

Hadaway Harry! The Story of Harry Clasper



Chapter 1

This was it. This was to be the day that Harry Clasper, the King of the River Tyne, would finally become a world champion. He had been working on developing the fastest boat that could be rowed, so streamlined that when his oars skimmed the surface of a river, it could glide across the water like turbo charged swan. But, he had been in a similar position before. Could Harry really do it this time?

With four other members of his family, Harry had come down to London to take part in the Thames Regatta. However, they weren't only going to rely on their fitness and their skill, not that they were short of either. They also had their secret weapon; their new boat the Lord Ravensworth! But could they really do it?

Chapter 2

Harry had been born on 5th July 1812 in Dunston, which is now part of Gateshead. In those days, Dunston was a small village about a mile upstream from Gateshead. When Harry was a little older, his family moved to Jarrow a few miles down river, but still next to the River Tyne. Harry grew up next to the river, with the sights and sounds of it never far away. Harry enjoyed playing by

the river....little did he know just how important it would be in his life...

However, it was the local coal industry, which first called Harry to the world of work. The town of Jarrow had a pit and it was there that young Harry went to work at the age of 15. Unfortunately Jarrow Pit was notorious for firedamp. Firedamp is a gas, which can easily explode. If released from a certain kind of coal, which was found in the mine in Jarrow, it could easily cause explosions.

It was a major turning point in Harry's life, when he decided that working in a mine was not for him. He had to decide what he was going to do with his life. Instead, he found work in Brown's boatyard in Jarrow as an apprentice. This means that Harry worked there, but at the same time was also being trained as a boat builder. At this time, the River Tyne was becoming one of the great shipbuilding rivers of the world. At Brown's boatyard, Harry was taught carpentry and shipbuilding skills, which would come in very handy for Harry later in life.

In 1831 there was a great miners strike and Harry's family decided that they might have to move away from Jarrow. Soon they had moved back to Dunston, where he found a new job as a wherryman and a coke burner in nearby Derwenthaugh at the Garesfield Coke Company. A wherryman was somebody who rowed a small rowing boat. This would also be useful to Harry in later life...

In his early to mid twenties, Harry also worked at Hawks, Crawshay and Sons, while in 1836, Harry married Susannah Hawks, who was from a wealthy family. On the marriage certificate, Susannah signed her name, while Harry simply put an 'x' where his signature should have been. Although Harry had never had the chance of an education, when he could have been taught to write and read, he would soon prove just how clever he really was!

Chapter 3

By the time he was in his mid-twenties, Harry was more than a little interested in rowing. This should come as no surprise; he had lived near the River Tyne all his life and had two jobs directly related to boats and boat-making. Rowing was becoming a major sport on Tyneside, where, in the days before football, it was to become the major sport in the fast growing city of Newcastle and its nearby towns and villages. Sometimes men rowed on their own and sometimes in teams.

By now Harry was obsessed by all things to do with boats. At the time, rowing boats were just the big, heavy bottomed boats that were used for work. They were not streamlined and were not designed to go really quickly. Harry was to change all that! Harry was also determined to show that he and his friends could row as well as anybody.

So it was that Harry formed a rowing crew, along with his brother William and two other men. It was Harry who was the most important of these rowers, as he was in the Stroke position. This meant that he sat nearest the stern or back of the boat and it was Harry that set the stroke rate, determining how fast or slow the boat would go. Soon they were winning races! In their boat the Swallow, what was became known as the Derwenthaugh Crew, was starting to gain an enviable reputation along the River Tyne.

Chapter 4

Harry decided to take over an inn in Derwenthaugh called the Skiff Inn. This meant that Harry had some income and gave him time to develop his real passions; rowing and boat-building. He set himself the task of building two skiffs - small boats, which could be used for rowing. He built them for himself. The first, built in 1840 was called the Hawk, and in the following year a second skiff was built called the Young Hawk. It was in this boat that Clasper won the Durham Regatta Single Sculls race in 1842.

