When on the 27th July 1829, the boys of Westminster and Eton at last met on the river Thames at Putney in a rowing match, first proposed nine years earlier, the crews were following an example set by a number of old Etonians and Westminsters whose attempts to set up a rowing match between the schools whilst they were at school had been forbidden by their Head Masters.

The example had been set six weeks earlier on 10th June at Henley when the ‘Grand rowing match between the Oxonians and Cantabs’ had come off. Three of the Oxford crew had begun their rowing at Westminster and three of the Cambridge crew in the boats at Eton.

For the Schools match at Putney, Eton pulled in ‘Britannia’, their favoured racing eight-oared man o’ war cutter. Westminster appeared in a new boat, built by Searle’s of Lambeth: ‘an eight-oared named the Cam…the boat was the one in which Cambridge had rowed their match with Oxford on 10th June...’

Although the Westminster crew were attired in white the boat appears to have been painted pink, not too surprising for that was and still is the Westminster town boys colour. But the Westminster crew of 1829 were King’s scholars whose colours were blue, the same as those of Eton, and Westminster rowing crews didn’t adopt using the pink until the crews of the King’s scholars and town boys combined for the Eton match of 1837.

The pink boat was not Westminster’s, it had been borrowed for the race from a club which appears to have a more ancient claim on the pink; that of Lady Margaret Boat Club, disputably the first established college boat club in Cambridge for the students of St. John’s College.

‘When Mr. W Snow of St. John’s, Cambridge and Eton, proposed, and Mr. T. Staniforth, of Christ Church, Oxford and Eton, accepted, a match between their respective universities in 1829[2], the fledgling Cambridge University Boat Club[only established one or two years before] had neither boats nor facilities.

It was incumbent upon the first CUBC captain to find his own boat. Snow seems to have managed to persuade his college to have a boat expressly built in London for the race with Oxford. As was the usual practice, the boat was painted in the colours of its owner, Lady Margaret Boat club whose colours were, according to their rowing jerseys of the time pink and white.

It appears however that one crewman simply refused to wear the pink and others wore a light pink sash or according to Jackson’s Oxford’s Journal as pink waistbands.

The ‘Sporting Magazine in its full account of the race [July 1829] claims the crew had pink handkerchiefs, ‘their boat being of that colour’.5
Rouse-Ball’s history of Cambridge’s Trinity Boat Club[1908] compiling earlier contemporary records described the pink Cambridge boat as ‘good to look at but bad to go’. Jackson’s Oxford Journal claimed the Cambridge boat ‘was far inferior in the water, dipping to the oar, while the other rose to every stroke in fine style’. The Cantabs boat returned to Cambridge down the Thames, pausing briefly it seems to be used by the Westminster School Crew on 27th July in a race from Putney to Hammersmith and back again against Eton College. Again the boat was unsuccessful. The LMBC records indicate the boat was in use again the following year by the LMBC second boat, finishing fifth on the river and a university select crew who were defeated by the Lady Margaret eight. Records of the boats existence disappear after 1830.

The ‘Cam’ probably followed in the tradition of a great many racing craft; being set up with comfortable seats and awning and used for picnics or as a pleasure-boat. Worse still she may have been chosen for a Bumps night burning as LMBC went Head of the river. In the Official Centenary Boat race history published in 1929, a curious image of what purports to be the Cambridge crew appears and has often been repeated since. The boat in the picture is actually of a slightly older vintage. It is in fact the famous Exeter [Oxford] White boat of 1824, which had been built in Plymouth dockyard and shipped by sea to Portsmouth and whence by land to Oxford accompanied by the great Oxford Boat builder Stephen Davies. The design and lines of the boat are undoubtedly similar to those of Searle’s Cam. The light painted colour of the boat may have been the reason for its choice as illustration. Most boats were painted darker club colours. All Trinity College’s early boats seem to have been painted black. The first Oxford Boat race Boat, the old Balliol was built by Stephen Davies and painted green. Its history is of course better documented, for the boat survives; at present in the River and Rowing museum in Henley having been rescued from Oxford in 1841 and taken to Loch Rannoch in Scotland by Sir Robert Menzies. In 1913 the boat was returned to the Oxford University Boat House upon the sale of the Menzies estate.

The second university boat race didn’t take place until 1836 when Oxford, in a Christ Church boat, again wore white and dark blue striped jerseys and Cambridge, in the Corpus boat arrived to row in white, but as the Eton college book of the river records; Shortly before the start Mr.E.Stanley, the Cambridge three man and formally Eton’s captain of boats in 1835, proposed Eton Blue should be the crew’s colour. Mr.Richard Nathaniel Phillips of Christ’s College was dispatched to a local haberdashers close by and returned with a piece of blue ribbon which was fixed to the bows. Cambridge beat Oxford by nearly a minute in the thirty-six minute row from Westminster to Putney. The blue remained and by the next race in 1839, Cambridge had added light blue stripes to their jerseys.

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6 W.W.Rouse Ball A History of the First Trinity Boat Club 1908
7 Jackson’s Oxford Journal June 1829
8 Aquatic notes or sketches of the rise and progress of rowing at Cambridge 1852
9 Byrne and Churchill Eton book of the river 1935
10 confirmed by Rouse Ball 1908 p.46