

## *Viewpoint*

# About the West Boathouse Project

*Ingrid Shearer*

Glasgow's interest in competitive rowing began in the early 1800s, with regattas recorded from 1830 onwards. Before it was eclipsed in popularity by football, rowing was the most popular spectator sport in the city – up to 50,000 spectators would crowd along the riverbanks to watch the races (Plate 1). Today, six rowing clubs are located along this stretch of the River Clyde from the tidal weir up to Flesher's Haugh, including the three clubs based in the West Boathouse: Clydesdale Amateur Rowing Club (founded in 1856), Clyde Amateur Rowing Club (founded in 1865) and Strathclyde University Boat Club (founded in 1967).

Finding suitable premises to store boats and gym equipment is a perennial issue for rowing clubs. Clyde and Clydesdale Amateur Rowing Clubs began lobbying Glasgow Corporation for their own building in the 1890s and in 1905 they got their wish. The material cost of the building was £1,333 (roughly £166,000 in today's money) and was paid for by Glasgow Corporation with a generous donation from James Henry Roger, a local wine merchant and a founding member of Clydesdale Amateur Rowing Club. Roger was a canny and uncompromising character who stumped up the cash in exchange for Clydesdale's claim to occupy the preferred eastern half of the building. Built by City Surveyor A. B. McDonald in 1905, the West Boathouse was a unique addition to Glasgow Green and the river frontage. Viewed from the Green, the building is austere with little hint of the architectural flourishes seen from the riverside. Viewed from the water, the building rises dramatically from the banks. The large arched windows, deeply recessed eaves and cantilevered balconies are playful and elegant. This attention to detail and investment in the sport is perhaps a recognition of the popularity and status of rowing at the turn of the twentieth century. Many of the club members were influential men within the city (there were no women members at this time), able to exert a little political pressure to get an impressive new boathouse in a prime spot on the river.

By the late 1990s, Glasgow City Council, who own the building, were becoming increasingly concerned with the condition of the West Boathouse. Historically, the clubs had carried out essential repairs and maintenance, but the building now faced significant structural problems. A new 'super-boathouse' was proposed in 2007/8 to accommodate all the Clyde-based rowing clubs but the plan was never realised. In 2015, Glasgow Building Preservation Trust, a charity that rescues and repairs historic buildings, began working with the rowing clubs and Glasgow City Council to explore options to save the building.

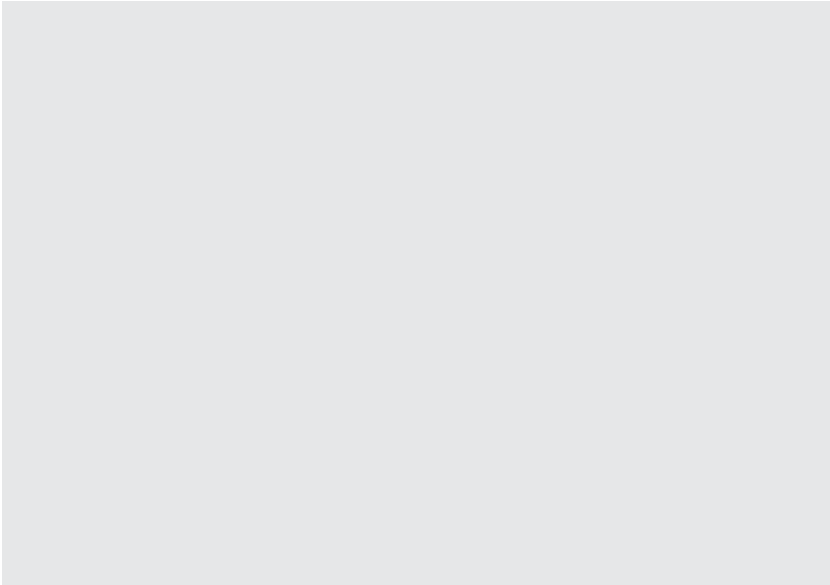


Plate 1 Lithograph showing the Clydesdale Amateur Rowing Club Regatta, 1862, published in *The Illustrated London News*, 27 September 1862. Crowds line the banks on Glasgow Green to watch the races.

