

BY MIKE ROWBOTTOM
PHOTOS: GERARD BROWN

A formidable *career...*



Christopher Davidge has devoted over 36 years to the Olympic Movement, both on and off the water

The gentleman in the post office at Little Houghton is explaining how to get to Christopher Davidge's house. His wife cuts to the chase. "It's the house with the big gates on the left. Keep walking. You can't miss it."

She is right. The gates in question, huge and black, each boast an armorial shield depicting – as I am soon to discover – the family coats of arms for Davidge's father and mother. The latter's ancestors had built in 1780 what Davidge accurately describes as "a gem of a Georgian house of its kind."

Like many of his forbears, Christopher Guy Vere Davidge is a lawyer, educated at Eton and Oxford. As he stands in the wide doorway of his family home, his form is a little stooped but still clearly recognisable as that of the man who was known during his competitive days as a stroke of monumental power and determination. His outstretched hand is huge; his eyes, above high cheekbones, piercingly blue.

Now 81, Davidge is, you might say, a gem of his own kind – and someone who has been involved in the Olympics over 36 years. He started as a rower at the 1952 Helsinki Games and signed off at the 1988 Seoul Games, where he was Chairman of the Regattas Commission for the sport's world governing body, FISA.

It is a formidable span, during which time Davidge has known high drama. "I suppose my experience has been pretty unique," he admits, as we sit in the library at the back of the house, a room in which one whole huge wall is given over to leatherbound early 16th to 19th century

tomes, and where a collection of clocks ring and chime periodically from the ledge of a large marble fireplace.

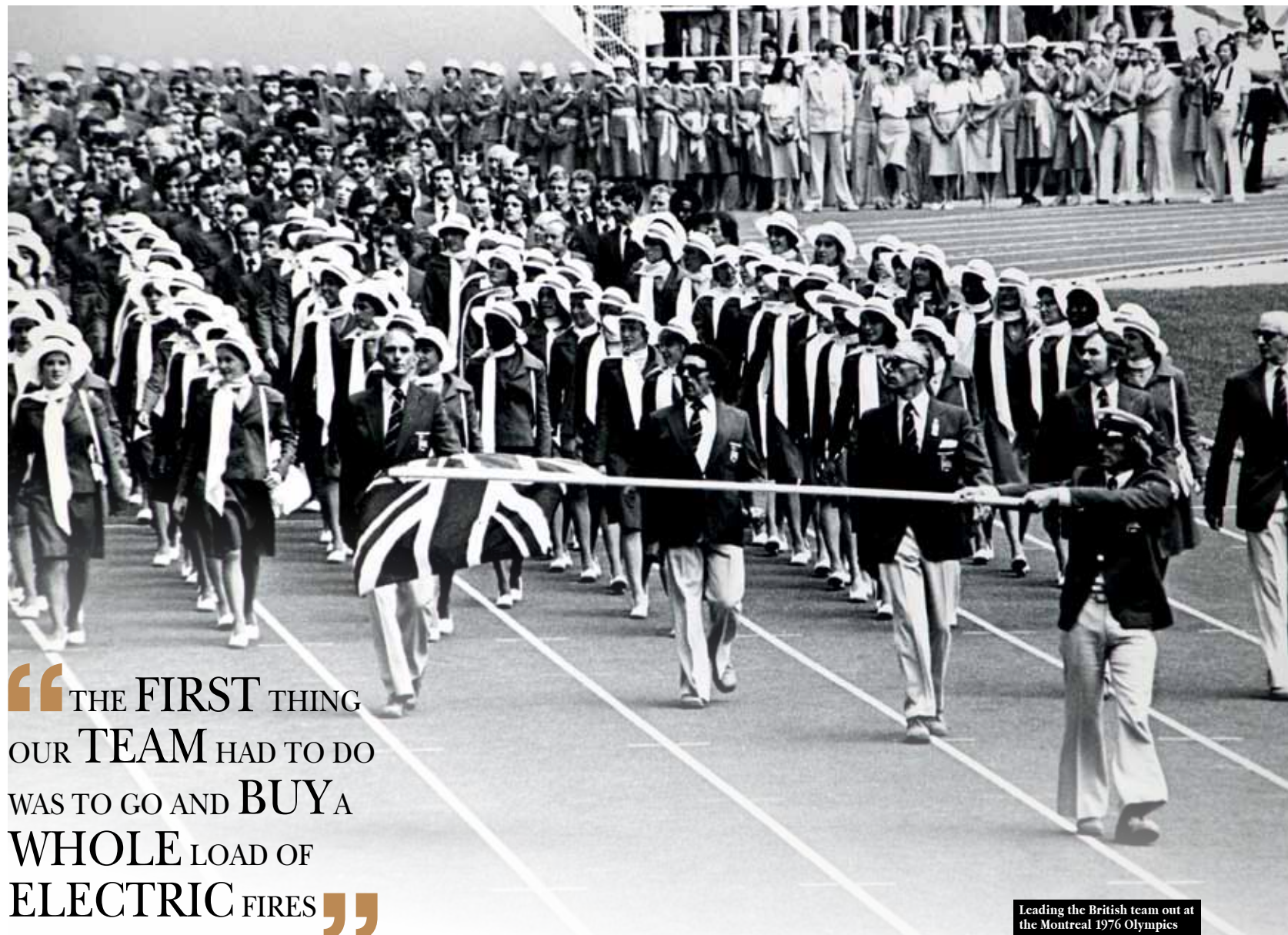
Davidge's experiences in three Boat Races served as a keynote for his subsequent sporting career; all were dramatic.

