

# **The Story of Guards Club Park**



**A Silver Jubilee Project  
by Maidenhead Civic Society  
1977-78**

Maidenhead Civic Society is the town's leading amenity group. It was founded in 1960 at the behest of the Council to represent public opinion on planning matters. Today, with around 350 members, it presents an effective, independent and respected voice on planning and environmental issues. Maybe a housing development doesn't fit. Or it could be a parking problem. Or it might be a campaign for a new cultural or leisure facility for the Town. In fact it can be anything that benefits the community by making Maidenhead a better place.

Over the years the Society has successfully lobbied for positive change in Maidenhead. We have implemented a host of projects, like **Guards Club Park** and the Green Way, enhancing character and amenity, and helped to initiate many others, like the formation of PRoM (Partnership for the Rejuvenation of Maidenhead), which drew up the plans for Town Centre regeneration, adopted in 2011.

[www.maidenheadcivicsoc.org.uk](http://www.maidenheadcivicsoc.org.uk)

# The Story of Guards Club Park

September 2018 sees the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the formal opening of Guards Club bridge, part of Guards Club Park. Here we describe how it all came about.

Guards Club Park was created by Maidenhead Civic Society as a Silver Jubilee project, which began in 1976 and finally ended in 1980. The centrepiece was the restoration of the delicate timber and iron footbridge, which was built prior to 1880 and which a team of Civic Society volunteers restored between 1976 and 1978, working on Sunday mornings come rain or shine. Members of the team included Jack Widgery, Harold James (our engineer in charge or "Gaffer"), Michael Bowley, Pat Symons, George Mair, Aubrey Norris, and Richard Poad. In a second phase Vincent Becket, Mac Mackrory and Brian Darracott joined the team building the shelter in the park.



*The bridge and river in the early 1900s showing eel traps in the foreground and the smaller bridge linking the Brigade of Guards Club with its own island*

## The Brigade of Guards Boat Club

By the middle of the 19th century, boating had become a popular leisure activity. In 1865, officers of the Brigade of Guards decided that they should have their own boat club on the Thames. They chose Maidenhead, which had the advantage of being easily accessible from London by train,

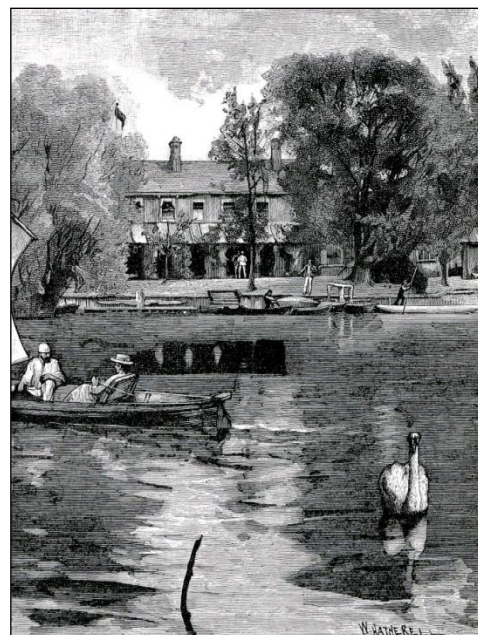


from Windsor by boat and from the Pirbright Depot by horse. Their first premises were in Mill Lane, Taplow, in what was probably an existing building and which was next to (but not part of) the Orkney Arms/Skindles Hotel, on the corner of Mill Lane and the Bath Road, just to east of Maidenhead Bridge. In 1883 the Guards rebuilt and extended their premises, adding a ballroom. A doorway of the former Skindles Hotel bore the inscription "BGBC 1883". It was only after the Guards moved to superior premises on the other side of the river, that Skindles acquired their former building.

