

We are very grateful to Gary Linton for sharing his recollections of his involvement in the early days of organised competitive Canoe Polo in the UK:

Just to set the scene, when I was about 15 years old and still a schoolboy, I was very keen on canoeing as we had a school canoe club at Wildern School run by a maths teacher called Dennis Dear. This was near Southampton. The Chair of the Hampshire Association of Canoeists was Jim Wilson and Jim was also the deputy Director of Fairthorn Manor, a YMCA Activities Centre in Botley a mile from where I live. Canoeing was a prominent activity at Fairthorn and another important centre for Canoeing in the UK was (and still is) Calshot Activities Centre, also located on the coast in Hampshire. The head of Canoeing there was Geoff Good, a prominent figure in the world of canoeing who later became the head of the British Canoe Union.

At this time, I attend a meeting of the Hampshire Association of Canoeists at Fairthorn Manor where Jim and Geoff explained to the audience of local Canoeists, that Oliver Cock, a leading light in the British Canoe world and a BCU official, had come up with an idea. This was to play a sort of game of rugby in canoes. Oliver was later to claim that he invented canoe polo and that may well be true in England. During my polo years, I came across an old print of paddlers sat on large barrels, which had wooden horses' heads stuck on one end of the barrel. They also had a ball which they would push around with the paddlers. I believe it was set in Germany and probably from the late 1800s.

The main topic of the meeting was to tell the audience of canoeists, that there were plans to put together a Hampshire team, to take on a rival team called Denstone College (an Independent school in Uttoxeter, England). The Royal Airforce were also thinking of creating a team at that time.

Jim explained that they were looking for paddlers, who were already very accomplished in a kayak but were also good footballers, rugby players, or basketball players. I knew then, as a competent young footballer and starting out on my canoeing career that this was right up my street. However, I was surrounded by more experienced and older paddlers, who were certain to have the honour of paddling in the first ever UK polo tournament.

The upshot of these discussions led to the first ever UK Canoe polo finals, which were held in the Olympic swimming pool at Crystal Palace Sports Centre, South London (as part of the National Canoe Exhibition). I think Denstone won beating Hampshire A (*BCU records show it as Birmingham Canoe Club – however this may have been the same players that were from Denstone as they were involved with Birmingham CC as well – Ed*).

At this time, I had also just joined what was quite an elite competitive canoe club called Itchen Valley, where the main disciplines were Slalom and White-Water Racing. The club had a number of British team paddlers, so the standards were naturally high and as a youngster I was in awe of these great paddlers. Almost all of the Hampshire Polo Team were paddlers from the Itchen Valley Canoe Club. These were people I was training with several times a week and when we were not in our

slalom boats or river racers – which was usually in the summer - we would play canoe polo. (Similar, to the early start of Canoe Slalom, when Skiers took to Kayaks in the summer).

One of my peers and training partners, who had just made the British Slalom Youth Team, was Nigel Midgley. Nigel's father Colin Midgley was a teacher at the nearby school of Bridgemary in Gosport and Colin set up the Bere Forest Polo Team and I was lucky enough to play for this team, eventually captaining the side.

Bere Forest went on to become one of the UK's most successful canoe polo clubs, regularly winning the National Championships and representing England in internationals before the UK had a GB squad.

I recall the excitement when Bere Forest was asked to play in our first ever international, which was held at Genneper molen, Eindhoven in the Netherlands. I believe we came second, which was a reasonable result in those days, as we had to master scoring by using the paddle to hit the ball into a low goal (A bit like water polo).

What followed was years of great internationals in the Netherlands including at Wormer, where we managed first place and the crowd sang our national anthem at the prize giving - a great memory. Then of course at Slotterplas, Amsterdam,

By the late 80's the British Canoe Union decided to form a Great Britain Canoe Polo squad and they ran a selection event inviting players from the top clubs. This included Bere Forest, Luton and St Albans. The players picked for the GB A team, included Alan Vessey, Greg Smale, Ian Plummer, Clive Rackham, Dave Brown, Dave Fancourt and yours truly, Gary Linton. The team was coached by Brian Barfoot from Luton and assisted by Ron Vessey (Alan's Dad) from St Albans. I was picked by the team to be captain of the side, due to my international experience with Bere Forest and I remained Captain until I retired from international canoe sport in 1992.

Our coach Brian Barfoot stated at the time that the early GB Polo Squad was the most successful British Canoe Team ever due to the number of podium places it achieved. We were all immensely proud of the results.

Gary Linton
(written 2023)