

Fordingbridge Regatta

At a meeting of Fordingbridge Rowing and Sailing Club on 5th July 1889 it was decided that a regatta would be held in August. The organisers did not let the grass grow under their feet and The Salisbury Journal reported on 3rd August that, "A torchlight procession of boats started at the boat house at 9.00pm and formed a very picturesque spectacle as it wound its way up the river.". Indeed, the regatta was such a success that a regatta was held every year until the festivities were put on hold during the First World War. They were resumed after the war and were held each year until 1928.

Fordingbridge folk don't do things by half and by Edwardian times the event was called the "Hampshire Henley" and special excursion trains were run from London to bring ladies in wide brimmed hats and gentlemen in straw boaters to fill the 300-seater stands or line the riverbank. Entry to the regatta course was via Sheering's yard which is now Timbermill Court and a humorous banner hanging over the entrance became a traditional feature.

Spectators would have seen the usual swimming and rowing competitions but also some more unusual events. These included water polo, pillow and greasy pole fights on the river as well as races for dogs and diving for plates. The dog's races were divided into large and small dogs and each dog wore its own colour and was named on the programme. The plates that were dived for were metal plates which were thrown into the river and the winner was the person who had collected the most plates in a given time. At one time the champion plate collector was one Ernest Perry who did not let the fact that he could not swim deter him. He ensured his success by practicing holding his breath and once he had plunged into the water, stuffing his old-fashioned swimming costume with the plates he collected.

At the end of the event a procession of illuminated boats was held, which passed by similarly illuminated riverside gardens on the way from the boat house to the bridge. Prizes were awarded for the best in both categories and the evening was rounded off with fireworks.

If your appetite has been whetted by this account, you can find out more about the regatta by visiting the celebrations for the twenty fifth anniversary of the opening of Fordingbridge Museum. This event is to be held over the first weekend in August this year. There will be a variety of events over the weekend and a display on Fordingbridge Regatta will be in the Victoria Rooms. Look out for more details nearer the time.

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