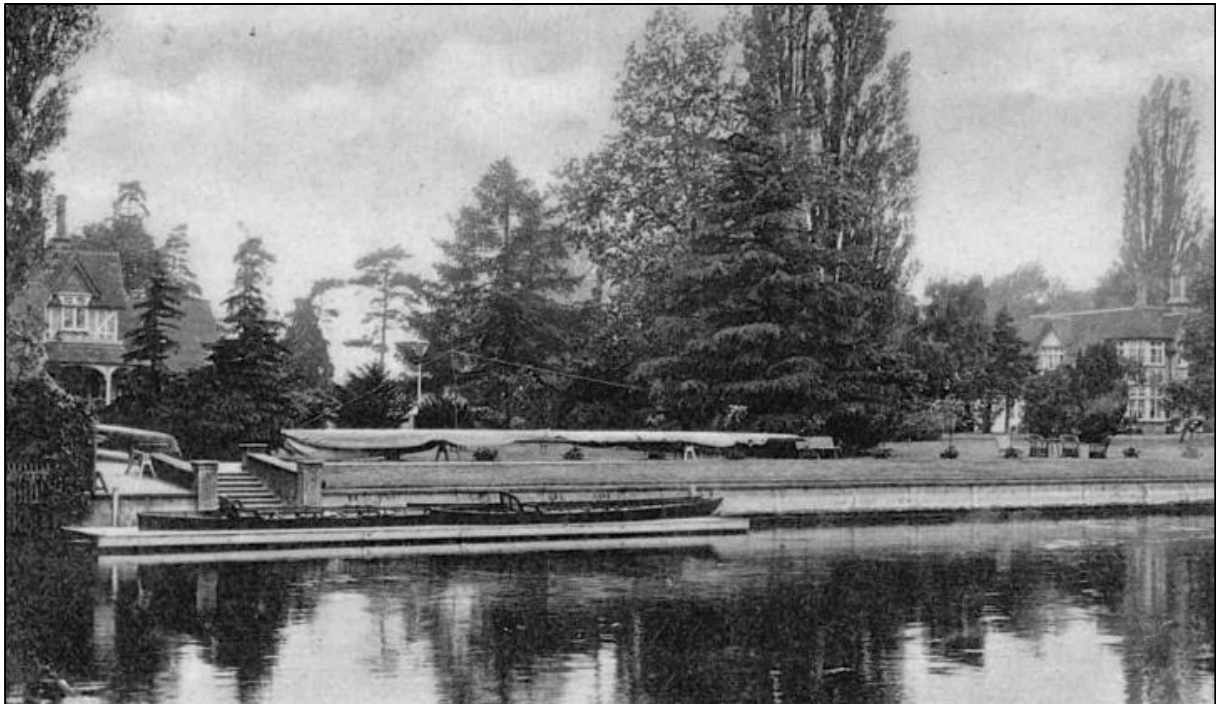


*The BGBC 1883 keystone can be seen in position above the doorway in the right hand corner of the photo. The hotel was closed in 1995 and stood empty until it was demolished in 2015*

*The Brigade of Guards Boat Club in its heyday in the late 1890s. The clubhouse with veranda was later incorporated in Skindles Hotel*



In 1904, the Club moved across the river to a larger site between the road and rail bridges. This comprised two houses, "Riverside" and "Eskdale" with their grounds, donated by Maj-Gen Lord Cheylesmore. There was also an island connected to the bank by a fish weir and footbridge, creating a virtually private backwater. "Riverside" had previously been the Riverside Club, established in 1889 as "a social and non-political club for gentlemen". It offered members boating facilities and stabling for their horses. A ballroom, swimming pool and tennis court were built, and later the club's regatta was a feature of the social scene between the wars.



*The post-1904 club viewed from the island*

The Guards Club was somewhere that members could relax after the rigours of ceremonial duties or society functions. Those who were former university "blues" would train for Henley or other regattas, but most were content to gently scull or punt along the river. At night, after dinner, there would be the usual officers' mess activities such as cards, billiards, or a sing-song in the bar. There was restricted admission for guests but definitely no accommodation for ladies. The town was developing a bit of a reputation by now and a popular contemporary joke went 'Are you married - or do you live in Maidenhead?' It was a favourite place for 'temporary honeymoons' and the phrase 'I'm off to Maidenhead' was usually delivered with a wink. Certain gentlemen housed their mistresses in the local riverside terrace on the opposite bank in River Road, Taplow, which came to be called "Gaiety Row" as many of the women were chorus girls from London's Gaiety Theatre. The more vulgar knew the terrace as

'Whores' Alley'. The Ascot Week balls were glittering occasions, to which society mothers brought their debutante daughters in the hope of finding a good match.

The club originally held its regattas on the Bray Reach course, downstream from the Brunel Bridge. Guests came down from London to Taplow by special train and watched the events from the lawn of "Orkney Cottage", a large house formerly on the Taplow bank just south of the railway bridge. In the 1920's the regattas moved to the club's own riverfront, and included "rag" events such as mop fighting. The regatta balls remained an important part of the social scene.

**MAIDENHEAD BRIDGE.**

*One mile from the Station, and 25-26 from London.*

The exceptional **FREEHOLD RIVERSIDE PROPERTY** well known as  
**" THE GUARDS' BOAT CLUB,"**

Situating just below Maidenhead Bridge, with  
**PRIVATE WOODED ISLAND AND LONG FRONTAGE TO THE RIVER THAMES.**

The property has a Private Approach from the main road, and comprises **THE MAIN CLUB BUILDING**, containing suite of reception rooms, dining and ball rooms, 12 bed rooms, eight cubicles, bath rooms, ample staff quarters, fitted lavatories, &c.

**TOGETHER WITH A SECOND RESIDENCE,**

known as **" EDENDALE,"** containing club rooms and sitting rooms, seven bed and dressing rooms, three bath rooms, extensive offices.

*Company's Electric Light. Gas and Water. Main Drainage. Central Heating. Telephone. Garages.*

The whole is well appointed and fitted for the purpose of a club. There are landing stages for both skiffs and launches, boathouses, &c.

**TENNIS LAWN. GARDENS SHADED BY FINE TREES.**

The whole extending to an area of  
**ABOUT 2 $\frac{3}{4}$  ACRES.**

Is held on lease for 7, 14, or 23 years from 24th June, 1923, at a rental of £500 per annum, which **JOHN D. WOOD and Co.** are instructed to **SELL** by **AUCTION** (unless previously sold), at the London Auction Mart, 155, Queen Victoria-street, E.C.4, on Wednesday, 9th October, at 2.30 p.m. Solicitors:— Messrs. Broughton, Holt and Middlemist, 12, Great Marlborough-street, W.1. Auctioneers:—**JOHN D. WOOD and Co., 6, Mount-street, W.1.**

*An advertisement in The Times describing the facilities that the Guards Club provided when the freehold was put up for sale following the death of the freeholder, Major-General Lord Cheylesmore of the Grenadier Guards*

However the club's finances were causing concern. In 1931, membership was extended to ladies, a sure sign of desperate times, though there was a later reference to the 'Ladies' Annexe' so perhaps they were exiled to a distant part of the premises. In 1936 a swimming pool was built. At this time the club was still only open during the summer.