Soon Harry and his brothers had beaten all their rivals on the River Tyne. Now it was time to take on the rowers from London and get a crew to race them on their own River Tyne! So Harry put out a challenge to the Thames Watermen, who were the undisputed champions of the world and they accepted the challenge. The date of the race was set for 16th July 1844 - could Harry and his brothers do it? Could they beat a crew from London? The race was held over a five-mile course from the old Tyne Bridge upstream to Lemington.....

To the immense disappointment of Harry and his brothers, the crew from London won an easy victory. What had gone wrong?

It didn't take Harry long to work out what the problem was; although his boat the St Agnes was considerably narrower than the London boat, at 29 inches, compared to the Thames boat, which was 40 inches wide, Harry's boat was a whole 60% heavier than the boat from the Thames...

Harry knew what he had to do.....

Chapter 5

In fact Harry had already started to do what needed to be done. He had started work on a lighter boat called the Five Brothers. This was a four-oared boat, which also had outriggers. These would help to prevent the boat from capsizing, but just as importantly they would help the boat go quicker. This boat was an improvement on the St Agnes, being much lighter, but still not as light as the boats on the Thames. The Five Brothers was taken to the Thames Regatta in 1844, where a lot of people took interest in it. It was shaped like half a gun barrel and some of the people in London laughed at it, thinking that it would be impossible to row in it. Surely Harry and his crew would fall out of it into the river? It had no keel and was fitted with outriggers. Nobody had seen anything quite like it before. Now all skiffs are based on this model. In the end Harry and his crew were not completely successful. The Derwenthaugh Crew won a prize of £50, but they still couldn't win the main prize of £100. Harry had to take his ideas further.....

Consequently, Harry developed a new boat called the Lord Ravensworth. this was an even better boat than the Five Brothers and now the Derrwenthaugh Crew, made up of Harry and his brothers and uncle Ned, were ready to take on anyone. They took the Lord Ravensworth to the 1845 Thames Regatta and finally they did it... The lads from the Tyne won the Champion Fours, beating two other crews, including one from London. They were world champions!

When they returned to Tyneside, Harry and the rest of the crew were given a great Geordie heroes' welcome. The city of Newcastle came to a standstill, as people came out from their homes and their places of work to welcome Harry and his crew back.

But this would only be the start. Harry and his crew were to repeat this feat an amazing six times more! In fact they became so famous that Tyneside's famous anthem the Blaydon Races has a strong link with them. On 5th June 1862 Harry had a testimonial night at the famous Balmbras Music Hall in the Bigg Market. This was a special night of entertainment to raise money for Harry and to say thank you for all that he had done to give Geordies a real sense of pride in who they were and where they came from. The stage was decorated with some of his famous skiffs or boats and the night was a great success. It ended with

Harry's friend Geordie Ridley singing a song he had just written; the Blaydon Races, the first time this great song was sung in public!

Chapter 6

Harry achieved a great deal in his life. And he achieved it despite starting work without being able to read and write. This just shows that you can do great things in life, even if you find things at school hard sometimes. Harry was able to make great use of his intelligence, despite this early disadvantage.

Harry was also of course an inventor, as well as a great sportsman. The boat that he designed, which helped him to win the world championship, is still the model which top rowers use today, 150 years after Harry died. Indeed Harry was part of a great 19th century Tyneside tradition of inventors, which included George Stephenson inventing the first steam trains, Lord Armstrong inventing the hydraulic crane and Joseph Swan and the invention of the first light bulb, while at the end of the 18th century North Shields-born William Wouldhave invented the modern lifeboat.

Harry died on 12th July at his the Tunnel Inn in the Ouseburn part of Newcastle. This was long before the days of social media, or even radio or television, but the sad news still spread quickly around Newcastle and soon it seemed as if the whole city was in mourning.

Perhaps the greatest tribute to Harry can be paid by looking at the size of the crowd who paid their respects by watching the funeral procession on Sunday 17th July. It was reckoned that at least 100 000 watched it at a time when the population of Newcastle and Gateshead combined was about 200 000. Harry was finally laid to rest in Whickham Cemetery, where you can still see his grave to this day.

Peter Sagar August 2018, with grateful thanks to David Clasper for all his help.