



Kingston rower Sarah Searle outside Hampton Court Palace

Breathing *history*

History and the river are very much entwined at Hampton Court Palace, near Kingston-upon-Thames in south-west London.

A member of Kingston Grammar School Veterans BC (KGSVBC), Sarah Searle rows regularly along the Thames and past the imposing south front of Hampton Court Palace. "You're seeing it from the water as people would have done in years gone by," she says.

And every day, she cycles along the towpath to her job there, where she helps to manage the 300 volunteers working across the six sites that comprise the Historic Royal Palaces.

For a history lover like Sarah, there can't be many more exciting places to work, especially in 2015. Not only does this year see celebrations marking the 500th anniversary of Hampton Court, but the country has gone Tudor-crazy following the much-lauded television production of Hilary Mantel's Booker Prize-winning novels *Wolf*

Hall and *Bring up the Bodies*. Although filming mostly took place elsewhere, the Palace was the setting for much of the plotting and intrigue depicted in the series: Henry VIII's ultimately destructive love affair with Anne Boleyn; his seismic break with the Church of Rome; and the rise and fall of his 'fixer', Thomas Cromwell.

"The walls are breathing history. It's a privilege to work in a heritage site and I never cease to be learning something new," she enthuses. And the site is revealing more and more of its secrets all the time. Recently, they pulled up a few springy floorboards in one building and uncovered some original foundations from the Tudor palace that no one knew were there.

And what about the many ghosts that are

For Sarah Searle, working at Hampton Court Palace combines two passions – history and rowing. Caroline Roberts finds out more

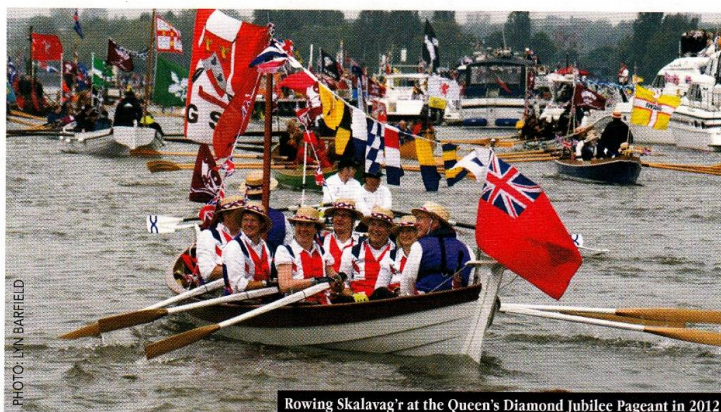


PHOTO: LYN GARFIELD

Rowing Skalavag'r at the Queen's Diamond Jubilee Pageant in 2012

believed to roam the site – the soon to be executed Catherine Howard's sobs in the Haunted Gallery; Sybil Penn, the 'Grey Lady', who acted as a nurse to Henry's offspring; and the spectral man in Tudor dress captured on CCTV in 2003?

"There are ghosts. Of that, I have no doubt. Something happened to me down in one of the old apartments. My colleague saw someone walk past me but there was no one there. They're not nasty ghosts; they are just ghosts that live here – some people tune into them and some don't. I keep a very open mind."

The volunteering team at the Historic Royal Palaces receives a huge number of volunteer applications, of all ages, from students to those who have retired, says Sarah.

"Our oldest current active volunteer is 92! Volunteers offer fantastic support across all the palaces, meeting and greeting visitors, assisting in the gardens, or helping with school visits. The volunteers give so much and we encourage them to learn more by offering talks and seminars for them to attend."

As for rowing, it was a chance remark that prompted Sarah to try it 12 years ago.

"I'd been taken by a friend to Remenham Club for lunch during Henley and someone said to me, 'You could do this – you've got the right levers.'"

She feels lucky, she says. "The chap who taught me – Graham Davies from Barn Elms – said that with rowing, I'd make friends for life. How true."

As well as her regular rows with KGSVBC she also subs in occasionally at Molesey Boat Club.

