

IN THE BEGINNING

The Wadham Boat Club Society and Vere Ducker

By Clive Dickinson May 1996

Vere put his stamp on WCBCS right from the start.

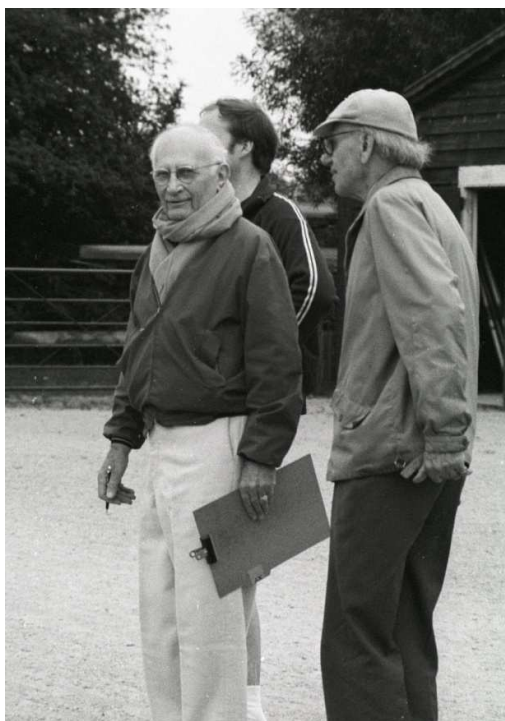
He and I first met on 6 July 1974. I know this because my small and rather faded University Diary has a brief entry 'Henley - lunch Revd. Ducker'. It was the Saturday of the regatta; a fitting occasion to bring together Wadham oarsmen down the years.

The story goes back a few weeks earlier, to the close of the Trinity term when the idea of forming a link between rowers past and present took root. From the outset we knew we needed someone with authority and presence to run it; someone who would carry weight with the Senior Common Room and would inspire old members to sign up. James Lunt, then Domestic Bursar, had suggested having a word with his immediate predecessor, Ben Arber. Ben was still in College quite a bit and had a soft spot for the Boat Club with whom he had seen considerable success, rowing for Wadham in the 1920s. Ben liked the idea and mentioned a fellow oarsmen from his day as someone who might be able to launch the new organisation. A note from him a few days later confirmed the appointment and a cheery wave across the rows of green deck chairs beside the river and the unforgettable cry of 'Clive....' brought us together.

Vere had already been busy by the time we sat down that balmy afternoon twenty-two years ago. He had a draft committee structure in mind, a list of possible officers, a name for the new society, a mission statement (in all but name) and a strong personal commitment which was to remain undimmed. That afternoon Vere turned a rather hazy undergraduate idea into a practical reality. Then he set about making it work.

He brought energy and discipline into WCBCS. He also brought experienced and willing cohorts in Ben Arber, Peter Jones, Harry Fawcett and David Gazes, all of whom had an affection for rowing at College level and significantly, in the case of Peter and David, at club and international level.

Perhaps Vere's most telling commitment came on the opening page of the first Newsletter (Winter 1974), which he edited: 'It is the firm intention of the committee to keep close contact with the Boat Club, i.e. to be real people not faceless names.' No one who knew Vere could ever accuse him of being a faceless name!



Vere, clipboard in hand, organising the 1985 Regatta with Harry Fawcett



Vere working on the Regatta draw, 1985

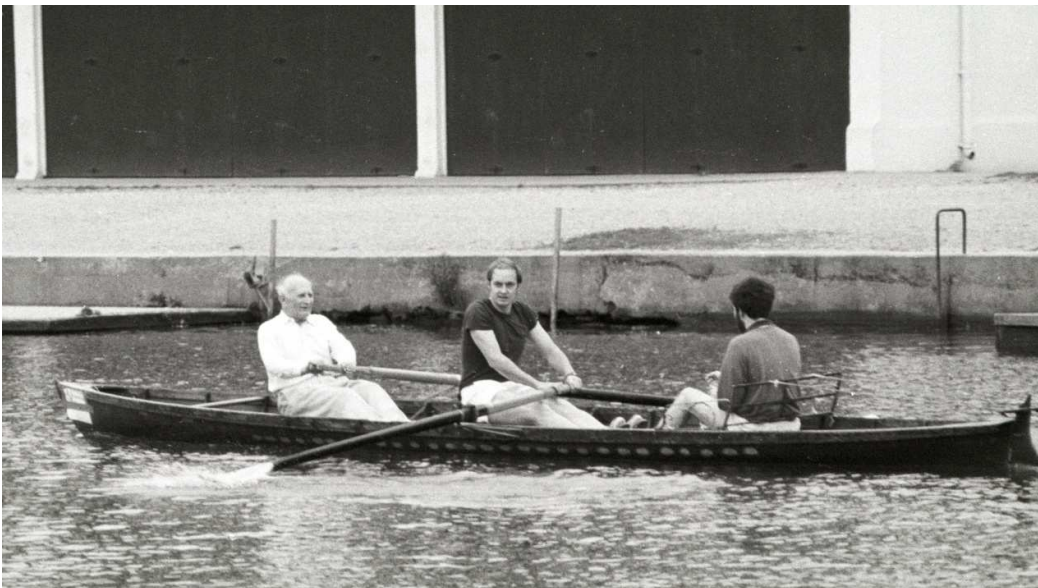
We all have enduring images of him - firm, (occasionally frustrating), but fond generous and open-hearted. Half-a-century separated Vere's rowing days from those of the Wadham crews that first knew him through the Society, but in the timeless bond that College rowing seems to weld those fifty years were of little consequence. It was Vere who gave the first gift from the Society, a mirror for the bank tub. Further, increasingly substantial, gifts were to follow over the years - all of them practical acts of great generosity

In those early days Vere was a "hands-on" chairman too: coaching from a bicycle clad in ancient 'blanket bags' (though he had never rowed on a sliding seat in his life); shouting encouragement from the tow-path in the worst of weather; tactfully persuading the College to spend a little more on the Boat Club than they might otherwise have done; funding pre-term training. Vere set a standard of involvement and participation in the Boat Club that still holds true today in the training and fund-raising work that those commendably active Society members continue to offer.

Vere gave the Society an identity and a purpose, and the tributes paid to him by present day crews, who know of him by reputation alone, are a powerful statement of what we all feel.

There can't be many boat clubs whose senior officers donated their OAP Christmas bonuses to club funds. That was one of Vere's ideas to benefit a new generation of Wadham rowers. It made him special then and the memory of what he did through and for the Boat Club Society will make him very special always.

Clive Dickinson



Vere enjoying an outing in a tub pair, 1985