Time was running short – surveys of the building revealed the below-ground timber foundations were deteriorating rapidly, and the exterior cladding was in danger of collapse. Interior facilities were outdated, and the accessibility of the building was, by modern standards, very poor. After several years of hard work and generous funding from the National Lottery Heritage Fund, Historic Environment Scotland, Glasgow City Council and many others, the Rejuvenation of the West Boathouse project got under way in 2019 (Plates 2 and 3).

In addition to renovating and upgrading the building, the project also aimed to change how the boathouse is used, and who it is used by – embracing new audiences and encouraging people to re-engage with the River Clyde. The community engagement programme began in April 2019. Over a three-year period, we have built boats with Glasgow Disability Alliance, developed nature walks with The Conservation Volunteers, made films with local schoolchildren, celebrated the sporting heritage of the city's east end, and begun work cataloguing and recording the rowing club's unique heritage collections.

Sport is integral to our shared past, reflecting and influencing broader societal changes. It can also provide a gateway into conversations around colonialism, class, immigration, gender, attitudes to the body and many other aspects of our shared social history. Sport and play are essential, vital forms of human

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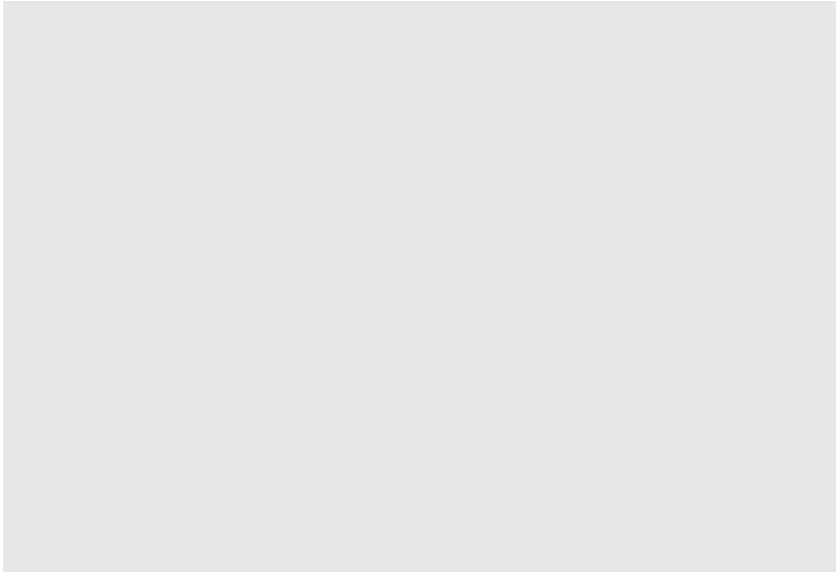


Plate 2 The West Boathouse in 2016, before restoration. (Photograph by Alasdair Woodburn)