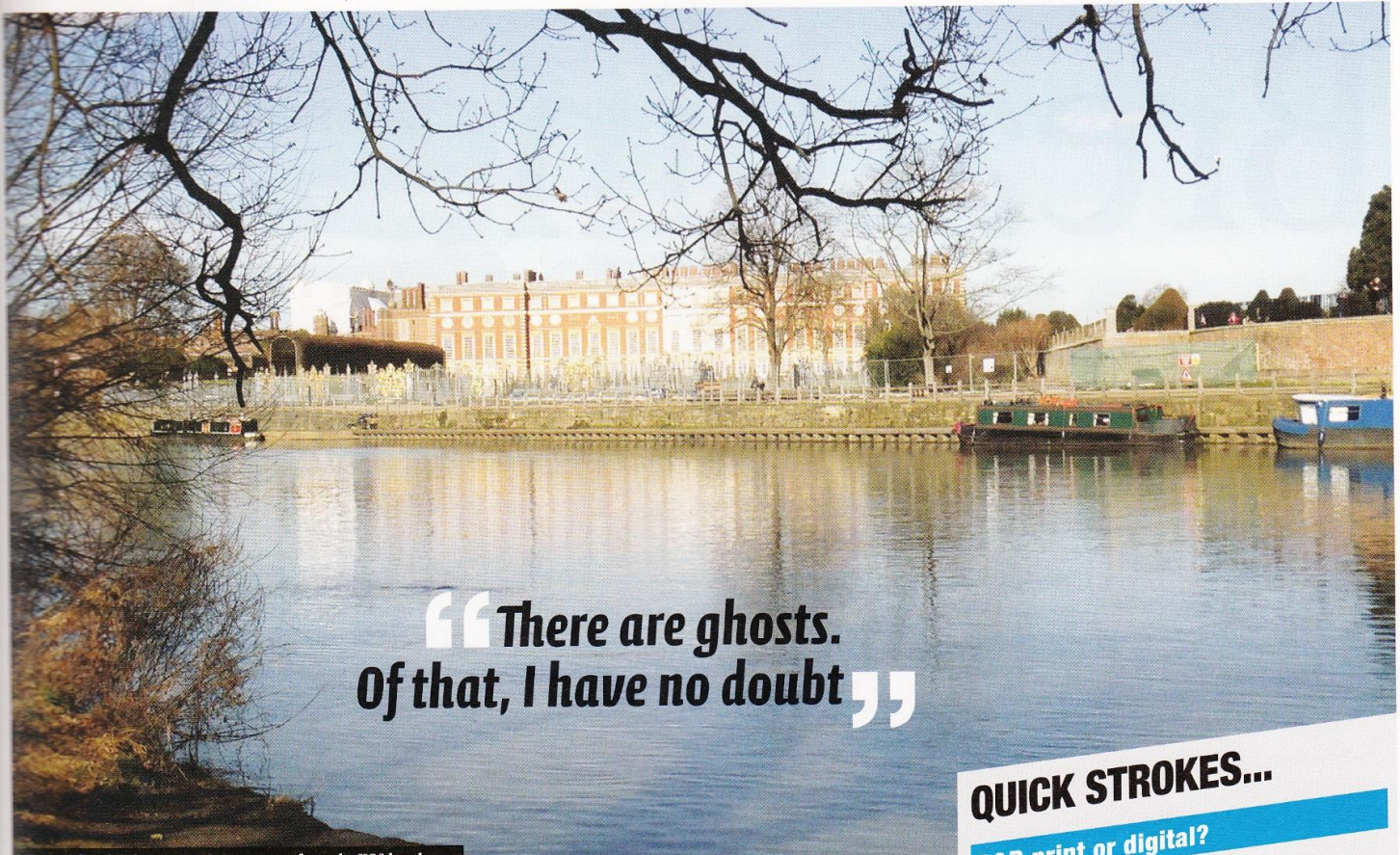
"Our club is tiny – just 45 members, all with some connection to Kingston Grammar School – and very social. It's all scratch crews. Every time you turn up, you'll go in a different boat. We've learnt on the water, being coached by our cox or steersperson."

