

President's Report by Andrew Clark at the Annual General Meeting on 20 April 2011

Fellow members of the Clyde River Steamer Club,

Sometimes things have to change if they are to remain the same.

In October, when I kicked off the winter session with a talk on the Glen Sannox, I asked a number of questions about our Club. Given that the word 'steamer' has become an anachronism, should we, the Clyde River Steamer Club, change our name? How can we make our activities more relevant to the internet generation? Should we be making more strenuous efforts to attract the new breed of steamer dreamer, whose interest revolves solely around CalMac and car ferries and related internet sites? What I said was that, if the Club we hold so dear was to continue to thrive and restock its membership, we would need to broaden our appeal. As well as looking to the past, which this Club is very good at doing, we would have to look to the future.

In that context, I must admit that my year as president has not been the success I hoped it would be. In numbers if not in enthusiasm, our membership continues to fall, while the average age continues to rise. As I said in my letter accompanying the AGM agenda, our Club faces a particular dilemma, in that there is only one steamer left on the Clyde – and thanks to rocketing fuel costs and temperamental weather, this summer may be her last. There is no longer any yard on the Clyde building merchant ships. The ferries around our coasts exist not to support the pleasure principle, as steamers used to do, but for the practical purpose of transferring vehicles, goods and people from one point to another. If, as expected, the Gourrock-Dunoon run is axed, we will be left with just two Clyde services with reasonable-sized boats. All this is decimating the constituency of people who are potential members of our Club.

There **is** a community out there who enjoy sailing, and not just on the Waverley. But a sizable proportion of them no longer want to join a Club, as they might have done in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, when many of us joined. In 1932, when our Club was founded, meeting together in the winter months and sailing together in summer was the accepted form of social networking. Today the seasons play no part in this. The accepted form of social networking today is a year-round activity conducted largely by way of the internet, as shipsofcalmac, shipsnostalgia, clydeshipping and other websites have demonstrated. Most of us could name people that we see on the Waverley, or taking photographs at James Watt Dock, or whose signature we recognise on ship-related internet sites, who are not members of the CRSC and have no interest in joining, even at the bargain rate of £20 per annum. And the number of Club members below the age of 40, never mind 20 or 30, is so low that we could probably count them on two hands. It has also come to my attention that there are quite a few lapsed members who nevertheless continue to pursue their enthusiasm in shipping-related circles. We can't dragoon them into rejoining any more than we can persuade the bloggers and twitters to sign up.

All this poses the question: does our Club have a long-term future? On the surface, you might think the question unnecessarily alarmist. Given the voluntary nature of our Club, it operates extremely efficiently. Its funds are in good order, and that is in no small way due to the canny management of our Treasurer, Billy Tomlinson, who knows, better than any of us, how vital it is for us to cover our costs without digging

into our reserves. Our meetings and methods of communication are equally orderly, thanks to the care taken and time devoted, from week to week, month to month, by our secretary, Eric Schofield. Without these two individuals, the workings of this Club would grind to a halt, and we must not take them for granted: thank you both.

We have a more than adequate place to meet, and we continue to attract excellent speakers, as has been demonstrated this session, with a varied and authoritative package of talks from Guy Platten of CMAL, Colin Tucker, Ian McCrorie and Fraser MacHaffie, who came all the way from Ohio to show us it is still possible to do an original piece of research on an unexplored corner of steamer history. Our publications are well received, and I pay special tribute to John Newth for the speed and skill with which he continues to amass so much material for the Review. We have a new Publicity Officer, Neil Guthrie, who has brought energy and fresh ideas to his task, and we have seen the photographic sales resume a very positive balance, thanks to the work of Iain Quinn. Stuart Craig continues to bring good cheer to the unglamorous but very necessary job of membership secretary, and I am pleased that the importance of his role has been acknowledged in the new constitution. Elsie Hinshalwood organised a really excellent Members' Night, and other committee members – notably Graeme Hogg, Archie McCallum, Robert Cleary and our Immediate Past President, Richard Orr – contributed wisely. It is wonderful to have as our figurehead Robin Boyd, who embodies so much of the Club's tradition but has also shown himself to be hearteningly open-minded about future developments, especially concerning digitisation of the Club's slide collection.

