

LIFE

LIFESTYLE



OUTDOORS

LEARNING TO BRAVE THE DRAGON

Clive Fewins grabs an oar and joins a lively boat race on the Thames

By 10am the sun had burned through the early morning mist and it was a perfect time to be paddling away on the Thames. It was bright, with not too much of a breeze, and I was assured that the river, although running with a strong current, was not likely to behave unkindly towards our dragon boat and crew of 19.

The dragon, whose carved head adorned the prow of our craft, seemed to don a wry smile as I stepped gingerly into the 40ft elongated gondola. I wondered if that was because he had designs of catapulting me overboard. Dragon boating reputedly

started in ancient China, when warriors used dragon-prowed boats to seek the body of a drowned colleague while one of them beat a drum to prevent the body from being eaten by fish. If the dragon was conspiring to consign me to the same fate he was going to be disappointed.

Riverside sages reputedly shook their heads in disbelief back in 1987, when the first dragon boat made its appearance beside the stately Henley Bridge. "They wondered how long it would all last," said one of the two founder members of Henley Dragons, Geoff Pope.

At 66 – even older than me – Geoff was still not the most



JOHN LAWRENCE

Take to the water: the Henley Dragons club has been rowing on the Thames for more than 20 years

senior member of the crew. That honour fell to Dennis Lewington, who will be 70 in September and started dragon boat racing at the age of 50.

"Although Henley Dragons are still one of the leading clubs we could do with a few younger members if we want to succeed in major competitions," Dennis said.

There are currently 23 dragon boat clubs, mainly in England. This, however, is just the top end. In the charity and commercial sectors it is reckoned that up to 30,000

paddlers take to the water in dragon boats every year.

"I was a rower before I started dragon boat racing," said Geoff Pope. "In this sport we don't get as bogged down with rules and regulations as the rowers do. There is no fuss about weighing competitors, and it is much more of a fun sport."

My mentor for the morning was chairman Phil Kaye, 37. After some energetic warming up exercises we were off.

Helmsman Isobel McLeod barked out the orders:

"attention", "brace the boat", "light pressure", "50 per cent", "100 per cent", and the ultimate – "KICK!". The latter was when we went at full pace in 500m bursts. I managed three of these before being allowed to become a passenger for 20 minutes of our 90-minute session.

When we returned to the river bank I learned how I should have been paddling. You must keep your outside arm straight, look straight ahead, taking your pace from the two strokes and the

drummer, and attempt to twist the outside of the shoulder forward and push your side against the gunwale. When the Helm shouts "KICK", it means you push your outer foot hard against the gunwale and try to transfer all the power from your back, arm and leg into your paddle. After such an exciting morning, I'll be sure to remember for the next time.

• www.henleydragons.com;
the British Dragon Boat Racing Association (www.dragonboat.org.uk)