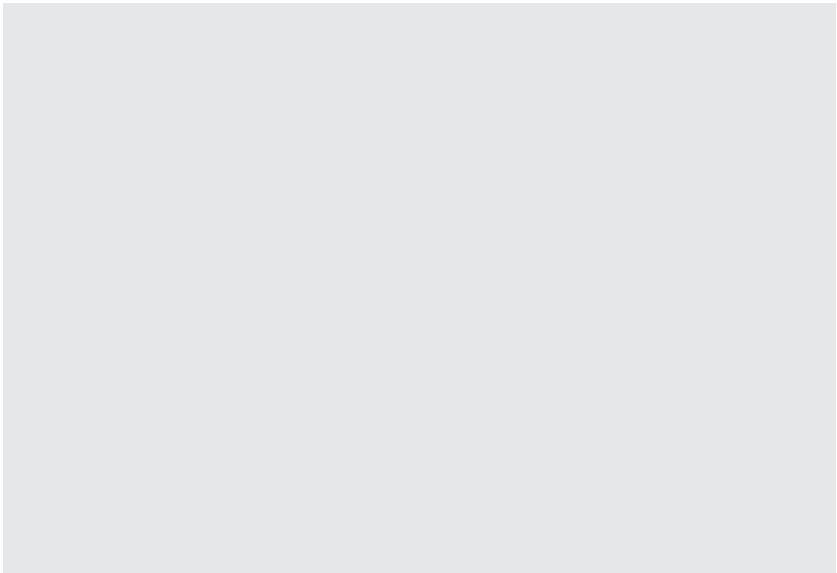


Plate 3 Renovations nearing completion in October 2022. (Photograph by David Collie)

expression and make a valuable and important contribution to our cultures. There is a universality that can transcend cultural divides and help us tap into new audiences, challenge stereotypes and break down barriers. Once you start to look closely, sport is everywhere. It's in our archives: kirk session records complaining of football games in graveyards,<sup>1</sup> suffragettes covertly distributing literature at roller-skating rinks,<sup>2</sup> and rowing rule books that forbade manual labourers (i.e. the working classes) from joining amateur clubs. It's in our national museums and galleries, and proudly displayed on the walls of schools and sports clubs up and down the country. It's in our street names – 'Curling Crescent' and 'Bowling Green Road' – and in the landscapes we inhabit, the buildings we pass by every day and the ground beneath our feet.

Traditional definitions of what heritage is (museums, castles and elite histories) and who it's for (mostly the white middle classes) have loosened and broadened over the past decade. While tourism and education are still the dominant drivers within the sector, community-led heritage initiatives have begun to challenge the status quo, and interest in sporting heritage is growing rapidly. Sport, along with heritage and creative industries, is now formally recognised by the United Nations as a key driver for creating and supporting sustainable and resilient communities.

The West Boathouse project is included among several innovative sporting heritage projects currently under way across Scotland, covering a wide range of themes and perspectives. While the source material may lie in the past, the outcomes and goals are very much rooted in the present. These projects use sporting heritage as a vehicle to address current needs within their communities and to engage new audiences in creative ways as these recent examples of sporting heritage projects in Scotland show:

- **Helping Asylum Seekers and Recent Migrants**

Excavations in search of the world's first international football stadium by Archaeology Scotland in collaboration with Hampden Bowling Club teamed archaeologists with local volunteers, asylum seekers and new migrant groups. As well as establishing that the first Hampden football ground was indeed located on the site of Hampden Bowling Club, the process of archaeological research and excavation was used as a vehicle to help new migrants practise their English, acclimatise to a new place and meet new people (<https://hampdencollection.com/the-first-hampden-project/>).

- **Supporting Mental Health and Reducing Social Isolation**

Sporting Memories Scotland and Sports Heritage Scotland both use sporting memories and object handling to tackle dementia, depression and

<sup>1</sup> G. O'Brien, *Played in Glasgow: Charting the Heritage of a City at Play* (Edinburgh, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> E. Crawford, 'WALKS/Suffrage Stories: The Suffragette 1911 Census Boycott: Where and What Was the Aldwych Skating Rink?', *Woman and Her Sphere*, 2012, [https://womanandhersphere.com/2012/09/03/suffrage-stories-the-suffragette-1911-census-boycott-where-and-what-was-the-aldwych-skating-rink/?fbclid=IwAR2MfxENCNvJB C5vuxEZOSjMQ9MdvMqQ9rI1Wl59Mee\\_1Yi7quZmj9AyOMY](https://womanandhersphere.com/2012/09/03/suffrage-stories-the-suffragette-1911-census-boycott-where-and-what-was-the-aldwych-skating-rink/?fbclid=IwAR2MfxENCNvJB C5vuxEZOSjMQ9MdvMqQ9rI1Wl59Mee_1Yi7quZmj9AyOMY).

social isolation. They run clubs and activities that bring together younger and older generations of fans, former players and family members to talk about sport and reminisce, with the aim of improving mental and physical well-being (<https://www.sportingmemories.uk>; <https://memories.scot/histories>).