During World War 2, the ballroom became offices for the Forestry Commission, and temporary membership was extended to ATA ferry pilots.



After the war, there was a determined effort to increase the membership. Central heating was installed so that the club could remain open all year. Some financial improvement probably arose when the Guards Club was used as a riverside setting in the 1949 film "*Kind Hearts and Coronets*" – a black comedy produced by Ealing Studios and starring Alec Guinness, Dennis Price, Joan Greenwood and Valerie Hobson.



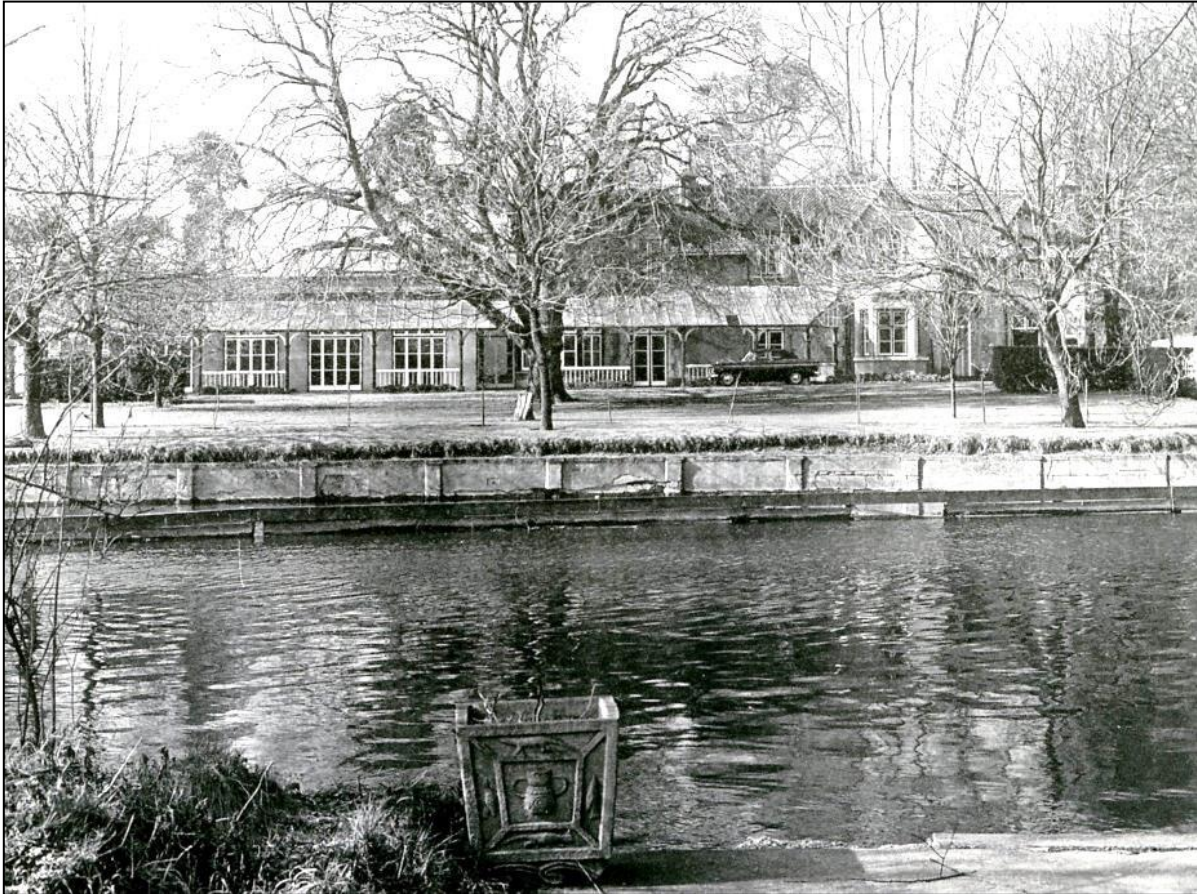
*The clubhouse doubles as Cruikshanks Hotel; Denis Price in the foreground*

*Tea on the lawn*



*Alec Guinness about to board a punt*

The regatta and Ascot balls were revived, some attended by Princesses Elizabeth and Margaret. However the lifestyle of a Guards officer had changed and the popularity of the river for leisure had declined. The club was uneconomic to run.



*The Guards Club near the end of its life in the 1960s*

There was a bold plan to demolish the two Victorian buildings and build a new club with bars and a ballroom. 16 residential flats for officers would be provided. This scheme fell through and in 1965 – in its centenary year – the club gave up its lease and closed. The site was sold to a developer (J A Pye from Oxford) who also owned the land where Oldacres and Horseguards Drive were later built. Planning permission was given for those developments, and for two blocks of riverside flats on the open space at the back of the park; incidentally, the mound just inside the Oldacres entrance covers the club's swimming pool. The council required the island and the immediate riverside area to be dedicated to the public as a 'planning gain'. The club buildings were demolished and the footbridge and a boathouse at its island end (complete with spire) gradually decayed and finally collapsed during the floods of 1974.