Having been accustomed to paddling about on water since the age of three – making good use of the lake at what he charmingly calls "the bottom of the garden" – Davidge took up rowing in earnest at Eton. By the time of the 1949 Boat Race he was established at stroke in the Oxford boat which lost to Cambridge by a quarter of a length – one 'dead heat' apart, the closest margin in the history of the event until the 2003 Boat Race. ➤



During his competitive days

Christopher Davidge at home earlier this year



Leading the British team out at the Montreal 1976 Olympics

“THE FIRST THING OUR TEAM HAD TO DO WAS TO GO AND BUY A WHOLE LOAD OF ELECTRIC FIRES”

Christopher Davidge

Outside Olympic competition, Davidge won nine Henley medals, including the Silver Goblets at Henley three times – in 1957 and 1958 with Tony Leadley, and in 1963 with Stuart MacKenzie. He and MacKenzie also won the Double Sculls Challenge Cup in 1959. Davidge won a bronze medal at the 1954 European Championships in a coxless pair with David Macklin and gold in the 1962 British Empire and Commonwealth Games in the coxless four with Michael Clay, John Beveridge and John Tilbury, and a bronze in the eight.

Director of Mixconcrete (Holdings) plc 1964-1982. Lloyd's underwriter 1957-. Vice president of the British Olympic Association 1976- (twice chairman 1972-76), Steward of Henley Royal Regatta 1967- (member Committee of Management 1973-2004), Commonwealth Games Council 1990-, president of the ARA 1977-1985 (hon life vice president 1985-), FISA Council member (Medal of Honour 1973, chairman of Regattas Commission 1976-1990), High Sheriff of Northants 1988-89. OBE (1982), DL (1994).

Elected President of OUBC the next year, Davidge was unable to row because of jaundice. Unusually, he was re-elected in 1951, and sat in the Oxford boat that sank in rough weather shortly after the start of that year's Boat Race, before suffering a heavy defeat in the re-run on the following Monday.

The 1952 Boat Race, in which Davidge was again at stroke, saw Oxford win by six feet. This was the famous contest rowed in a snowstorm during which the BBC radio commentator John Snagge made his classic, despairing comment: "I don't know who's in the lead... it's either Oxford or Cambridge!"

That year's Olympics, in Helsinki, offered Davidge another claim to fame as he secured a place in the team rowing in the pair with his old school team-mate David Callender.

"We were up against experienced international pairs – we hadn't raced internationally at all – and we weren't really quite up to it," he recalls. "As with everybody else, we came fourth.

"We didn't know any of the opponents. And we had never raced on a multi-lane course.

"Everything was new. The early rounds had gone fairly well for us, we had a following wind. In the final it turned into a headwind, which we were not as good in. But it was a great achievement to get to the Olympics."

