

A family affair



On Saturday 4 August sports fans around the world will be focussed on the Olympic finals at Eton Dorney. However, it's not the only rowing taking place – crews will also be boating at Sudbury and Hereford. **Jon Mcleod** visited Suffolk last year to find out what makes Sudbury Regatta tick

PHOTOS: SIMON WAY >

“The narrow width and snaking bends of the river mean the spectators are right next to the action, creating a cracking atmosphere”



Every year Andrew Blit begins the process of scheduling the Sudbury Regatta. It's a demanding challenge; made all the more difficult by the sheer diversity and number of crews descending on this small section of river in East Anglia.

The narrow stretch means crews must boat in divisions, adding to the conundrums and complications of creating a timetable that accommodates more than 200 crews in around 60 different categories.

After weeks of head scratching, calculating and negotiating, the matrix is complete.

"We want customers to do what they want to do," he says. "We will try to fit around them. We get it right eventually.

"Although one year I failed. I knew I had got it right, all the boats were in consecutive divisions and all the people were fine. But a husband and wife were in boats in the same division, which was fine, except there was no-one to look after the baby!"

The rueful look etched on his face reveals the

dedication and passion with which the task is undertaken – something that is evident everywhere at this popular local regatta. From the young Sea Scouts manning the stake-boats to umpires and the pint pullers, there is a real enthusiasm that fuels this family event every August.

"When it comes to an event like this it breaks down the barriers," Regatta Secretary Pippa Kerry says on a sunny day in early August as the jazz band strikes up and the roars of the crowds reach

a crescendo. "Everyone pitches in. I love the way it brings the whole club together."

Sudbury Rowing Club has hosted the regatta for the past 131 years on the banks of the River Stour in Suffolk. And last year's was the biggest yet with 226 crews competing from J14 single sculls up to senior sprint eights and masters events.

For the Regatta Secretary, the preparations began a year before. "My job is to coordinate everything on the field at the moment, which involves everything from getting the licences for

“The racing is really hard and really serious, but it’s got a different feel to the regattas where you have a multi-lane course”

Side-by-side at Sudbury Regatta



Community affair



It's not all about the racing!



Andrew Blit briefs the officials



Sea cadets on duty in the stake-boats



Lending support from the riverbank

the bars to organising the marquees to the public address system and jazz bands," says Pippa.

"For months and months you are on your own and then you start delegating jobs. Because it's been going for so many years, we hang on to a lot of our members as they get older and everyone knows what to do. Everybody just takes their jobs."

Willing helpers take on responsibility for sponsorship, race entries, scheduling and catering as the countdown continues. "From more than six weeks out Andrew takes over the whole of the racing side," Pippa says. "He does the draw and scheduling, which just boggles my mind. Someone will ring up asking to race an obscure boat. He will do his utmost to find opposition."

Of course, the finances are essential to running such an event. With local companies paying from

£150 to £1000 to sponsor a race, all the equipment and supplies for the day can be bought and hired in preparation, which means all the takings of the day go straight back into the club.

"Everything we raise from sponsorship basically pays for the whole of the regatta," says Pippa. "Everything we take on the day in terms of race fees and stalls and everything else is our profit. It's our main fundraiser."

With two weeks to go the reeds are cleared from the serene stretch of river. Four days to go and the landing stages are erected. Then on the eve of the regatta, the final push as an army of club members from young to old help carry down all the supplies, put up the marquees and set up the electricity for the following day.

"It's like rolling a snowball. You roll it around the garden and when it gets to the point when it's ➤

really heavy, somebody comes and helps you. Today, I feel like I have got to the top of the hill and just pushed it off and it's going," says Pippa, just as a woman asks where to inflate the bouncy castle among the jazz bands, ice-cream vans, vintage cars and beer tents.

Sudbury is the ideal setting for an intimate country regatta. Wandering through a thin line of

trees, sheltering it from the nearby town, the path opens to a cluster of green meadows with rolling hills rising beyond and the winding river cutting across the landscape before disappearing into the leafy countryside.

The narrow width and snaking bends of the river mean the spectators are right next to the action, creating a cracking atmosphere. And yet with many of the competing clubs regulars, such as

Lea and Maidstone, it remains a relaxed rivalry and friendly crowd.

"You can hear the crowd shouting and telling you to move over or helping you around the bend," says David Bull, a former Sudbury captain and returning as a member of the Lea Rowing Club.

"The racing is really hard and really serious, but it's got a different feel to the regattas where you have a multi-lane course," says Mike Arnott,

“A husband and wife were in boats in the same division, which was fine, except there was no-one to look after the baby”

A family affair

Mixed eights



chairman of Sudbury Rowing Club. "It's great to compete, as you are so near to the crowd. It's a lovely old-style regatta, and there aren't that many of them around now."

In 2011 the local regatta even had an international element. Six years ago Rachel Lund rowed at the event and was back competing, along with Ignacio Hidalgo, in the colours of Barcelona Club de Rem having spent time studying in Spain.

"When I first learnt to row I came to Sudbury and it's great to come back," says Rachel. "It's a shame my team-mates aren't here, they'll have to come next year," adds Ignacio. The pair borrowed boats from the Sudbury club to compete.

"Everyone comes to Sudbury expecting a certain level of camaraderie and a certain atmosphere. So we try very hard not to change anything," says Trisha McGrillen, Regatta Secretary on two previous occasions. "We want to keep that

very traditional regatta and go out of our way to help people. We can't just pitch up and expect people to want to compete here, we have got to come up with the goods and supply something in addition to the race. People take their racing seriously but they enjoy the atmosphere on the banks as well."

Naturally, as the day goes on and some crews get knocked out, the beer tent fills up. Through the day they'll get through a few kegs of lager and six firkins of local beer.

"It's a busy job, especially when the Lea turn up – that's always a good sign that you are going to sell lots of beer," says Tim Rowe. "When the sprint eights finish then the bar gets busy."

With races rowed, trophies presented and another successful regatta completed, attention turns to later this year when Sudbury face competition from another regatta.

"We were slightly concerned that numbers would be lower at this regatta, but then nobody got Olympic tickets," says Pippa. "So it has been to our advantage. We will have a big screen television and hopefully it will be even bigger again."

So, as they go into their 132nd year of running this event, what is the reason for the obvious success of Sudbury Regatta?

"We are the epitome, the apotheosis of the country regatta, set in a field apparently separated from town," says Andrew Blit. "A family regatta where all ages from J12 to masters can row and where people can race as intensely as they want, but are here to have fun. I wouldn't like people to come here and be miserable when they lose because I don't think it is like that."

Find out more about Sudbury Regatta at www.sudburyrowingclub.org.uk/regatta



Sudbury's secrets

Make your regatta a success with these top tips...

1 – Finances

Securing race sponsorship from local business can fund the regatta and ensure on the day's takings go back into the club.

2 – Organisation

Strong leadership and detailed preparation will guarantee a smooth and successful event.

3 – Volunteers

The time, effort and enthusiasm of club members, volunteers and umpires is essential.

4 – Identity

Tradition, location, events, age categories or competition can all provide 'unique selling points' to attract competitors and visitors.

Row for Gold

Would you like your club's event to be part of the Row for Gold series? Find out more online at www.britishrowing.org



Race officials in action



Sudbury silverware



A packed riverside on the Stour