

Baltic Wharf Open Meeting 27th June 2021

A great event and a great venue!

Baltic Wharf Sailing Club in the Bristol Floating Dock is a venue quite different to others on the Comet circuit. The backdrop of the different coloured houses rising above the far side of the dock, the Victorian industrial buildings associated with the various marine dockside activities, the astonishing range of old and modern watercraft, the distant view of part of the suspension bridge all add to the stunning vista which meets one's eye on arrival and always make me take a sharp intake of breath on first sight.



This year, helpful warning on the Association website provided by the host club of a road closure on the last part of the western route to the dock meant I took a different and slightly longer final route than usual. However, it also meant I got a good view of the River Avon as I drove alongside it. This is a stretch of the river which Victorian engineers had diverted to allow the dock to be constructed along the old bed of the river. This was followed by an easy drive up Cumberland Road to the harbour master's office. I swung past the big green gates into the car park to be greeted by the rest of what Norah subsequently described as the "West Country contingent" - Henry and Norah Jagers and Eddie Pope, by the lovely sight I have already described, and by.....plenty of wind!!! The joy at seeing the latter is explained by the fact that this was to be my second attempt at sailing at a Comet open meeting this season, the first at Carsington (entailing nearly a 500 mile round trip!) having been called off on the day because of a complete absence of wind.

Another difference this year was that because the current restrictions meant the club's changing room and facilities were closed, we had to use the public facilities at the far side of the Underfall Yard. However, this also meant walking past several information boards relating to the Victorian dockside installations – the Hydraulic Power House, the Patent Slip, etc which turned a necessary journey into an informative occasion!

Following the usual tradition, the first leg of the first race was a beat right up to the eastern end of the harbour, a distance of about 1 mile! Entertainment on this upwind leg was provided by trying to dodge the other water traffic and a rowing coach warning us by megaphone that his trainee was a novice with little control over direction of travel! For the first two-thirds of the leg, one's skill was tested by the wind shifts created by the dockside structures and local topography, but at about this point, one entered a very short region which we learnt later from the local club members was known as the "Doldrums" – on both sides of the harbour were two large multi-storey buildings opposite each other creating sharp variations in wind direction and strength (horizontally and vertically!). Judging by the appearance of the wind blowing in opposite directions across the harbour, both buildings seemed to act as wind reflectors! Although I was being closely followed by a canal barge over the last stage of this leg, I was fortunate as the skipper had the patience to wait until I had rounded the windward mark before passing. I then had the tricky prospect of getting

through the short length of the “Doldrums” on the long return downwind leg. The race finished with a very much shorter beat-run-beat to the finish line. As ever, with this venue, the first race provided an enjoyable experience unlikely to be repeated anywhere else on the Open circuit.

The two afternoon races were sailed back-to-back over several laps on a much shorter course at the western end of the dock where the wind was more steady (well, relatively speaking as compared to the first race!), consisting of a beat, a short reach, followed by a downwind leg to a gate consisting of two buoys spaced about 50 yard apart and set about equidistant from the start/finish line, then a beat back up to the line. I have never encountered this type of leeward gate at a Comet event, and personally, I thought it was an excellent feature which worked well. It helped to reduce the possibility of several boats arriving all together at a single leeward mark, with all of the furore which can develop over calls for water at the mark, collisions etc. It seemed to me that any advantage offered by one of the leeward marks with regard to wind direction and strength over the other mark changed from lap-to-lap! I would love to see more clubs use this type of leeward gate at Comet events.

For someone who had not raced since the Open meeting at Staunton Harold in October 2019 because of the pandemic restrictions and because of moving house, this was just the right conditions and venue to realise how rusty I was, and to try and get back into the swing of things! I was reminded throughout the day how important it was at this venue to make the most of wind shifts when sailing upwind and downwind and keeping an eye out on the surface for where there was more wind. My difficulty was in deciding whether or not to tack on the shifts, in other words, trying to decide if a header would be sustained, or whether, as seemed to happen quite often, it would be followed by a persistent lift. I also realised after a while that beating right up to the side of the dock sometimes found a helpful lift, but could also put one into a most unhelpful wind shadow. The results show that I must have absorbed some lessons as the day went on and a certain person on the shore told me that my boat handling had got smoother during the last race.

The entire harbour and its surroundings are open to the public and hence there are other users of the slipway and landing stage. This year, as always, the harbour was busy with other waterborne activities – stand-up paddle board (lots of them!) lessons, rowing skiffs, a dinghy sailing school, canal barges, sightseeing cruisers, but not the Matthew! A newcomer on view this year was the Jubilee Sailing Trust’s 3-masted barque, *STS Lord Nelson*, moored at the eastern end of the dock and now up for sale. To me, all these sights and sounds add to the overall enjoyment of the day, no matter how well the racing is going. In previous years, I have known members of the public stop to watch the racing and then come up to us while de-rigging on the dockside and show their interest by asking questions such as about how the racing is organised and about the Comet dinghy.

The club are to be congratulated on not allowing the local restrictions currently in place to stop them putting on such an excellently organised event this year. This is an open meeting not to be missed, so if you have never been, think about coming next year when the club are considering changing the event to run on a Saturday.

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