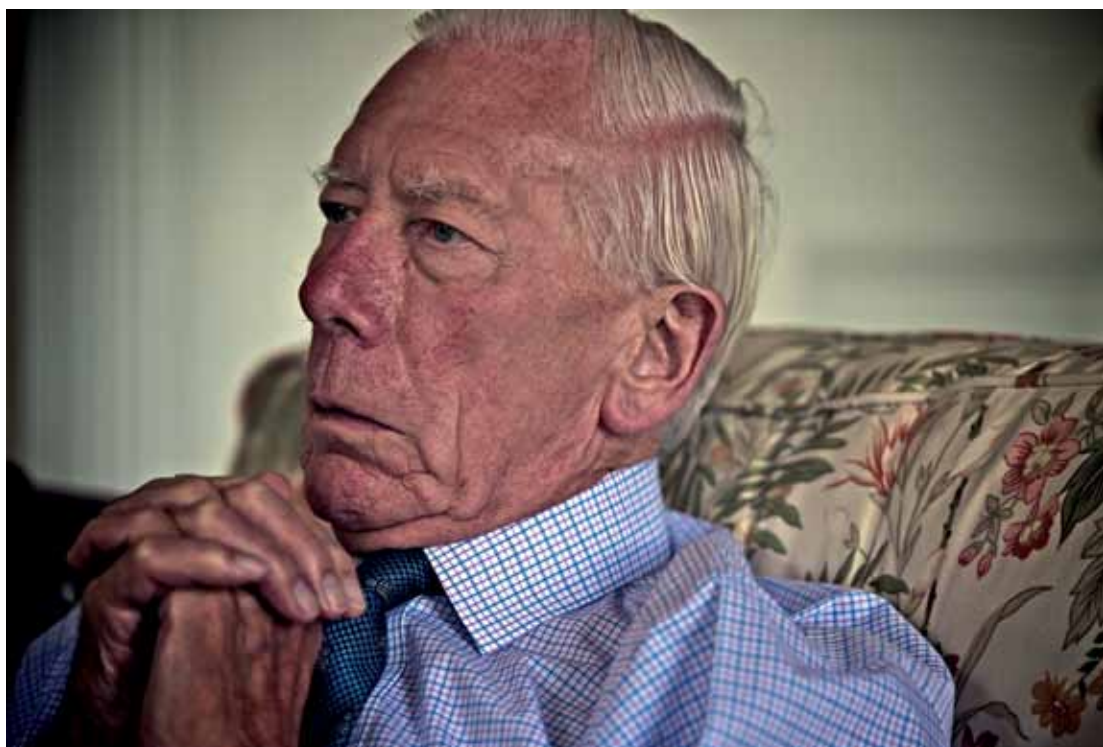
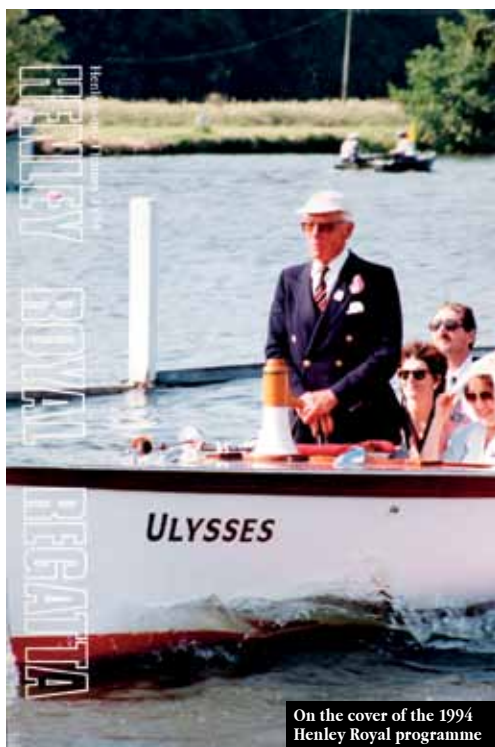
Four years later, having won European bronze in the pair with David Macklin in 1954, Davidge was in the Leander eight involved in a three-race series against a composite Amateur Rowing Association crew to determine Olympic selection for the Melbourne Games of 1956.

He describes the process as "an absolute farce." After beating the composite crew in the first two races, Leander lost the last one after the selectors had swapped two crew members round, placing at number two a rower Davidge characterises as "a boat-stopper."

"The selectors, who were three fairly elderly gentlemen, had got the result they wanted," Davidge says. "Because for some reason or other they didn't like us."

The chairman of the ARA selection board duly announced that the composite crew would go forward to that summer's European Championships – and, it was understood, the subsequent Olympics in November.