Every four years, the club members join Kingston Grammar students on an 84-mile sponsored row from Radley to home, raising money for a charity nominated by the school, and for the boathouse. They also enter the Boston Marathon every year and have recently started doing the Head of the Dart. "Apart from those, it's just local heads and regattas as we don't have our own trailer. We're getting better and better; we're not near the bottom of the nine pages of results any more."

Sarah's twin passions of rowing and history often coincide. She was part of a crew that rowed

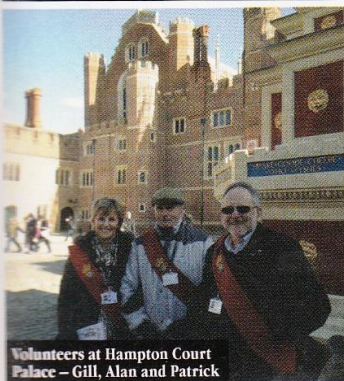
Volunteering is such an important part of life

Hidden depths



“There are ghosts. Of that, I have no doubt”

The east facade of Hampton Court as seen from the KGS boathouse



Volunteers at Hampton Court Palace – Gill, Alan and Patrick



The view from Sarah's office window

Skalavag'r, a traditional Scottish yawl owned by two KGSVBC members, in the Queen's Diamond Jubilee Pageant in 2012. They have also taken part in other events for historical craft, such as the Great River Race and the Vogalonga in Venice.

And Hampton Court Palace features in a number of ceremonial events involving rowing. The annual Tudor Pull is organised by the Thames Traditional Rowing Association. Members of the Company of Watermen and Lightermen row the royal shallop Jubilant from Hampton Court Palace to the Tower of London to deliver 'the Stela', a piece of medieval water pipe on a base of timber from the old Richmond Lock, bearing the Watermen's coat of arms. "It's wonderful to see them leave under procession from here. It highlights the importance of the river," says Sarah.

In 2012, Sir Matthew Pinsent carried the Olympic torch through the Palace grounds and down to the royal barge Gloriana. "We were right behind her in Skalavag'r again. It was tough

keeping up; we just had to though. We followed them all the way to Richmond Lock, where the Tideway people took over."

Both rowing and her day job at the Palace have taught her a lot about the value of volunteering, she says. Most Sundays, she helps coach the juniors at Kingston RC, and volunteers at Thames Ditton Regatta every year. "The roles complement each other," she adds.

"Volunteering is such an important part of life. No matter how busy you are, you learn that you do have time in your day to give to other people and make things happen. It's great to see those youngsters develop – I guide them a little bit and suddenly they're rowing beautifully and they really love it."

Hampton Court Palace celebrates its 500th anniversary from 3-5 April with a stunning son et lumière show projected on the south facade of the building. To find out more about this and other events, visit the Palace website at www.hrp.org.uk/hamptoncourtpalace □

QUICK STROKES...

R&R print or digital?

Print – I'm a traditionalist.

Anne Boleyn or Jane Seymour?

Anne Boleyn.

Scottish yawl or fine rowing shell?

A good quad or double: but the yawl is fun and very social!

Coaching or rowing?

Coaching – would love to do more.

Art house film or comedy night?

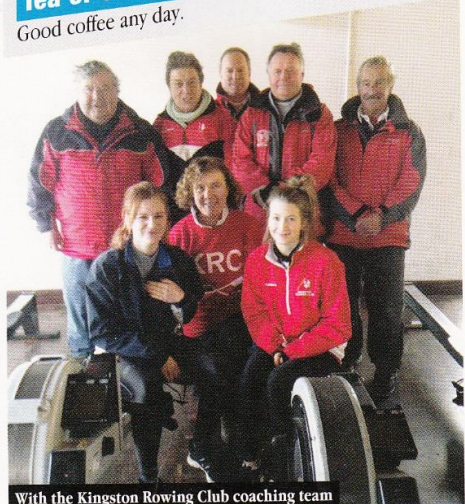
Art house film.

Cat or dog?

Both! Cats at home and a dog for good company when walking on a beach.

Tea or coffee?

Good coffee any day.



With the Kingston Rowing Club coaching team

