

Up from the ashes

Rushing to finish their new clubhouse in time for its Royal opening, Liverpool Sailing Club found time to speak to Ciara Leeming.

It celebrates its 50th anniversary this year, but a devastating arson attack almost prevented Liverpool Sailing Club from reaching this milestone.

The blaze in 2001 followed years of vandalism targeting both its clubhouse and members' boats, and left management on the brink of giving up.

But discussions with councillors, police and the Royal Yachting Association (RYA) persuaded them to give it one last try. Last month they left the dark times behind when Princess Anne, RYA president, officially opened their new clubhouse.

The finished building – at the heart of Speke and Garston Coastal Reserve – marks the end of a six-year journey that saw members roll up their sleeves to help when funds dried up.

The club – like the neighbouring communities of Speke and Garston, two of Liverpool's most disadvantaged – declined during the 1980s, with membership dropping from 500 to 120.

The polluted land around it, near the original Liverpool airport, was used by off-road vehicles and motorcycles and littered with burned out cars.

Club president Tom Workman, a member since the 1960s, says: "That site was deliberately chosen because it is the widest part of the River Mersey and was the only access point when the Liverpool side was mostly docks.

"But the vandalism affected membership. People couldn't leave their boats at the club because they would get damaged. The 2001 fire was the final straw." Club officials called a meeting with local figures to discuss the future but were persuaded to carry on. Sport England agreed to put £496,000 towards the project.

Then in 2003, Peel Holdings – which bought the old airport site in 1997 – opened Liverpool John Lennon Airport close by. A business park is being built on part of the original airport site, while 70 acres was left to nature and became the coastal reserve. A further £249,000 towards the coastal reserve came from the Mersey Waterfront regional park, £40,000 of which was earmarked for the sailing club.

Run by a partnership that includes the Mersey Basin Campaign, Mersey Waterfront regional park, the National Trust, Liverpool City Council and the Northwest Development Agency (NWDA), and largely funded by Artery – a three-year European riverside regeneration programme – the reserve opened in 2006.

While this was being developed, the sailing club put forward two designs for its new headquarters. Both were rejected, prompting the NWDA to launch a design contest to find something suitable.

It was agency officials who picked the winner – a modern design that looks like two sails from the air and is carbon-neutral, with a wind turbine to provide electricity and a moat to recycle water. Tendering was carried out and a £1.6 million contract signed.

Club managers applied for a grant from Artery and were awarded £500,000 towards their target.

"We now had £1 million in the bank to do the work, but it still wasn't enough," says Workman. "That just got us the bare building – with no doors, no windows, no floors.

"We had to finish it ourselves. That took ages, and during this period Sport England decided we weren't doing enough to increase use of the river."

BEST

"Members taught themselves how to use computers and set up a website. This was key to keeping the community interested and up to date with the project."

WORST

"Access to the river was more of a problem than we anticipated because the river has silted up. We are still trying to reclaim part of our slipway to allow sailing to take place at low tide, and are having to bid for more funding."

A further £250,000 was secured from Sport England, allowing contractors to be brought in to finish the building work, and leaving officials to fit out the clubhouse. Workman says: "We want to reach out to the whole community and are trying to pick up new members each week.

"We've set up a young people's group called Youth Afloat, to get teenagers learning to sail. We work with local schools and promote ourselves to families.

"Our membership includes people who sail power boats, cruisers, jet skis, canoes and even windsurfers. We have seven cruisers on moorings but we are hoping to increase that to about 30. We want people here all the time, making the most of the water."

Iain Taylor, public-private partnership manager at Peel Holdings, says: "The coastal reserve is designed as a wild open space for local people to enjoy.

"In the past the land had been used for a lot of anti-social activities. For this reason it's very important that this space should be animated in a positive way – and sailing is one way of doing that. The club is an asset to the whole community."

PHOTOGRAPH Matthew Sutcliffe