"The selectors also said they did not consider any of the other oarsmen capable of reaching the Olympic standard," Davidge recalls. "Well, you can imagine that went down like a lead balloon. Four or five people in our crew had all been to the previous Olympics. It was unbelievable!"



The eight performed so nondescriptly at the Europeans, however, that a new composite eight had to be formed for the Olympics, including Davidge at stroke.

“It still wasn’t a good eight, but we were much better than the one which had gone to the European Championships,” Davidge says. “We didn’t do very well but we weren’t a complete disgrace.”

More memorable in some ways was the five-day plane journey over to Melbourne, during which one of the many aircraft involved – a newly commissioned Super Constellation – had one of its engines break down en route from Honolulu to Fiji, forcing the pilot to land his plane full of Olympic passengers on an old wartime strip on Christmas Island.

The next outbound Super Constellation from Sydney was then diverted to the same location, where one of its engines was transferred to replace the faulty one. “What happened to the poor passengers on the other aircraft I don’t know,” Davidge adds with a grin. “They can’t have been very pleased.”

The rowing was at Ballarat – about 80 miles from Melbourne. “We got there thinking we were going out to a lovely Australian summer,” Davidge says. “Like hell. It was as cold as blazes. There was no heating and we were in Army barracks. The first thing our team had to do was to go and buy a whole load of electric fires.”

The 1960 Rome Games offered Davidge the prospect of a tangible reward. But fate was to decree otherwise.

Davidge, John Vigurs, Colin Porter and Mike Beresford were in a coxless four that had reached the final in style. But on the morning of the big race Beresford turned out to have suffered a recurrence of malaria overnight. He was deemed able to row – just.

“We were not going to win, but I felt we would

definitely have won a silver medal if Mike had not gone sick,” Davidge remembers. “That was really disappointing. Because as far as I was concerned it was going to be our last Olympics, as we were already in our thirties by then.

“With Mike being at bow there was the question of keeping the boat straight. We had to sort of nurse him through, and we finished fifth.”

While Davidge did not attend the 1964 Tokyo Games, which came a year after he retired, he had some influence on it having done some coaching with the three Molesey rowers who were part of the silver medal-winning coxless four.

He resumed his active Olympic career at the 1968 Mexico Olympics, where he was rowing team manager. The shooting of hundreds of students by police in Mexico City during protests against the government provided a shocking background in the lead-up to the Games.

“I knew all about it, as I was working closely with the general team HQ,” he recalls. “We were most anxious that news of this didn’t get back to England as we had some young competitors in the team and we were very concerned that parents might get the wind up. Because it was very nasty indeed – something like 300 students were shot dead, and the tanks were out.

“So all the team were very closely confined to barracks. The buses all had armed troops on them. There was no question of any members of the team going out into the city, which was very sad really. The team members began to smell a rat, but we were anxious not to tell them what was going on.”

Four years later Davidge had more shocking circumstances to deal with when he was the British team’s deputy Chef de Mission at the Munich Olympics, at which members of the Israeli team were taken hostage and eventually killed by the Palestinian terrorist group Black September. ➤

“MORE MEMORABLE WAS THE FIVE-DAY PLANE JOURNEY OVER TO MELBOURNE”



Commemorative blades, including one from the 1952 Helsinki Games

“SOMETHING LIKE 300 STUDENTS WERE SHOT DEAD, AND THE TANKS WERE OUT”

“Everybody was thoroughly shaken,” Davidge recalls. “The immediate worry was that the Games might be stopped, but that discussion was at a higher level from me.”

By the time the Games reached Montreal, in 1976, Davidge was Chef de Mission of the British team, leading them out in the Opening Ceremony. This time around, the chief difficulty before the Games lay in the demand issued by 17 African countries that New Zealand – whose rugby players had recently played against apartheid South Africa – should withdraw or risk an African boycott.

“Great pressure was being put on the New Zealand Chef de Mission,” Davidge says. “He came to me to discuss it. And I said: ‘You do not under any circumstances agree to withdraw. Rugby football is not part of the Olympic Games. Therefore there is no reason whatsoever why the Olympic team should be crucified, as it were. You stand firm.’”

New Zealand remained at the Games allowing John Walker to get his 1500m gold medal. Twenty-two countries withdrew.