- **Tackling Gender Bias**

Play Like A Lassie is a collaborative community editing project run by the West Boathouse project and Glasgow Caledonian University. It is aimed at tackling the systemic gender bias in Wikipedia entries relating to women's sports in Scotland and celebrating their contributions. We have trained up fifteen new editors (ten women and five men) who are working to research and create new articles to amplify women's stories on Wikipedia (<https://www.westboathouse.org.uk/play-like-a-lassie/>).

A key part of the West Boathouse project was working through the heritage collections of the three resident rowing clubs. Small sports clubs face many challenges and pressures – declining memberships, decaying buildings, poor accessibility and facilities and a general lack of capacity and resources. They also serve as vital community hubs and significant green spaces in our increasingly built-up city environment. While some clubs actively use their collections to engage with their members and visitors, others are unsure what to do with it all. Getting clubs over the 'fear factor' when resources are tight is critical. Collections encompass objects and documents, and the professional divisions between 'archives' and 'museums' can be unhelpful for small groups trying to tackle a mix of the two. We aimed to find a middle ground, adhering to best practices where possible, but with an emphasis on finding practical and affordable solutions. 'Do no harm' should always be our first principle, but this can often lead to 'do nothing', a paralysis born out of a fear of doing the wrong thing. With support and advice from the Scottish Council on Archives,<sup>3</sup> Glasgow Museums,<sup>4</sup> The Sporting Heritage Network<sup>5</sup> and many helpful academics and specialists in sporting heritage, we developed a practical resource kit and ran online workshops to help small sports clubs and community archive groups to see the potential of their collections and share their sporting heritage.

The clubs are very proud of their long histories. Before its closure for renovations, the West Boathouse was packed with photographs, vintage boats, oars, pennants, medals, and a wide range of rowing-related material dating from the 1860s to the present day. Very little of the collection had been catalogued or recorded, so the decant in advance of capital works provided the perfect opportunity to begin working through the material. With the help of volunteers from each club, we conducted a rapid inventory, and photographed and recorded each room before the big move. Even at this early stage, the process of looking

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.scottisharchives.org.uk>.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.glasgowlife.org.uk/museums>.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.sportingheritage.org.uk>.

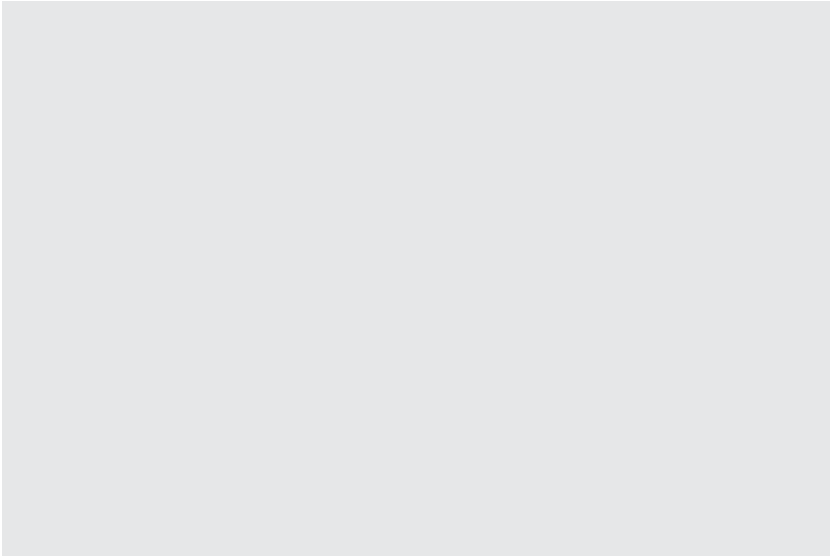


Plate 4 The stairwell in Clydesdale Amateur Rowing Club's side before renovations began, packed with old photographs, oars and trophies. (Photograph by David Collie)

more closely at the heritage in the building helped club members begin to think about the material as a heritage collection rather than just an assortment of rowing memorabilia (Plate 4).

