

# How competitive rowing began in Hungary

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Fisa Coaches Conference, Budapest, 8 Novemeber 2007 – Christopher Dodd

It's not necessary to lecture an audience such as this on the significance or importance of water. A glance at a map of Hungary says it all – a relatively flat country encircled by mountains that form a basin for two mighty rivers, the Donau (or Danube) and the Tisza and their associated tributaries and lakes. They flow, like the Thames in England or the Mississippi in mid-America or the Rhine in Germany, through the history and the geography of Hungary. They are the link with neighbouring lands, and oars were once the principal means of transport on them.

Enter Count István Széchenyi, soldier turned communications pioneer, a man fascinated by science and technology who transformed his country during the Industrial Revolution.

Széchenyi was born into an old and influential Hungarian noble family in 1791. As a young man, he distinguished himself in the Napoleonic Wars, and he travelled widely in Europe for several years. The rapid industrialisation and modernisation of England fascinated him and led to a number of developments in Hungary. He was a leading light in establishing the Hungarian Academy of Science in 1825. He strove to improve the navigation of the Danube to the Black Sea and introduced steam shipping onto the river. He also planned the country's railway system, and was a prolific writer, advancing his ideas by the publication of 120 books, articles and Parliamentary Bills.

Széchenyi rowed as a teenager on Lake Ferto, and in 1821 had an English boat imported for his use, the first of several. His 1826 English boat was described as a 'hardwood coxed double'. This was probably a 'wherry', of which there were hundreds on the tidal Thames for passenger use, manned by watermen who in effect operated London's original taxi service.

While he was in London pursuing technological advances in 1822, Széchenyi went rowing on the Thames with his friend Lord Jersey. At that time, bridges over the Thames were few and far between – and permanent bridges across the Danube there were none. Steam power was in its infancy, and so the main means of crossing these rivers was still by rowing boat. At around this time, Széchenyi dreamt up the idea of joining Buda and Pest by a bridge.

Realisation took several years. Meanwhile Széchenyi was a serious recreational rower. He often went rowing with his friends, sometimes during breaks in parliamentary business, and in 1827 he began a series of long-distance pulls for the sheer hell of it – but also to survey the navigation of the Danube.

On the 16<sup>th</sup> of May that year, Széchenyi rowed from Vienna to Pressburg (Bratislava) with his British friends Thomas Hallifax and John Barneby in 3 hours 52 mins. A memorandum of this feat dated 16<sup>th</sup> May 1827 reads:

Count Széchenyi Thomas Hallifax and John Barneby left the Lusthaus in the Prater at Vienna at quarter before six o'clock that morning in Count Szechenyi's two-oared boat with a pilot to steer and arrived at the bridge at Prestbourg at 23 minutes before ten o'clock; having performed the voyage in three hours and 52 minutes. The boat is this day christened *Louisa*.

[signed by the three of them]

In 1830 Széchenyi rowed from Pest to the Black Sea in a boat called *Juliette* with Frank Emmet, an English boat builder who was experimenting with metal outriggers.

In 1834 he pulled to the Black Sea again with an American, William Anderson, to survey the Danube prior to construction of the Iron Gate to aid navigation.

The idea of long distance rowing continued after Széchenyi. A huge tableau in the Hungarian Sports Museum commemorates the voyage of an in-rigged coxed four from Budapest to the Black Sea in 1885. They covered 1690 kilometres in 55 days, including 48 hours when they were storm-bound.

Meanwhile, Széchenyi's notion of a bridge was taking root. He was influenced by developments on the Thames, where an elegant chain bridge designed by William Tierney Clark opened at Hammersmith in 1827. (Hammersmith Bridge became a familiar landmark on the Oxford and Cambridge Boat Race course when the race moved to its present course of Putney to Mortlake in 1845. But the current Hammersmith chain bridge replaced Clark's bridge in 1887. Clark's bridge was pretty but it wasn't built for modern traffic, and there were fears of collapse on Boat Race day when an estimated 12,000 spectators would swarm up its chains.)

The Thames river's second chain bridge was at Marlow, also designed by Clark and opened in 1832. In 1836 Széchenyi snapped up the engineer to design his suspension bridge, and a Scot, Adam Clark (no relation) to build it. The Chain Bridge, now named after Széchenyi, opened in 1849, 375 metres long, a superb engineering feat. Today it is 'twinned' with Marlow Bridge by a commemorative plaque in Hungarian on the latter.

While the Chain Bridge was under construction, a boatshed was erected close by, and the English and Hungarian workers formed crews and raced against Italian soldiers who were garrisoned nearby – very probably using boats made in England. This is possibly the first rowing club in Hungary, started by Count Széchenyi who was assisted by a retired English sailor, John Dews. The Count was the true father of modern rowing in Hungary.

### **Hungarian rowing after Széchenyi.**

As rowing as a way of earning a living declined on Hungarian rivers, so recreational and competitive rowing grew in popularity. The first formal regatta [???] was held in Bratislava in 1863, and two years later the regatta between Margaret Island and Chain Bridge in Budapest attracted tens of thousands of spectators. In 1893, the Association of Hungarian Rowing Clubs was founded, and the following year the first regatta for women was organised in Szeged.

Hungary was represented by an eight at the 1908 Olympic Games in Henley. The sculler Béla Szendey won the first gold medal for Hungary in the European Championships in 1930. For four consecutive years from 1932 to 1935, Hungary won the Glandaz Prize awarded to the most successful national team in the European Championships. This is held in great esteem.

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At the London Olympics of 1948 the Hungarian coxed pair of Béla Zsitnik, Antal Szendey, and Róbert Zimonyi won Hungary's first Olympic medal. A new era began when Kornélia Pap appeared on the scene. She won four European sculling titles from 1958 to 1961. The women's quadruple scullers won the first gold medal in this boat class, in 1965.

Hungary's best Olympic result so far was in Mexico City in the 1968, where the men's coxless four won silver. Mariann Ambrus won a silver medal in the World Championships in 1975 at Nottingham, and followed this with two further medals. Katalin Sarlós won a bronze medal in the Worlds at Bled in 1989.

The torch is now being held by light and heavyweight double scullers. The heavyweights Akos Haller and Tgibor Peto were world champions in 2001 and 2002. The lightweights Zsolt Hirling and Tomas Varga were world champions in 2005 and are the first European doubles champions of the modern era, the European Championships having been re-ionsted in 2007.

Rowing became exciting during World War II when the RAF began to lay mines in the Danube in 1943, and the Luftwaffe retaliated by shooting them up. This no doubt affected both the timing of outings and the sprinting ability of crews.

After the war, rowing survived under state control. There are now about 2000 rowers in Hungary, half of them belonging to clubs here in Budapest.

The world junior championships were held on the Fisa 2000-metre course in Szeged in 1989 – a full international course named after Count Istvan Széchenyi. Recently, however, it has been re-named the 'National Kayak-Canoeing and Rowing Olympic Centre.' You can see where the politicians are coming from with this name change, but the new name certainly doesn't have the same ring about it as 'Széchenyi'.

Széchenyi, sadly, died in a mental institution in 1860, after a couple of suicide attempts. We can only wish that his delusions were happy ones. His name and his memory as a national hero have survived for 180 years through all kinds of wars and political changes. His name also expresses the chain link between rowing in Hungary and England, and I expect that the spirit of Széchenyi will survive in Szeged as well as in Budapest.

Finally, if you look at the 5000 forint bank note, you will see that Hungary is the only country to commemorate the founder of its rowing on its currency. Let us hope that Széchenyi makes it to the euro in the future.

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