



■ **ROW FOR IT:** The Staines Rowing Club crew are ready to take out their new boat



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Ashes tribute to father who died saving others

In 1971, policeman Alan Choules drowned when his boat got into trouble at Penton Hook lock, but not before he helped save other crew members. Forty years on Staines Boat Club has christened a boat in his memory, writes **TAMMY HUGHES**

MADDIE Shoobread is 14 years old and loves rowing. She joined Staines Boat Club a year ago and has won a number of competitions. On Saturday, she clapped with her team-mates when the Mayor of Spelthorne, Councillor John O'Hara, named their new boat, The Ashes, after the vessel her grandfather died in at Penton Hook Lock almost 40 years ago. The original boat was christened in 1951 after the boathouse and everything in it burned to the ground.

On Sunday, April 25, 1971, The Ashes was taken out by eight coarsmen and a 10-year-old cox. One of the men rowing was 29-year-old Detective Constable Alan Choules, of Feltham CID.

He had two children and a wife, Carol. The next day it was reported that three men – Dave Firman, 29, Alan Wickens, 25, and Mr Choules – had all drowned.

Their boat got into trouble at Penton Hook lock, snapping in half after it hit a pylon.

As The Ashes turned, the men facing downstream disappeared under the current, while those on the other side managed to fight their way to shore or were rescued.

Staines Boat Club safety advisor Craig

Tvaddle said: "Following the break-up of the boat, Alan supported the young cox, holding his head above the water.

"As they went towards the weir Alan lifted him towards a man standing on the weir bridge, but could not quite reach far enough and they went through the weir.

"Several witnesses saw Alan shield the cox's head as they went through the weir.

"Below weir, Alan continued to support him until two men rowed a boat out and they were able to pull him out of the water, but by this time Alan himself had disappeared."

Phil Wigley recalls helping one of the rowers out of the water.

He said: "He was hanging on to a pylon, the stream was so strong that it had ripped off all his clothes."

Mr Wigley was supposed to be rowing on the day of the tragedy, and said: "I pushed them off. I was late and someone had taken my place."

He said Mr Choules was a "very genuine man".

Mr Choules' daughter, Helen, was five when her father died.

She said: "I only remember bits and pieces of it. My earliest memories of him are at the boat club. He used to take me down there all the time."

Helen's mother Carol, 68, now lives in Farnborough.



■ **TO THE FUTURE:** Phil Wigley, Carol Choules-Howe and John Turnbull at the boat naming. Inset, Alan Choules and how the accident was reported at the time. Photos by Huw Powell



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She said: "A policeman came round to the house, but my husband was a policeman, so I didn't think anything of it at first. It was a terrible shock.

"I said at the time it was typical of him to help another person before thinking of himself. As a policeman, that was part of his job, it was his initial reaction.

"I was immensely proud of him and still am."

For a long time Mrs Choules lost touch with the boat club, and it was not until 2009 that she visited the place again.

She said: "They had bought a new rescue boat and they had named it after my husband.

They asked me if I could come down for the naming ceremony.

"My family and I came down, and now my granddaughter is a member of the boat club. She really enjoys it."

On Saturday Mr Choules and the other victims were commemorated at a joint boat-naming and fundraising event.

The club is trying to raise £300,000 for a boathouse that they hope to build in two years.

To donate or to get involved in the club, email Alison Tench at spcnewletter@hotmail.co.uk.