The decant took place just before the first lockdown in March 2020 and the collections were moved to the offices of Glasgow Building Preservation Trust (GBPT) for storage and recording. For over a year, it wasn't possible for volunteers to access the collections due to Covid restrictions. To maintain momentum, we used this time to focus on online activity – trialling and evaluating cataloguing systems, cameras and other recording kit, and developing training resources for volunteers. By the summer of 2021, our offices at GBPT had reopened and we were able to resume working through the material.

We relied on volunteers and interns throughout the collections care process – a few members of the rowing clubs, a core of committed volunteers from the University of Glasgow's Archaeology master's course, our regular West Boathouse volunteers and three interns from the University of Glasgow's Museums Studies and Information Management master's courses. Each cohort came with their own needs, motivations and interests.

In the case of the archaeology students, Covid had impacted opportunities for traditional fieldwork, and this project offered a chance to engage with the recording, care and curation of objects, using similar principles and techniques to post-excavation fieldwork. Sporting heritage was an unfamiliar area for them, but they brought a unique perspective on material culture that complemented

the knowledge base of our other volunteers. The interns were keen to get experience in the methodologies and standards around the collections and helped develop our cataloguing system.

It has been challenging to attract and retain volunteers over the past three years. Covid had the greatest impact, making it difficult to physically access the collections and restricting the number of volunteers we could accommodate at any one time. The rowing community also struggled to maintain their connection to the project. Members devoted a lot of their spare time to other aspects of the project such as negotiating legal agreements and fundraising, and simply didn't have any extra capacity. Rowing is also an extremely intensive and technically challenging sport which requires substantial commitments of time and energy. While many rowers were interested in what we were doing with the collections, they were more focused on getting back out on the water.

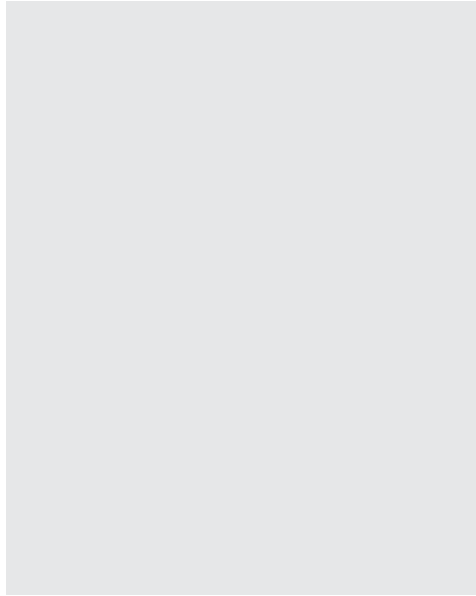
All our volunteers had training in handling, basic digital photography and lighting, using the cataloguing system, labelling and packing. Once they were confident and comfortable with the process, they were able to work autonomously and could pop through to our main office if they had any issues or needed advice. We regularly employed a buddy system, where a more experienced volunteer would be paired with newer recruits.

The West Boathouse will have limited public access and isn't a museum, but we wanted to make our collections accessible. We spent a lot of time evaluating and testing various software options for cataloguing and sharing our collections, including eHive, Omeka, OpenHeritage, Collective Access, Collection Space and Axiell (formerly known as Adlib). One of the main challenges was finding something that suited the diverse nature of our collection. Most professional cataloguing software packages are tailored to museums or archives, and adhere to data standards for those sectors. We needed something that was simple, customisable and affordable. How to record and share the collections required a bespoke approach and no single system or set of standards quite fit our criteria. In the end, we developed our own system, using a Google Forms user interface which publishes to a simple spreadsheet. This has made the cataloguing process more comfortable and intuitive for volunteers, and allows for a degree of control and standardisation of terminology and descriptions.