*The extent of the Guards' Boat Club; the proposed Oldacres scheme is depicted in the bottom left hand corner*



*The near derelict bridge and boathouse ca. 1975*

## Guards Club Bridge Restored

In 1973, which was European Architectural Year, the Civic Society put on an exhibition about the architecture of Maidenhead. The photographs of the rotting footbridge galvanized the Society into doing something – anything – to prevent it being lost. With fewer than 150 members, very little money in the bank and an estimate from Harold James that the restoration would cost up to £10,000, we set about persuading the developer to let us work on the bridge *before* he actually handed it over to the council. We also persuaded J A Pye to modify the layout of their estate to delete the blocks of flats and increase the area of the riverside land to be dedicated.



Work started in 1976, with the salvaging of the cast iron arches and stanchion posts. The wooden structure was completely replaced. The pile driving and the casting of replica arches (at Cinderford in the Forest of Dean, left) were the only parts of the entire project which were not carried out by Civic Society volunteers.



*Divers inspect the foundations of the decaying bridge*





*Volunteers clear away rotten timbers from the bridge deck near the island*

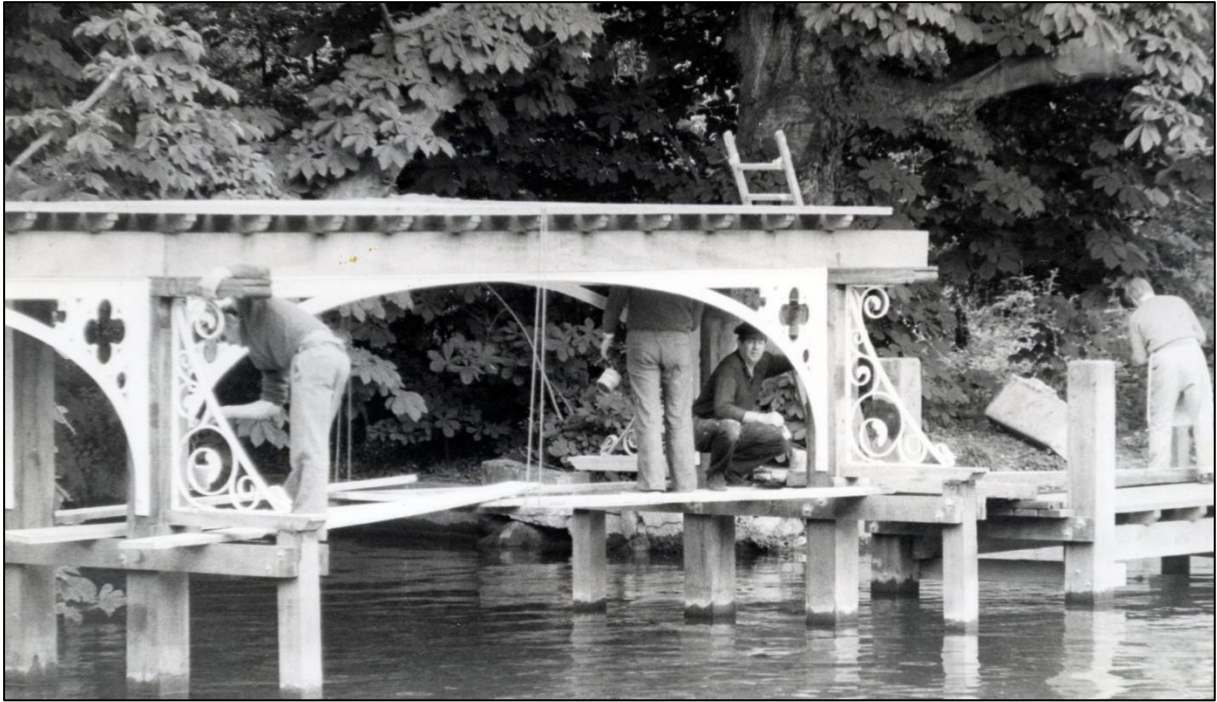
Two Slough firms also gave their services for free for work on the bridge's decorative ironwork. A team from F F Treacher Ltd removed all the old iron from the bridge using oxy-acetylene cutting equipment. Impact Finishers Ltd cleaned the elegant iron arches and braces and returned to the Civic Society for re-painting. Undamaged pieces were put back on the new timber bridge but eight of the 16 half-arches needed replacing (at a cost in 1977 of £200 each).



*Ken Willis and George Field of Treachers cutting through the decorative ironwork*







*The Society's paint crew get to work; the paint (Dulux Gloss White, Poppy and Goldcup!) was donated by ICI Paints Division in Slough, where Jack Widgery was the resident colour advisor*

The boathouse having collapsed, local scouts rescued the fancy spire from its roof, and this was later incorporated into the shelter in phase 2 of the project.



*The derelict boathouse not long before its almost complete collapse*



*Maidenhead scouts get ready to lift off the boathouse spire.....*



*.....gently does it!*





*Maidenhead's Sea Scouts get down to salvaging one of the pillars from the steps on the island that had found its way into the river*

Nothing was wasted: sound wood was saved and used as benches and marker stakes in the new park, and the rotten timber was given to the local Round Table organisation to help fuel its Jubilee bonfire on 6<sup>th</sup> June 1977.

Although promoted as a Silver Jubilee project, which helped us when it came to fund-raising, it was clear that the restoration would take much longer. But as part of the Silver Jubilee celebrations hundreds of people came to the 'park' to enjoy Maidenhead's first rag regatta in years and its first ever Combined Charities Fair. The swimming pool was filled with water for us by the Fire Brigade and radio controlled boats sailed up and down it all afternoon.



