



▲ Assuredly **Thomas Doggett** did not die a pauper, as stated in the churchyard of **St John's in Eltham** (top). The once renowned comic actor made generous provision for his family and his servants, plus £350, no less, to ensure that the **Coat and Badge** race he had initiated in 1715 would continue to be staged after his death, in 1721.

Organised ever since by the Fishmongers' Company, the expenditure, as set out in Doggett's will, allowed five pounds for the provision of a silver badge (above), this to bear the word 'Liberty' over a rampant horse (the symbol of the Hanoverian George I, whose accession to the throne Doggett wished the race to celebrate).

To this was added 18s for 'orange' cloth, 21s for the coat to be made up with buttons, and 30s for the Watermen's Company Clerk.

With appropriate dramatic effect, a further stipulation required that the race be held annually, 'forever'.

So far, so good. The odd break for wars apart, the run continues.



Flanked by his predecessors, the 2010 race winner, **Daniel Arnold**, parades his new **Doggett's Coat and Badge** at the **Fishmongers' Hall, London Bridge** (above). A member of the **Tideway Scullers in Chiswick**, like many current watermen **Arnold** works aboard **Thames** cruise boats. Alongside him in the darker uniform of a **Bargemaster** is **Bob Prentice**, a fourth generation waterman from

Wapping. Prentice joined **Poplar, Blackwall & District RC** at the age of ten, worked as a **lighterman** delivering **Ford** motor components to various docks, and now **skippers** tourist boats. His winning time of **23 minutes 22 seconds** in the **1973** race has yet to be beaten. Another **Doggett's** record is that of the **Phelps** family. **Boatbuilders** of **Putney**, the **Phelps** provided **ten winners** from **1860–1938**.

◀ Watching a single sculler plough through the waters of central London can at times resemble a child in a pedal car who has strayed onto a motorway. But like all entrants in the **2010 Doggett's Coat and Badge Race**, **Dean Pettipher** from **Gravesend**, seen here midway through the four miles and seven furlong course between **London Bridge** and **Cadogan Pier**, knows the score. He is, after all, a waterman.

Today, as in 1715, entry to the **Coat and Badge** race is restricted to a maximum of six watermen whose apprenticeships have just ended. By 1799 there were around 2,000 apprentices, and none was allowed more than one try. Today the total is around 125, and each is allowed to enter the race three times (that is if they do not win at the first or second attempt).

As can be seen, they are also now allowed to race in purpose-built, lightweight boats, whereas before 1906 they had to compete in standard wherries, clinker built, wide-bottomed and seating four.

Not only that but before 1873 Doggett's races were contested against the ebb tide, requiring entrants to row for over two punishing hours to reach Chelsea.

Yet despite the race now going with the flow, lasting barely 30 minutes and drawing the interest of only a handful of spectators and passing tourists – largely because it takes place midweek in July – Doggett's remains a genuine test of watermanship. This is particularly so given that the race is observed closely by fellow watermen and by the entrants' families (who are often one and the same), following in a small flotilla of boats, watching every move.

In that sense, the Doggett's Coat and Badge may be London's oldest sporting event, but it remains an essentially internal affair.

Here are individuals who spend their working lives on the river, yet are so drawn to it, and to their heritage, that they choose to spend their free time mastering an art which has been all but redundant in their professional lives since the advent of powered boats.

For a waterman to don the Coat and Badge is akin to an athlete gaining a gold at the Olympics.

Once a Coat and Badge winner, always a Coat and Badge winner. Forever.



▲ On the riverside frontage of the **Westminster School Boat Club** on **Putney Embankment** (see map 2, page 46), the name of **John Hawks Clasper** (1836-1908), known as **Jack**, is a reminder that one of the great sporting rivalries of mid 19th century England lay between the professional watermen of the Thames and their counterparts on the River Tyne; a rivalry played out not only between oarsmen but also between boatbuilders.

Jack Clasper's father **Harry** was a legend in the north east on both counts. Illiterate and sent down the mines at the age of fifteen, by his mid 20s **Harry Clasper** was running a pub, building boats and racing them to great effect, often crewed by his brothers.