With a mix of objects and documents, some of which are definitely 'outsize' (eight-metre-long boats), we have used a mix of flatbed scanning for smaller documents and digital photography for everything else. A large-format overhead scanner would have been ideal for the bigger photographs and documents, but these are prohibitively expensive. Instead, we rigged a makeshift overhead mount for the DSLR camera using a camera boom arm, mounted on an old hat stand. Initially, we had some issues with camera shake on the boom, but with the aid of a mobile phone app we could set up the shot and release the shutter remotely. The pay-off was speed – setting up the shots and lighting was time-consuming and technically challenging for volunteers (Plate 5).

Sharing collections online was less straightforward. There are lots of options available, including some great open-source projects. However, while the

Plate 5 Project volunteer Alisha Virani, using an ad hoc overhead digitisation system (repurposed hat stand, camera boom arm and DSLR camera). Here she is capturing an outsize photograph of Clyde ARC's famed 'Penny Brothers' crew of the 1930s. (Photograph by GBPT)



software might be free, you need a developer to integrate it into your website, and this can be costly. In the end, we plumped for eHive as a way to publish our collections.<sup>6</sup> You can also use eHive to catalogue, but we were keen to keep our costs down, so we used our own system to create the master catalogue and published a selection of material to eHive. We adapted our bespoke cataloguing system to align with core cataloguing fields in eHive, so we could do bulk uploads without having to replicate data entry. Thus far, the system has worked well and if other options for publishing material develop, the eHive material is readily portable and can be downloaded and migrated to new platforms.

Every collection is different, especially when it comes to storage and display, but there are a few essential bits of kit that will always be needed. Below, is a list of the items we have found most useful on the West Boathouse project. Throughout the process, we kept a keen eye on the budget and experimented with workarounds and ways to reduce costs, which in total came to around £900. It is worth noting, this does not take into account costs for storage and/or room hire, tables and chairs or laptops and computers (Table 1).

We also needed to consider how the collections would fit back into the building once renovations were complete. The building continues to function as a working boathouse and this needed to be balanced against best practice for the collections. Alongside planning for the recording, sharing and long-term storage

<sup>6</sup> <https://info.ehive.com>.



and care of the collections, we developed a simple interpretation and redisplay scheme. This has focused on how we will use the collections to tell stories and signal to visitors and members that the building is a friendly and inclusive place.

When the project began in 2019, the collections were housed in the boathouse. The stairwells and corridors were filled with photographs dating from the 1860s onwards. Framed pennants, vintage boats and oars were hung from the ceiling and displayed on the walls of the gyms and club-rooms. The building was filled with sporting memorabilia and had a chaotic charm which appealed to visitors and club members alike. The redisplay plan aimed to recapture that informal friendly vibe, but with greater balance and representation of more recent history. The clubs are keen to promote greater diversity and inclusion, and this needed to be foregrounded within the redisplay, in particular by telling the story of women's rowing. The cultural and natural history of the river also became a key narrative thread in the plan.

In discussion with the clubs and volunteers, we developed a set of key goals and considerations to guide us in the redisplay and interpretation of the boathouse heritage. With a large, diverse collection and a combined history of more than 350 years, identifying a set of simple goals and messages has helped us work through the stories we want to tell. Key goals were to:

- Signal a welcoming, friendly and inclusive space
- Commemorate the reopening of the boathouse
- Engage new audiences
- Celebrate sporting heritage
- Encourage behavioural and attitudinal change towards the river and banks

In response to our goals, we developed a series of considerations and responses to guide our interpretation planning. This encompassed all outputs, activities and events.

Because the West Boathouse is not a museum and will have limited public access, the digital offer (website and digital resources) was crucial in sharing and disseminating collections and storytelling. A selection of key images and content will be archived on Wikipedia and Wikimedia Commons and available under creative commons licence.

Part of the project was evaluating the process of recording and sharing collections for other small clubs/heritage groups with limited income, where solutions should be accessible, low-cost and easily refreshed and updated, but as close to best practice as possible. We have shared and promoted our journey to other groups through our Scottish Archives Council collaboration. Our recording system, documentation and resources will be made freely available via the website. Interactive digital material will be hosted on the Internet but all interpretation within the building will be analogue.