As a result of all the publicity, the Society's membership doubled in a single year, and then doubled again the next year. Funds for the project kept flowing in, and in the summer of 1978 we began to clear deep mud from the paths on the island and get the unkempt lawns into shape. We received a hundred shrubs which were planted on Guards Club Island and also fifty rose bushes donated by the Maidenhead Evening Townswomen's Guild. All the landscaping was carried out by volunteers, many from local youth groups.



*Civic Society member Pat Symons proudly shows off one the eight refurbished escutcheons which adorn the deck of the bridge*



*The completed bridge, September 1978*

The project was formally opened, to great acclaim, on the afternoon of 30th September 1978 by the Lord Lieutenant of Berkshire (Col. the Hon. Gordon Palmer) who, together with Mayor and Mayoress (Cllr and Mrs Neville Whitely), arrived in a procession of about twelve boats, including steam boats and slipper launches, having set off from the High Steward's barge, which in those days was normally moored at Bridge Gardens, the other side of Maidenhead Bridge.

The public was invited the opening and there were stalls and sideshows, entertainment by the Ellington Morris Men, and the Band of the Welsh Guards played.

After members of the Civic Society who had been engaged in restoring the bridge were presented, the Lord Lieutenant went on to inspect a guard of honour and then up onto the bridge to perform the opening ceremony.



*A rather anxious-looking Richard Poad (left, with trademark beard) looks over his shoulder!*

The official part of the proceedings over, the public tea tent opened and Society members stayed on hand to show off their work and hopefully encourage more to join the Society.





*The bridge open at last to the public – their first chance to walk over to the island*



*A pen and ink drawing by Jack Widgery of the newly opened bridge, used for fund-raising greetings cards*



# Awards for restoring Victorian footbridge



Chairman of Berks County Council, Mr. Lewis Moss (centre) presents Civic Trust certificates to chairman of Maidenhead & District Civic Society, Mr. Jack Widgery (right) and vice-chairman, Mr. Harold James.

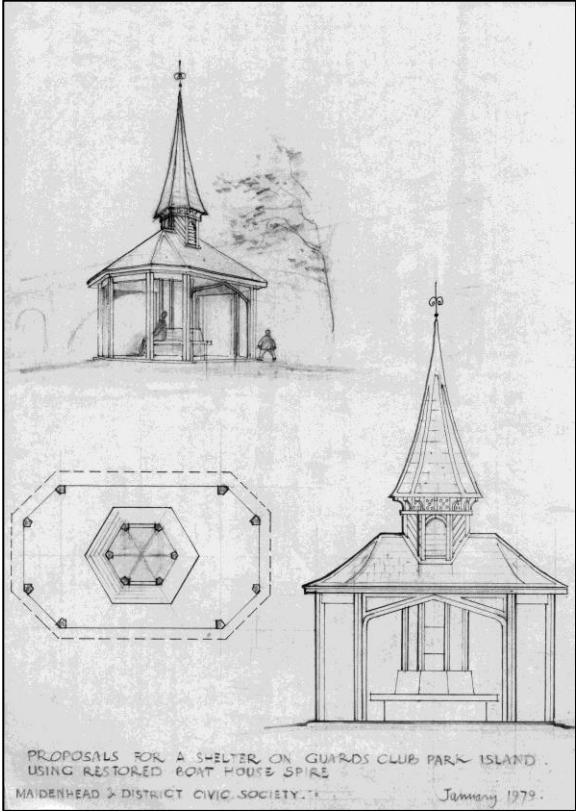
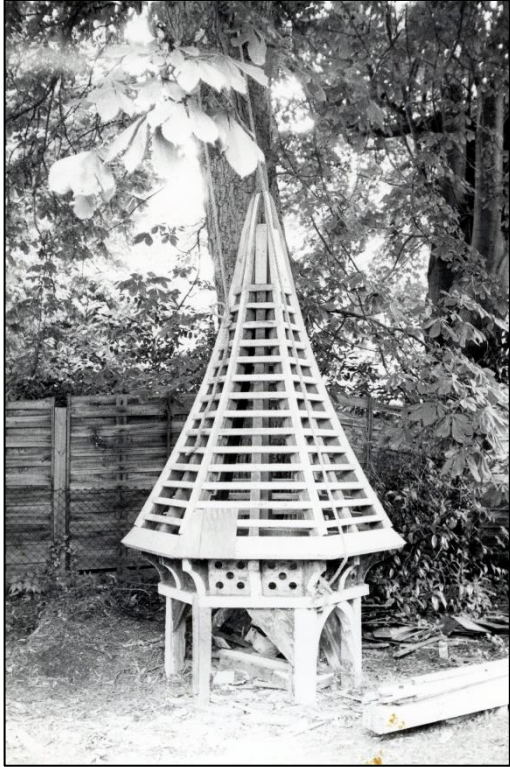
*The success of the project was crowned by the award of a Civic Trust Commendation in 1980 (clipping from the Maidenhead Advertiser)*

## **Guards Club Park Emerges**

The volunteers took a year off, and then built the little shelter in the park, using a wooden summerhouse on top of which we put the spire rescued from the boathouse.

Brian Darracott recalls: "The building of Guards Club Shelter has particular memories for me, as it was through being roped in to help – almost literally! – that I and Ann became members of the Civic Society. At that time (1979/80) we lived in Guards Club Road, near Maidenhead Bridge, and often wondered why there was so much traffic to-ing and fro-ing with cars pulling trailers laden with all sorts of DIY equipment. Eventually curiosity got the better of me and I wandered down to take a closer look. As I recall it, the frame of the shelter was up and the workers were pondering how best to lift up the quite heavy spire on to the top. I offered the use of my heavy-duty block and tackle gear (previously used to assist in getting my Jeep out of tight spots in the African bush!) and

was immediately dragooned by Richard Poad into the work party (he would have made an excellent 18th century press-gang officer!). It was only a matter of time before Ann and I were signed up for membership.



