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Councillor Sian Reid, Leader of the City Council
Philippa Noon, Cam Conservators River Manager,
Julian Huppert, MP
Bill Key, CRA president
Pete Convey, CUCBC chair,
Andrew Johnson, Local ARA representative

13 June 2010

Dear Sirs/Madams,

It has been appalling and surreal to read the reports in the Cambridge News concerning rowers, an aggressive swan and an angry barge owner, Bob Middleton (self-appointed defender of this swan). From these articles it would appear that the majority of Cambridge actually hates University of Cambridge, their students and in particular their rowers who allegedly are aloof, disrespectful and most probably relish killing swans. I am writing to make you realise that these articles are totally one-sided and unbalanced.

The swan that is evoking such passions against the university and student rowers is the pawn in a most bizarre town and gown squabble. It was the Cambridgeshire Rowing Association (CRA) that initially requested an aggressive swan be relocated as it is attacking rowers and canoeists. The CRA has nothing to do with the university. But, to the untrained eye student rowers cannot be told apart from CRA rowers: "All rowers are arrogant, university toffs" is the spin that the Cambridge News zealously construes whenever there are issues between rowers and other residents on the river Cam. The most straightforward action for the Cam Conservancy would have been to relocate the swan to elsewhere. But due to the immense negative campaign orchestrated by the Cambridge News during the recent May Bump races the college boat clubs have been forced to bend over backwards. They amended their pre race warm-up in front of thousands of spectators as to avoid "disturbing the swan and avoid rocking" the oversized barge Bob Middleton has moored on the racing stretch of the river. This significantly detracted from the enjoyment of the races for everyone who had gathered to watch them. Would a golf tournament tolerate a similar disruption? Why is one person allowed to continue disrupting a sport enjoyed by thousands people?

Perhaps rowing still seems like an elitist student activity and maybe because rowers train and race next to less affluent areas of Cambridge such as East Chesterton their very presence is seen as provocative by the locals in that area of Cambridge. But that is an underlying social problem that a tug of war over a swan or irrational curbs on rowing will never fix.

Another reason for the animosity towards the university may be people who feel they have no stake whatsoever in the university. This is in spite of the university being the biggest employer in the region and students certainly making an important contribution to the local retail economy. The university has also founded science

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parks around Cambridge hosting many successful companies. In fact there are plenty of benefits to enjoy from the university for non-members. All the colleges are open to visits by any Cambridge resident free of charge. That applies also to the renowned world class Cambridge University Library which any Cambridge resident can use. There are societies organised by the students that are also open to non-student Cambridge residents, such as student dancing societies. If Cambridge residents who are envious of university members choose not to use such amenities that is not a fault rowing.

As for rowing, CRA clubs allows the sport to be enjoyed by all residents regardless of social background or level of skill. Memberships of CRA clubs are cheap around £180 per year. It is undeniable that these clubs benefit from a continuous intake of past students that settle to work in Cambridge. There are over 1,000 CRA club members and the CRA bumping races involves four times as many people. Evidently, rowing significantly heightens the quality of life for many residents in and around Cambridge.

If Cambridge wishes to remain a national centre for rowing at all levels that still can field home grown athletes of international calibre then it must recognise that there often will be times on the narrow river that will inconvenience others who live close to the river or want to share the river space. Failure to do so and by allowing the Cambridge News waging its misguided class war may over time reduce rowing activity in Cambridge: Local government will acquiesce the irrational hysteria and impose ever more absurd restrictions on the sport.

Ironically rowing would then become an elitist sport as only those few athletes resourceful enough to train elsewhere than in Cambridge (say Ely) will bother to travel there. Maybe this would increase the turnaround of the Cambridge News. Is that what Cambridge wants? Would Sport England, the National Lottery and other funding bodies which have helped Cambridge rowing clubs tremendously over the years feel that it is worthwhile sponsoring Cambridge rowing clubs?

Sincerely,

Robert Oeffner
Rob Roy Boat Club member
Churchill College Boat Club alumnus

Cc: Cambridge News
Cambridgeshire Rowing Association
Cambridge University Combined Boat Clubs
Rob Roy Boat Club
Churchill College Boat Club