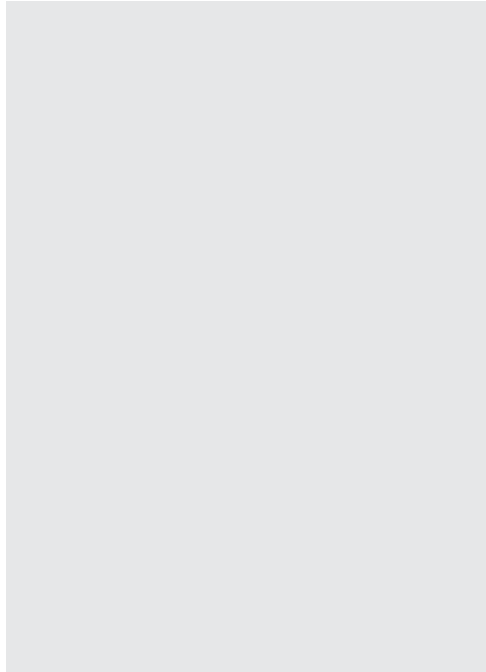
The interior layout has changed substantially from its original configuration as a semi-detached building, and spaces are now shared between all three clubs. This is not without its challenges as the new layout has reduced the space available to display items in the stairwell and main first-floor corridor,

Table 1 Indicative Costs for Basic Equipment and Materials

Item	Main use	Practical notes	Cost (2020)
Paper, pencils, pens, sharpener and eraser and tweezers	Recording and labelling	A chinagraph pencil will write on plastic, glass, paper, film and metal. Stabilo wax/graphite pencils will write on film, plastic, glass, metal and paper. Use 2B pencils for writing lightly on paper surfaces and objects. Use a plastic eraser to avoid tearing and discolouration (e.g. Mars Plastic Eraser). For note-taking and recording, or use a laptop/PC if you have one. Use tweezers to help position labels.	£15
Soft bristle brushes, lint-free cloths, cleaning pads and smoke sponges	Cleaning	A selection of soft bristle (e.g. goat's hair) brushes for very gentle cleaning and dusting. Use smaller paintbrushes for applying adhesive before labelling. Cloths, cleaning pads and smoke sponges should be used with extreme caution and for light cleaning only.	£50
Ruler/measuring tape	Recording	A cord-backed ruler is ideal. Gauge callipers aren't essential but can make measuring 3D objects much easier.	£10
Camera, memory card, tripod, boom and scales	Recording	A basic DSLR will cost from around £300 upwards (cheaper if you buy second-hand). A good quality, sturdy tripod is essential. You want to minimise camera shake to get crisp, clear photographs. You can print out your own scale bars from online sites and glue them to card or foamex to make them a little more robust. We used a set of 5 cm, 10 cm and 20 cm scales.	£500
Photography backdrop and lighting	Recording	We experimented with plain white curtain lining and an old offcut of white foamex board as an affordable backdrop for photographing objects. Two lights positioned on either side of your object will produce an even, diffuse light and reduce shadow and shine. You can pick up a soft box kit with two positionable lights for around £50–60.	£60

Tyvek tags	Labelling	Tyvek tags for labelling artefacts. Tyvek is very strong, tear-proof and waterproof. You can use the tags to attach to artefacts, or use offcuts for labelling.	£10
Wheat-starch paste	Labelling	Used as an adhesive for Tyvek labels. Works well on wood, metal, stone and ceramic materials but less successfully on plastics. Wheat-starch paste makes a good non-chemical alternative to Paraloid B-72 adhesive, which requires careful storage and use.	£10
Gloves	Handling	White cotton, latex or nitrile – essential handling for photographs and some metal objects.	£10
Acid-free tissue paper	Packing	Versatile and relatively cheap – use this to wrap and protect, or as a buffer between documents and photographs. You can buy tissue in rolls or as pre-cut sheets. A 13 metre roll will cost around £25.	£10
Boxes	Storage	Ideally, any boxes or containers will be made from acid-free card or polypropylene plastic (chemically stable and safe for use on archives and collections). Sizes and quantities will depend on your collection. Plastic boxes offer protection from damp and dirt, but not against potential UV damage from sun exposure. Really Useful Boxes are great – sturdy, waterproof and stackable.	£200 (cost for approx ten medium-sized boxes)
Polyethylene pockets and bags	Storage	Archival polyester pockets and sleeves are a good way to store photographs and slim documents. Bags can be used to store larger or more awkwardly shaped objects. Both are available in a wide range of sizes.	£100
TOTAL			£900