*Above left: the frame of the rescued boathouse spire undergoing renovation. Above right: the original concept drawings for the shelter, drawn up in January 1979. Right: the completed shelter ready for the formal opening.*







*A montage of photos, assembled in 1989 for the exhibition accompanying the unveiling of the commemorative plaques, showing various stages in the construction of the shelter. Unfortunately the originals are now lost*



The little shelter in the park was formally opened by the Mayor of Windsor & Maidenhead, Cllr Arthur Jacob, around Eastertime 1982. A good crowd of Society members and local residents turned out to see the fruits of their efforts recognised.



*The formal cutting of the tape by the Mayor, Cllr Arthur Jacob, with Society members Michael Bowley and Harold James*



*The "workers" pose proudly with the Mayor and Mayoress*



*Society member Ann Darracott presents the Mayoress with a cake modelled on the shelter*

We also salvaged a pair of pillars from a nearby site and hung on these pillars the gates from Maidenhead's original public library, which had been languishing in the council depot, and these now form the gateway at the Guards Club Road entrance to the park.

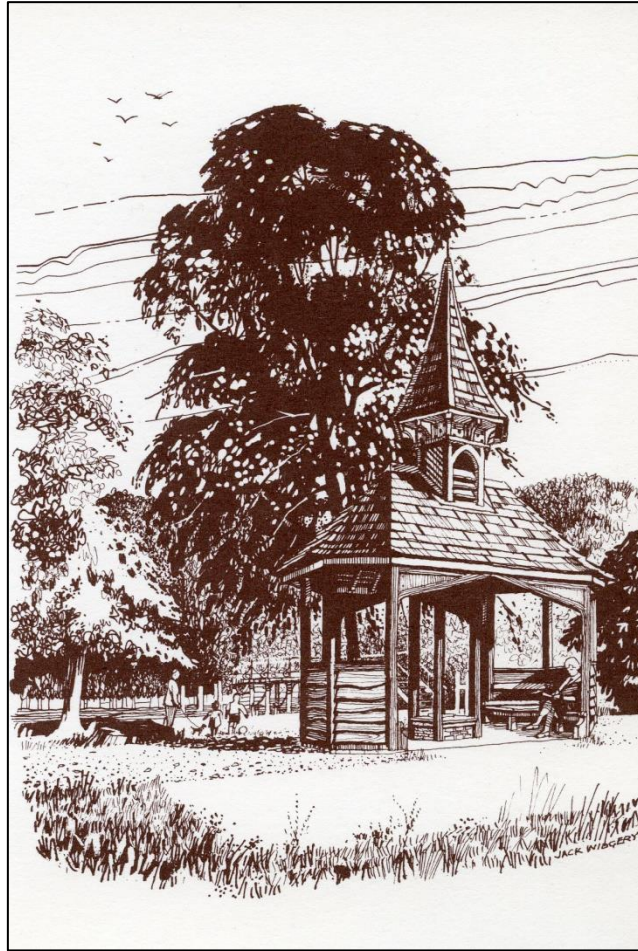
*The gates then.....*



*.....and now*







*Once again, artist Jack Widgery produced charming sketches for Civic Society cards and notelets*





The final phase of the Civic Society's involvement in the creation of the park was the installation of commemorative plaques at the two entrances to the park. These were formally unveiled on 23<sup>rd</sup> April 1989, and the occasion was taken to mount a small exhibition about the history and creation of the park.



*The plaque at the Oldacres entrance*



*Pat Symons explains the background and importance of the project*

## **The Park under Threat**

Since its opening, the Park appeared to be an attraction not only to the general public but also to the local youth who often congregated there in the weekend evenings and left their litter behind. Over the years the shelter in the park has on many occasions been defaced with graffiti. The Council (the Royal Borough of Windsor & Maidenhead) managed to clean the worst off, but the shelter has had to be repainted several times over its lifetime. The bridge railings were also vandalised and the grass in the park damaged by motorcycles racing round. The local Thames Reach Residents' Association (TRRA), with support from the Civic Society, instituted a monitoring regime, and also occasional working parties to clean up the graffiti and other damage. Eventually the Council instituted a policy of locking the park gates between dusk and 7.00 a.m. It also became necessary to restrict access to the island via the bridge during the months of April, May and June in order to protect the wildfowl and in particular the swans that nest on the island. Things now seem to have settled down a bit, and such vandalism is now rare. However, the ravages of time and weather meant that the bridge needed a major refurbishment in 1997.

Perhaps the greatest threats to the idyllic setting of the park came from two proposed major building/construction projects. Somewhat ironically, in December 1987 the Maidenhead Rowing Club submitted a planning application for a large boathouse/clubhouse complex in Guards Club Park, leasing the land from the Council. Their current site was needed for expansion of the Riviera Hotel. The plans showed a large 10m tall boathouse with a shiny aluminium roof sited next to the river side of the present car park, with a new car park for 38 cars on British Rail land in the shadow of the railway bridge. The clubhouse was to cater for functions with up to 150 people. The TRRA together with the Civic Society mounted a vigorous lobbying campaign against the scheme, citing major concerns over loss of public open space created by community effort and public subscription; change of character of the park, loss of tree cover, intrusive building and despoiling of river views; greatly increased traffic, cars, boat trailers etc; and noise from evening lettings. A Council working party was set up to explore alternative sites. The application was eventually withdrawn, not least because of a restrictive covenant between the Council and the developer (J A Pye Ltd) made when the land was dedicated to the public in 1978 which would have been legally contested in the event of any attempt to relax it. The Rowing Club eventually moved to its present site in Springfield Road, across the river on the Taplow side.

