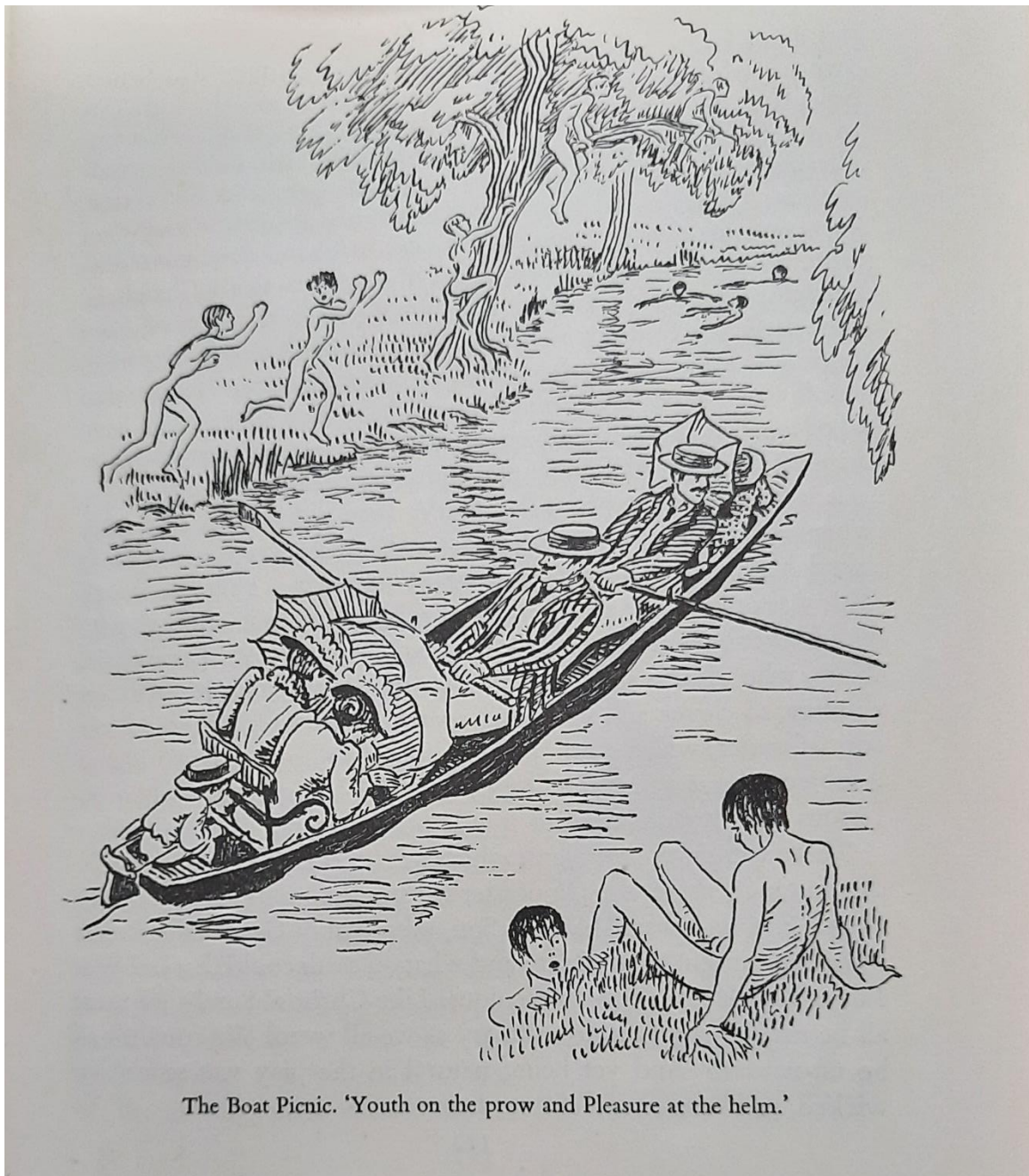


Notes on the history of swimming at Sheep's Green

The Cam has been used for bathing for over four centuries. In 1587, Everard Digby, a fellow of St John's College, wrote the first British treatise on swimming, prompted by concerns about undergraduates drowning in the Cam.

Many famous people, including Lord Byron and Rupert Brook have written about bathing in the Upper Cam River. The artist and grand-daughter of Charles Darwin, Gwen Raverat, described the Town Bathing Place as 'one of the most beautiful sights in the world' in her book 'Period Piece,' published in 1960.



The Boat Picnic. 'Youth on the prow and Pleasure at the helm.'

Traditionally those from the town swam from the banks of Sheep's Green, whereas those from the University swam a little further upstream. By the early nineteenth century both sites had become official bathing places known as the Town Sheds and the University Sheds.

More than a century later, in the early 1960s, Sheep's Green is where I was taught to swim by the redoubtable bathing custodian, Mr Tarrant. Snobs Stream, the leat to Newnham Mill, has a concrete bottom just downstream of the low Driftway bridge, giving it a consistent dept of about three feet. Mr Tarrant had a stick with a rope and canvas sling which he lowered as a support for the learner's belly. He then instructed breast stoke, and when arms and legs where doing his bidding he lowered the stick. Learners learnt quickly! And, when they could confidently cross Snobs Stream without their feet touching the bottom, they were allowed to swim in the main river

In the 1970s, people were discouraged from swimming in the river due to concerns about river water contaminants and in 1972 the learner pool was constructed, which together with the paddling pool, is filled with mains water rather than filtered river water. By 1980, the Town Sheds had become the base for the Cambridge Canoe Club.

However, people have continued to swim from Sheep's Green. Now, the Cam Conservancy allows swimming in the upper river from Byron's Pool to Sheep's Green

The Slow Swim Picnic is an annual event where in excess of 300 people swim from Grantchester to Sheeps Green. Sadly this year contaminated river water caused at least five of the swimmers to suffer sickness and diarrhoea. If Sheep's Green becomes officially designated as a bathing place by DEFRA, the impetus and funding will be forthcoming to address and reduce river water pollution.



Swimming in the river in the 1970s. The Learner Pool, behind the honeycomb block enclosure, was built in 1972.



The Slow Swim and Picnic event on Saturday 8th July 2023