Plate 6 Framed cover of  
*Rowing Action* magazine,  
October 1998, featuring  
Olympic champion and  
former Clydesdale ARC  
member, Gillian Lindsay.  
(Photograph by GBPT)



which had previously hosted many historic photographs and these are now fire-protected areas. This forced a rethink for the clubs around the messages the collections signalled to members and visitors. In consultation with the clubs, we carefully selected a range of material that aligned with our project goals, with less emphasis on the 'past masters' and greater representation of youth rowing, women and the clubs' social activities. Elements of the building such as stair-treads have also been reused – in artworks, shelving and as souvenirs for the reopening event. We were also conscious that displays within the building should not interfere with club operations, to reduce the risk of accidental damage. During the fit-out stage, we worked closely with the clubs to ensure material was safely redisplayed. The clubs have committed to the long-term care of archives and objects held within the building, and members and volunteers were given training in basic care and management.

Over the four-year course of the project, three key narrative strands became apparent. Some of these were interlinked with the club collections, while others emerged through wider engagement and research around the cultural and natural heritage of the river:

- The story of rowing on the Clyde and individual club histories
- The growth and success of women's rowing
- The environmental history of the river and caring for the Clyde

On the face of it, the narratives are straightforward. However, sports clubs are very proud of their specific histories and triumphs, and this needed to be balanced against the wider context of rowing on the Clyde. Women's rowing was also highlighted as a priority – an area that had not previously received much attention. Over the past few years, we have gathered oral histories, objects and items from former rowers, trawled the archives for evidence of early pioneers, and celebrated the contributions made by grass-roots coaches to Olympians such as Dame Katherine Grainger and Gillian Lindsay (Plate 6).

We were also keen to tell the story of the river along the six kilometre 'rowing reach' from Glasgow Green to the Cuningar Loop, a stretch of the River Clyde that is often overlooked. As it meanders through the east end of the city, the upper reaches have a rich, fascinating history of textiles, water management, pollution and popular protests. This also tied in with the West Boathouse 'Green Policy' and a drive to encourage the rowing community to take a more active role in advocating for the river and its wildlife. Much of the research and archival content around this work was integrated into the main project publication, *An A-Z of Rowing on the Clyde* by Ingrid Shearer and Morag Cross. This book was produced as a limited-edition hardback and is also available digitally via the website.

While most of the material has been returned to the boathouse and is either on display or carefully stored in archival boxes, the question of what to do with some of the older and more fragile material was an issue we needed to address in consultation with the clubs. Following discussion with members, the decision was taken to deposit items predating the Second World War with Glasgow City Archives for safekeeping. This allows the clubs to retain ownership and ensures the most fragile and rare parts of the collection will be professionally cared for in the long term. High-quality reproductions stand in for the originals. While this will inevitably impact the feel of the building and doesn't have the same authenticity as the originals, club members were in agreement that this was the best strategy to ensure their survival.

On 14 May 2023, the West Boathouse was formally reopened following an extensive two-year restoration project managed by Glasgow Building Preservation Trust. The event was a celebration of the restored building once again being home to Glasgow's rowing community and also an opportunity to thank the many individuals, organisations and funders who gave their time and resources to the project.

For more information on the West Boathouse project, please see the website: <https://westboathouse.org.uk>