Of no less concern was the threat posed by the Crossrail scheme. As part of the Crossrail proposals, the Great Western Main Line would be electrified. This required the provision of new 25kV overhead line

equipment, generally employing portal frames, although masts with cantilevers would be used over Maidenhead railway bridge.

There was alarm over the plan to use Guards Club Park as a depot for storage of materials and equipment likely to be involved in the electrification of the rail-lines through to Maidenhead. Such a scheme would have been totally unacceptable. The park is a public open space in a town which, on the government's own criteria at the time, was forty percent below the norms in this respect. Moreover, the park was created by the initiative and effort of the Civic Society. It seemed on the face of it that the proposal had much to do with the convenience of the contractors. Crossrail had proposed that at least part of the Guards Club Park car park at the eastern end of Oldacres would be used by the contractor as a storage compound, providing a small temporary site office/store facility. It was also proposed to carry scaffolding through the Park and across the footbridge to the island in the middle of the river to be erected adjacent to the middle pier of Brunel's railway bridge. The ornate structure refurbished by the Civic Society as part of the Silver Jubilee Park project was certainly not intended to support heavy loads.



*The delicate footbridge with Brunel's magnificent railway bridge behind*

The Civic Society campaigned for and won some important concessions over the electrification of the railway which threatened to deface the historic Brunel Bridge and also the use of Guards Club Park as a depot during the engineering works. We suggested they use barges to ship materials to the site, instead of using the Park and the Bridge. This idea was accepted but never employed. Our delegation of Nigel Cockburn, Tina Sell and John McIntosh presented the Society's case to the House of Commons Select Committee on Crossrail. As it turned out, the overhead



gantries on the railway bridge have been installed, but thankfully plans to use Guards Club Park were dropped.

### Guards Club Park Today

The Guards Club Park is an attractive and popular feature of the town, and a reminder of a part of its history as a leisure resort.

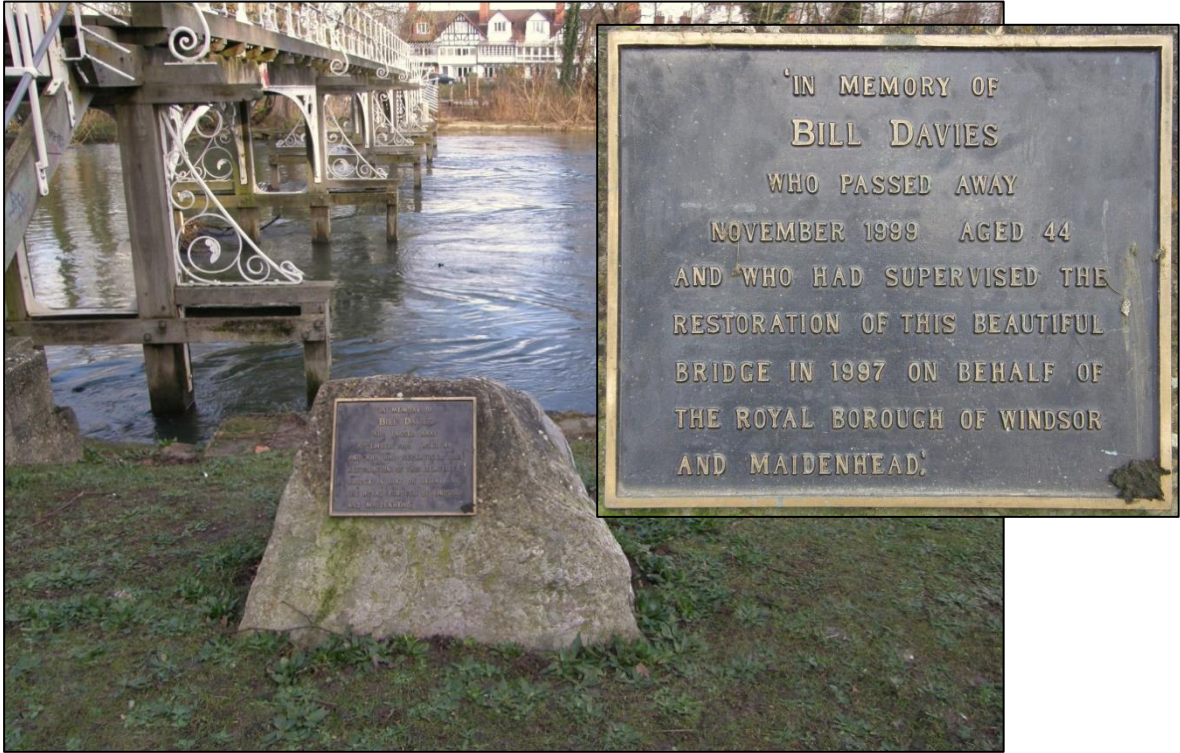


The park is well maintained by the Council and there several information boards dotted around to briefly explain to the visitor how it came about and what there is to see.





