them. In 1949, as Minima celebrated its Diamond Jubilee, it became the first Thames club to adopt the cadet class sponsored by Yachting World. In 1958 our youngsters were made Number Seven Squadron of the International Cadet One-Design Class. In the fifties the Solos and Enterprises arrived, to become among the most popular classes at the club.



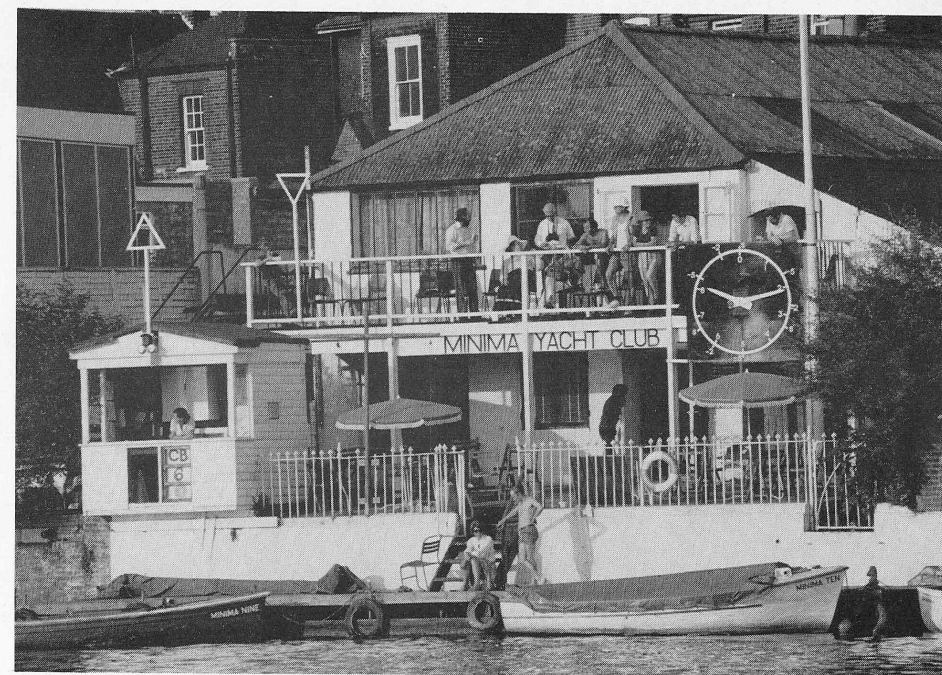
National 12 119 June 1953 passing Nielson's sail loft.

Redevelopment plans for the town centre obliged MYC to once again tackle its acute accommodation problems. With our tenure at Nuttall's uncertain, we secured a lease from the council on the premises we occupy today — the former Neilson's sail loft and store. This historic old building appears in the background of many early photographs of racing at MYC.

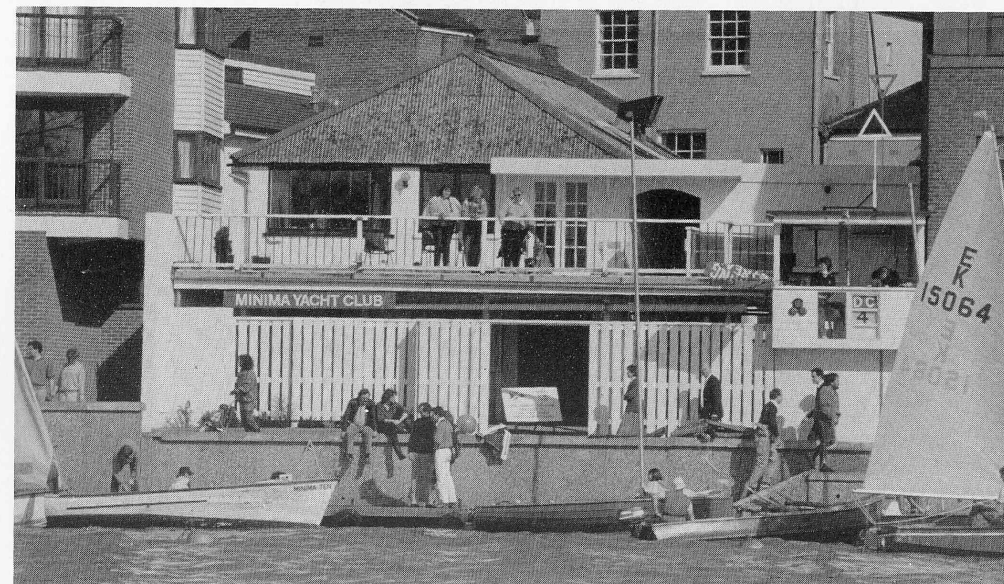
Under the guidance of Commodore Gordon Smith the move to 48A High Street was completed in 1969. The first of several conversions and renovations was carried out, mostly by members in their "spare time". Many of us acquired new DIY skills as part of our MYC membership! Today Minima thrives and, with the blessing of our landlords at Kingston Guildhall, hopes to continue racing on the Kingston Reach for another hundred years.



Working on the new Clubhouse winter 1969/70.



New Clubhouse as it appeared after the move in the winter of 1969/70.



The Clubhouse as it appears in the centennial year.

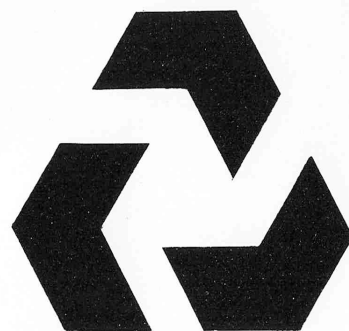


Club members on the Clubhouse balcony in Centennial Year.

Edward Walford summed it up for us in his 1884 Survey of Greater London: "The Thames here, especially in summer, is fair to look upon as anywhere below Windsor and Maidenhead; and the broad reach which runs from the bridge past Surbiton and up to Hampton, is one of the favourite haunts of the amateur sculler and the disciples of Izaak Walton".

The prescient Mr Walford evidently failed to chance upon a dinghy sailor beating his way up river but, in its Centenary Year, Minima Yacht Club respectfully begs to share his sentiments and offers a toast to them just the same!





*Nat West Surbiton
look forward
to caring for
Minima's money
for the next
100 years*