

Golden girl Houghton aims for London 2012

OXFORDSHIRE'S Frances Houghton has decided to return to the rigours of international rowing, writes Mike Rosewell.

After competing at three Olympic Games, in which she won silver medals in Athens and Beijing, plus landing three world championship golds and a world under 23 gold, the 29-year-old from Wheatley took a year off to consider her future.

Houghton started rowing as a young teenager and a break was perhaps overdue.

She said: "The past year has been a long, gradual healing process.

"It has also been absolutely fantastic fun. I haven't laughed and smiled so much in my life.

"For the first time since I was 15, I have been able to walk upstairs without tears of pain, which has been a pleasure more than I can express!"

Houghton has not exactly been inactive.

"I have been blown away with all my expectations of what life on the other side could be like, and I wouldn't swap a single day.

"I've been to France (cycling), Devon (sailing), Cornwall, France, Belgium, Norway (long-distance skiing), Madrid, Seville (rowing) Ireland (professional cooking course), Athens (conference on Olympic ideals at Olympia) - and of course home.

"It's all been amazing."

So, why is she going back to rowing?

She explained: "At the beginning of the year the thought of training again gave me nightmares and I couldn't even contemplate putting myself through it ever again.

"But just the thought of the Olympic



□ **GOLDEN GIRLS:** Frances Houghton (third from left) stands on the podium with Great Britain crewmates (from left) Annie Vernon, Debbie Flood and Katherine Grainger after winning a silver medal in the women's quadruple sculls at the Beijing Olympics

Games makes every nerve in my body go crazy with excitement.

"To walk through another Olympic Village as an athlete would be a dream come true for me. Even writing about it makes my hair stand on end.

"Who knows if I will ever have another opportunity to race for a medal, let alone the gold. But I'll take it one step at a time..

"To make it back on to the team for the World Championships next year in New Zealand is the No 1 aim.

"I know this will mean many more

early nights, missed weddings, and tearful climbing of stairs. But I am very happy to have come to this decision. It feels 100 per cent right.

"And whatever happens I know I am so lucky to have the opportunity to go for it, and if I'm not smiling, remind me to.

"It's only moving a piece of fibreglass down a river after all."

That piece of fibreglass has gone fast for our local hero in the past. Hopefully, it will do so again.

• City of Oxford RC will be staging the

Isis Sculls on Saturday. The single, double and quad sculls will be raced off at 11.00am, 12.45pm, 2.30pm and 4.15pm.