The committee member who took on the biggest burden this session was Charles McCrossan, who did the lion's share of work on the constitution, and who has spent hours and hours and hours developing csc.org.uk, our new website, with help from Neil Guthrie and John Newth. Charles has done a fantastic job, and I thank him on behalf of us all. This is also the moment when I can finally, belatedly, pay tribute to Gibbie Anderson, our pioneering website convener, who has not been present at the past three meetings due to illness. I am delighted to see him back in our midst tonight. With notable good grace, Gibbie handed over to Charles before Christmas, after 11 years of looking after our website. Back in 1999, Gibbie single-handedly moved the Club into the digital age, raising our profile on the internet in a way that gave countless people around the world their first point of contact with our activities. Gibbie performed this task quietly, out of the limelight, but with characteristic good humour. His work provided the springboard for csc.org.uk and we are hugely grateful to him.

We also have a new Convener of Cruises. After 10 challenging years in the job, John Newth has handed over to Simon Morgan, who faces an unenviable task. The whole area of Club cruises is one of our thorniest problems, because the slump in enthusiasm for sailing together has been particularly noticeable in the past year. It is a problem that I pass on to my successor without having made any impact myself as President. Do Club members still want to partake of a cruise programme, and what can we do to encourage more members to sail together? We need ideas and active help from Club members.

I notice the West Highland Steamer Club have already organised a trip on the new Islay ferry, and given our increasingly convergent interests and common membership, it's on this sort of trip, and on the Calendar, that we really should be cooperating with them. In the long term, I can also see us producing one Review. As long as it remains financially viable to produce two separate reviews covering largely the same territory, and as long as there is a core of personalities, as at present, who want to maintain a separate identity for each Club, there will continue to be this rather

odd duplication of enthusiasms. But if, on either side, membership numbers dwindle, the inevitable will happen. In this regard, I am sure that Gordon Law, who has been a strong support as vice-president, will play an influential role.

I am glad that, after the robust and extensive discussions the Committee had while devising a new constitution, we have kept the name of our Club as it stands. Clyde River Steamer Club – crsc – is as pertinent to our activities as Taggart is to the storyline of the television crime series. We have an identity, an instantly recognisable brand name, one with a great tradition, and no cosmetic name change is going to alter who we are.

But as our age profile gets older without a sufficient influx of new blood, we face a spiral of decline. Without that new blood, our numbers will continue to fall and our income will drop correspondingly, which means that over a period of time we will be less able to sustain a magazine and a review and a schedule of meetings, at least in their current format, and that will impact on the enthusiasm of existing members to keep on paying their subscription. Such a spiral of decline will leave the Club more and more dependent on the same people to run it, creating a sort of rump oligarchy, short of fresh ideas and reluctant to change.

In that context I am grateful to two of our committee, Charles McCrossan and Iain Quinn, for stepping down as elected members. They will of course continue to make a valuable contribution in an ex officio capacity, but it opens the way for newcomers to make a contribution, and I am looking forward to the later part of this meeting when we will see who these new committee members are going to be.

The dedication to the Club's wider interests that Iain and Charles have shown is typical of the committee as a whole. For all our differences, we get on well. I am especially glad that the committee agreed unanimously to extend the duration of the president's term to two years, starting with the incoming president this time next year. I hope this will enable future presidents to play a more active role in shaping the Club's future, rather than serving as a figurehead. We are a very democratic organisation. We don't need a revolution in structures or personnel, because those already in place work well, but we do need energy, ideas and leadership. Not only that, we need a new form of activism, involving as many Club members as possible, because without more activism, this Club faces extinction in 15 or 20 years' time – maybe less.

Of course, we can continue to function just as we are. Given the age profile of our membership and the particular problems we face as a Club, maybe we have no option but to muddle through. But we owe it to the memory of John Wood, George Stromier, Leo Vogt, Graham Langmuir and Donald Robertson, just as we owe it to Robin, our honorary president, and our fellow members, at least to try to find ways of revitalising the Club. That is why I am glad we revised the constitution, and agreed a policy on digitisation, and created a new website. But that's only a start. As I said, sometimes things have to change if they are to remain the same. If we are to continue as a Club, sharing this wonderful interest in steamers, an interest that has shaped and immeasurably enriched our lives, now is the time to get involved – now, before it is too late.

Andrew Clark