In 1980 there was huge pressure applied by the Margaret Thatcher administration on the British team to join the Americans in boycotting the Moscow Olympics following the Soviet Union’s recent invasion of Afghanistan.

Davidge, as President of the Amateur Rowing Association, was given a clear mandate by resolution of the Council to stand up for rowing going to the Games.

He was summoned to the Foreign Office to account for himself in front of the Home Secretary, Lord Carrington. Shortly before he did so Carrington’s Parliamentary Private Secretary Douglas Hurd, with whom Davidge had been at school, came into the waiting room.

“I said, ‘I hope I’m not going to get into too much hot water but we are not complying’,” Davidge says. “I put my case to him, and he said ‘Good luck, have a go.’”

“Anyway I was duly ushered in to see the Foreign Secretary. My case was quite simply this: ‘If you, the British Government, will stop trading with Russia, we will support you. But we as sportsmen are not prepared to be used as the whip for protest.’ He was very gentlemanly about it. He said ‘I quite understand your position. But we must agree to disagree.’”

“It was a meeting I shall never forget. Because they were trying to pick us off sport by sport and we were an obvious first target.”

Davidge was to attend two more Olympics in his FISA role – the Los Angeles Games of 1984, and the Seoul Games of 1988. He vividly recalls his experience on the final day of racing in 1984, when the rowing got underway at Lake Casitas in thick mist. Davidge, in the launch which followed the crews, was able to witness Steve



Redgrave win the first of his five Olympic golds in the coxed four.

“I was the only Englishman who actually saw them row the race and win, because the spectators could hardly see anything from the bank,” he recalls with a smile.

For Davidge, it was a unique distinction in what has been a unique Olympic career.

Olympic record

Helsinki Games 1952

Men’s coxless pairs – Mei Bay

Round one – 1 SUI 7:46 / 2 GBR (Christopher Davidge, David Callender) 7:47 / 3 BEL 7:48.9 / 4 USA 7:50.7

Semi-finals – 1 GBR 7:45.6.

Final – 1 USA 8:20.7 / 2 BEL 8:23.5 / 3 SUI 8:32.7 / 4 GBR 8:37.4

Melbourne Games 1956

Men’s eights – Lake Wendouree, Ballarat

Round one – 1 AUS 6:05.8 / 2 CAN 6:07.1 / 3 USA 6:09.1 / 4 GBR 6:23.9

Repechage – 1 USA 7:09.09 / 2 ITA 7:17.4 / 3 GBR 7:18.1

Final – 1 USA 6:35.2 / 2 CAN 6:37.1 / 3 AUS 6:39.2 / 4 SWE 6:48.1

Rome Games 1960

Men’s coxless fours – Lake Albano

Round one – 1 GBR 6:28.18 / 2 USA 6:29.67

Final – 1 USA 6:26.26 / 2 ITA 6:28.78 / 3 USSR 6:29.62 / 4 CZE 6:34.30 / 5 GBR 6:36.18 / 6 SUI 6:38.81

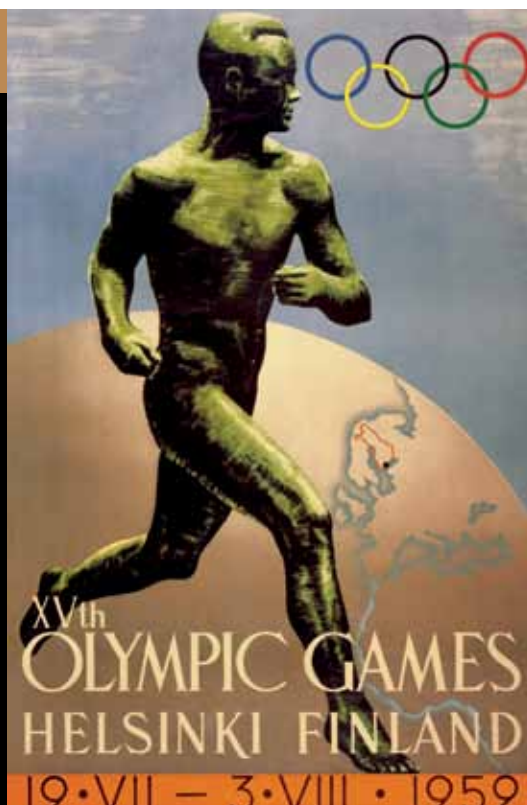


PHOTO: IOC