In 1842, having been stung by defeat on the Tyne at the hands of Thames watermen, **Clasper** and his fellow Tynesiders set about a radical redesign of racing boats, perfecting a new form of outrigger, combined with inboard keels and narrower, lightweight shells. Three years later they gained revenge with victory at the **Thames Regatta**.

Young **Jack**, the eldest of thirteen **Clasper** children, notched up his first aquatic honour when, at the age of 13, he coxed his father's four to victory at **Henley** in 1849. He then moved to **London** in 1854 to be apprenticed as a waterman and to make his own name as a rower.

He did well, winning several titles. But it was as a boat builder that **Jack Clasper** really excelled.

By 1864 he had established a yard in **Durham**, to which he added a second on **Putney Embankment** in 1868 (possibly the building we see here), followed by a third in **Oxford**.

Like his father, **Clasper** was forever experimenting; for example perfecting a form of sliding seat that had been invented in the USA and first seen on the Tyne in 1871, and creating longer, narrower shells.

Five times a **Clasper**-built boat secured victory in the **Boat Race**, a link that lives on in that his **Putney**

premises now serve as the base of the **Oxford** crew on race days.

Clasper also coached, one of his charges being fellow **Geordie** professional **Bob Chambers**, winner of five national sculling titles. Such was **Chambers'** repute that when he was struck down by tuberculosis at the age of 37 in 1868, an estimated 50-60,000 turned out for his funeral in **Newcastle**.

But then, two years later double that number were reportedly on the streets to pay their respects to **Harry Clasper**. This was followed only months later by the third major funeral of a Tynesider rower, **James Renforth**, who died after a race in **Canada**, aged just 29.

All three are commemorated by magnificent memorials (featured in *Played in Tyne and Wear*, see *Links*). **Renforth's** in particular, in **Gateshead**, has a carving of the rower expiring in the arms of his fellow English crewman, **Harry Kelley**, from **Putney**.

Lavishly sentimental in the best Victorian tradition, it is possible that the three memorials were inspired by an earlier one in **London**.

Robert Coombes (1808-60), whose tomb at **Brompton Cemetery** (top right) was unveiled in 1866, was born in a **Vauxhall** pest house, apprenticed as a waterman in his teens, and in 1842 was one of the **London four** who humbled **Harry Clasper's** crew on the Tyne.

Four years later he became the first sculler to win the national championships on the **Putney** to **Mortlake** course. On the Thames and on the Tyne **Coombes** then defended this title twice. In later life he also coached both **Oxford** and **Cambridge**, winning the **Boat Race** on two occasions, before the tide of opinion turned against the use of professionals in amateur races.

Coombes' final days were spent in poverty, in a **Maidstone** lunatic asylum. But as would later occur on Tyneside his rowing pals and admirers rallied and commissioned the memorial we see here.

Listed **Grade II**, the tomb is surmounted by an upturned wherry, over which is draped a **Doggett's** Coat and Badge. In each corner stands an oarsman, thought to have been modelled on **Coombes** or his contemporaries, but alas now sadly headless.

The figure nearest the camera wears the traditional buttoned coat of a Thames waterman.



Between them, the likes of **Coombes**, the **Claspers**, **Chambers**, **Renforth** and **Kelley** laid the foundations for modern rowing.

Yet as noted earlier, by the 1880s their ilk found themselves ostracised by the **Amateur Rowing Association**, who refused to compete against professionals, a rift only finally settled in 1956.

During the interim years watermen continued to take part in competitions organised by the **Tradesmen's Rowing Association**, plus the **Doggett's** of course, and the **Christmas Handicap** on Tyneside, last staged in 1938.

More recently in 1975 another Thames race emerged, this to celebrate the traditional skills of lightermen.

In the **Thames Barge Driving Race**, seen above passing **Sir Christopher Wren's Royal Hospital**

at **Greenwich** in 2010, crews of between four to eight lightermen and/or watermen race unpowered barges, using 20 foot long oars, or 'sweeps' for rowing.

Given that the winning time for completing the gruelling seven mile course from **Greenwich** to **Westminster** is usually around 90 minutes, this is perhaps one river sport best left to professionals.