There are also some commemorative reminders of those who contributed to the upkeep of the bridge and the creation of the park, though, sadly, many – if not most – of those who gave so much time and effort to the project have now passed away and are remembered only by their surviving colleagues.



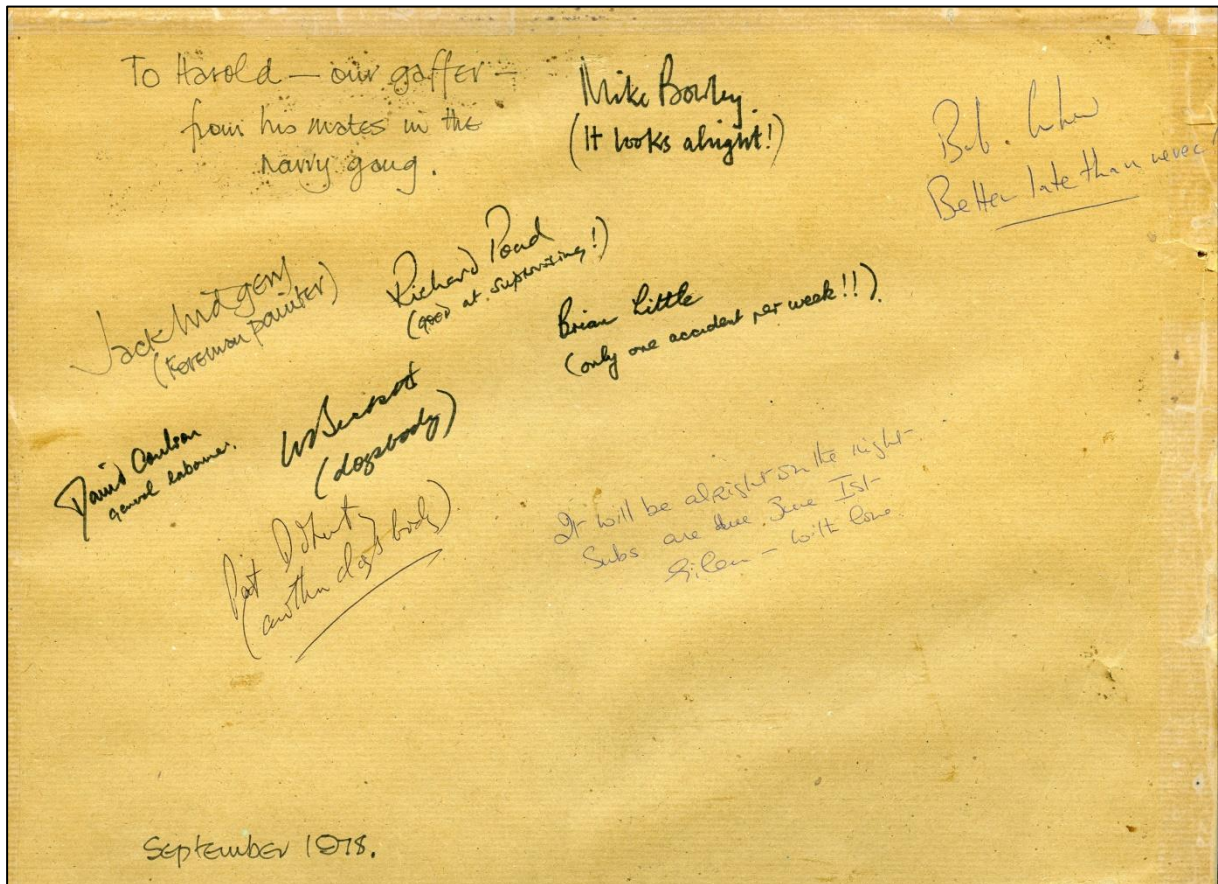
*Bill Davies, who supervised the bridge restoration in 1997*



*Jack Widgery, long-time member of the Civic Society and a key member of the original 1977-8 bridge restoration team*



Perhaps the only "memorial" we have is depicted on the back of the picture of the bridge shown on page 13. The picture was presented to Harold James – the "Gaffer" – and is signed with affection by the others in the crew.



At Guards Club Park the Civic Society created a public asset of lasting worth, and not surprisingly has a proprietorial interest in the area. After an initial period of neglect, the park is now well looked after by the council and provides a quiet oasis at the riverside, where the only modern things in sight are the trains on Brunel's bridge and the planes above your heads. Add a little imagination, and you could be back in Maidenhead's heyday, with punts on the river and pretty girls installed across the river in Gaiety Row! One wonders what they would have made of Crossrail's proposal to use the park as a building depot (which, thankfully, didn't happen).

**Compiled by Brian Darracott, March 2018**



Notes: This compilation has drawn on short histories prepared by Richard Poad on the occasion of the Civic Society's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2010; Brian Boulter of Maidenhead Heritage Centre, who carried out more detailed research some years ago; and the Civic Society's photo archive. An interesting online article about the history of the Brigade of Guards Club in the context of the history of rowing on the Thames can be read here <https://heartheboatsing.com/2016/09/29/guardsmen-in-a-row-part-ii-the-brigade-of-guards-boat-club/>. To the above I have added my own recollections and photos and, hopefully, tied it all together from the Civic Society's perspective.







# Maidenhead Civic Society

Preserving the best – improving the rest

[www.maidenheadcivicsoc.org.uk](http://www.maidenheadcivicsoc.org.uk)  
Registered Charity No. 272102