

## MAGNA CARTA 800<sup>TH</sup> RIVER RELAY

We've all been there – propping a bar at Henley Royal Regatta having supped a few pints of Pimms and someone says “Why don't we .....?” and goes on to propose some outrageous rowing event, so it was in 2011. The seemingly outrageous proposal was to recreate the arrival of King John at Runnymede aboard a boat to celebrate the 800th anniversary of the sealing of Magna Carta in June 2015. Most people walk away from these ideas but once again I found myself picking up the challenge gauntlet and making off in to the sunset with an idea...

Firstly the Thames Alive Team was stirred in to action, a proposal written and a plan of action formulated, fast forward over three years - after many fruitless meetings to get support for the idea eventually a Councillor from the Royal Borough of Windsor & Maidenhead suggested a River Relay carrying a facsimile of Magna Carta. The other local authorities of the Boroughs of Runnymede and Spelthorne agreed to support the event and in late 2014 the planning finally began.

The Magna Carta was to be carried by local Charter Bearers on board a traditional rowing boat down the River Thames over two days from Hurley (the upstream boundary of the Borough) stopping at different places for plays to be presented by costumed character actors telling the story of Magna Carta and finish at Runnymede with 'King John' re-enacting the sealing of this historic document. The Charter Bearers' boat was to be escorted by other river craft and have a Herald craft of The Queen's Row Barge 'Gloriana' lead the way.

So it was on the 13<sup>th</sup> June 2015 the Charter Flotilla of The Queen's Shallop 'Jubilant' escorted by the Draper's Shallop 'Royal Thamesis' and the Watermen & Lightermen's Shallop 'Lady Mayoress' with Charter Bearers (selected from the local area) and characters from the Magna Carta story (the rebel Barons) were sent on their way from Hurley by the Mayor and the Town Crier of the Royal Borough of Windsor & Maidenhead.

Whilst a short distance downstream, at Bisham Abbey, 'Gloriana', with a crew from Maidenhead RC, embarked on the Royal Progress passing through Marlow Town Regatta which kindly suspended racing to allow the Royal Barge to pass unhindered.

Below Marlow lock at The Longridge Centre the first of four escort groups totalling 100 boats of many types from all over the UK were waiting to join the core boats.

The Charter flotilla arrived at Bisham Abbey and in front of a crowd of spectators 'Robert Fitz Walter' took the opportunity to put the Rebel's case to Radio Berkshire, whose reporter had followed along the Thames path by bike

'Gloriana' meanwhile arrived with her escort with all due splendour at the next stop, Cookham Reach Sailing Club, where the actors were already mingling with the crowds. After a short stop for VIPs to embark she moved off downstream.

The charter boats continued downstream through Marlow lock where they were joined by the first of their escorts and with a short stop off Upper Thames Sailing Club, onwards to Cookham.

They arrived to a rousing welcome at Cookham Reach Sailing Club and once again the festivities and play unfolded to the ever increasing crowds.

'Gloriana' had now moved on to Cliveden House where the 'Archbishop of Canterbury' awaited the boats and once again after a short stop for the Deputy Lord Lieutenant of Berkshire to take the salute from the local Sea Rangers she moved off downstream with her second escort group of boats.

By now downstream at Boulter's lock the crowds packed the footpath above and below the lock and the waiting cruisers watched as the MC 800 River Relay escort boats were called in to the lock (thank you EA staff!) recreating the wonderful 1887 Gregory painting not once but on three occasions.

The Charter flotilla arrived at Cliveden and once more the story of Magna Carta was told to the watching crowds who thoroughly enjoyed the spectacle cheering as the flotilla moved off down river with the fourth escort group of boats.

The last stop of the day was at Bridge Gardens beside Maidenhead Bridge which was once again full to capacity with onlookers. The actors stepped ashore to a rousing cheer and told their story once more whilst the 100 escort boats and 'Gloriana' made their way downstream through Bray lock to overnight moorings at Oakley Court Hotel and some onward to Datchet.

A couple of hours later the enthusiastic crowds filling the lawns at Oakley Court Hotel had their own full performance of the Magna Carta story as the sun set over the moored boats – Day 1 completed.

Early on Sunday the Windsor Triathlon 3000 competitors were swimming in the river in Windsor so the escort boats made their way slowly downstream followed by 'Gloriana' and the Charter flotilla which stopped for the last time at The Brocas for the full play to be acted out to the spectators waiting in the light drizzle.

By now another 80 boats were arriving, launching and creating the Parade of Boating at Runnymede being joined by the escort boats from Day 1 that had overnighted at Datchet.

The Mayors of Windsor & Maidenhead and Spelthorne were delivered by two launches 'Verity' and 'Jolly Brit' to Runnymede where the Mayor of Runnymede Cllr. Cottey welcomed them ashore in front of the newly unveiled statue of HM Queen Elizabeth II – and finally the sun began to shine.

On instructions from the Marshal boats all the 100+ manpowered craft made their way up to the weir stream of Old Windsor lock and mustered ready for the finale row pasts.

On schedule 'Jubilant' and the Charter flotilla with an escort of over 40 boats rowed gently down the Runnymede meadows waved and cheered on by 1000's of spectators, was saluted by a toss of oars from the escort, coming in to moor delivering the Charter Bearers, the Magna Carta and the last of the Barons to the waiting crowds.

Finally The Queen's Row Barge 'Gloriana', rowed by Windsor Boys School, came round the corner with her escort of 60 boats led by two Gondolas (one rowed by a crew from Venice) who again, as the Royal Barge carrying 'King John' moored on the Runnymede meadow, tossed oars and gave a rousing three cheers.

The escort boats then rowed on past the Royal Barge with her crew standing in salute to them, eventually stopping all other river traffic by sheer numbers – 180 traditional boats, many in period costume, all proudly flying the MC800 River Relay flag rowed, paddled and motored past the ceremony of the re-enactment of the sealing of Magna Carta being performed in the arena.

The MC800 River Relay was a marvellous celebration of this historic document enjoyed by 100's afloat and 1000's on the river bank over the 20 miles of the River Thames. The flotillas moved safely through 10 locks, stopped on time at six locations for the plays and all arrived on time at Runnymede – well done to all those who took part, many thanks to the Environment Agency for all their assistance, the three local Borough Councils for their support and to all those volunteers who made the plan work.

*Malcolm KNIGHT*

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The Thames Alive Team have brought you the re-enactment of Lord Nelson's river borne funeral procession, the Henry VIII 500<sup>th</sup> and Henry's Honeymoon flotillas, the Manpowered Division of the Queen's Thames Diamond Jubilee Pageant, Day 70 of the Olympic Torch Relay, the Lord Mayor's Flotilla and has been involved in the annual Royal Watermen's Tudor Pull.