

KAYAKING AND CANOEING ON THE TIDAL THAMES 2014 GENERAL NAVIGATIONAL ADVICE

INTRODUCTION

Navigating a canoe or kayak on the Tidal Thames or Thames Tideway as it is also known requires knowledge of the river and how it operates. The Port of London Authority (PLA) and Canoe England have produced this advice for both existing users and those planning to use the water. It applies to navigation at all times between Teddington and the Sea.

Users should also refer to the PLA "Boating on the Thames" web site for "**The Tidal Thames- Recreational Users Guide**", navigation rules, signage, sound signals, tide times, Restricted Zones details, Ebb Tide Flag Warnings, and Notices to Mariners for the latest navigation information, river and Thames Barrier scheduled closures, in river works, events etc.

It is the responsibility of organisations and individuals to ensure of all participants can cope with the expected conditions, everyone and the canoes/kayaks to be used are suitable and correctly equipped for these waters, and activities are risk assessed and undertaken safely with appropriate good environmental practice by referring to the Canoe England guidance "You, your canoe and the Environment".

NB: Below Putney Pier the river should be treated as a waterway for the more competent user with experience of tidal waters and windy conditions which are more suited to kayaks with enclosed cockpits.

PLANNING A TRIP

It's very important to take account of tide and wind. Long trips work best with the tide. Plan return trips around the change of tide – taking account of the stage of tide. Towards the end of ebb tide the current will be relatively slow.

REGULATIONS THAT AFFECT YOU

Canoes and kayaks must keep well clear of vessels such as tugs and tows, passenger vessels and commuter vessels. The loss of a canoe or kayak when on the river should be treated as a vessel sunk and reported to **London VTS**. Any vessel that has sunk, been damaged, damaged another vessel/river object or an incident involving personal injury should be reported. Incident reporting forms can be found at: www.pla.co.uk.

TIDES

On the Tidal Thames the tides can rise and fall by as much as 7m and run up to 3 knots in the main channel (and considerably more around bridges and piers). Depending on the land water flow the ebb tide can take up to 7 hours to flow out with the flood tide coming in over roughly 5 hours. Getting off the river 2 hours before or after high tide can be difficult, as there is little or no foreshore exposed and in places there are few egress points. When you plan a trip find out where you can exit safely. There are a lot of draw docks above Putney Bridge but very few below, details of which can be found on the interactive map on the PLA's recreational website. Pontoons and piers are privately owned and should only be used to exit in an emergency or with permission. It is vital that you understand the tidal conditions and its sets and maintain situational awareness at all times.

WEATHER CONDITIONS

Weather conditions on the Tideway can have a significant effect on the safety of navigation for kayaks and especially the handling of open canoes. The river is exposed; strong winds in opposition to the stream can create steep standing waves and confused waters when combined with washes from motor vessels. Conditions can become awkward and physically demanding in a matter of minutes. Wind speeds can vary and noticeably increase around and through bridge arches. Rain and snow can seriously reduce visibility.

The most significant danger to canoeists is fog and reduced visibility. It usually affects the Tideway on days when the conditions are otherwise good, with no wind or rain. To navigate in reduced visibility, motor vessels often rely on radar, but radar does not show kayaks/canoes so the risk of collision increases.

POSITIONING ON THE RIVER

Most important for safe canoeing and kayaking on the tidal Thames is to **Keep a good lookout at all times and should navigate on the starboard side of the river at all times**. Observe where the main river traffic flows are and position yourself well away from them. Large vessels will usually be near the center of the river where it's deepest, so beware and if you are in this position return as soon as possible to the starboard side of the river. However, in a number of places the main navigational channel is not in the center and large boats can appear to be in the "wrong" place on the river, especially at low tide. You should familiarise yourself where the navigational channel is before going out. Always assess risk at each stage of a journey and position yourself to minimise risk to yourself and nuisance to other river users.

At low tide take care to avoid grounding on shoals and shallow water near the riverbanks. Keep clear of bridge abutments, vessels manoeuvring and especially pontoons, piers and moored vessels as a strong flow can drag a trapped small vessel underneath.

CROSSING THE RIVER

This can be the most hazardous part of any journey and must be undertaken keeping a constant good lookout. When clear to do so canoes and kayaks should cross the main channel as a closely formed group and avoid a single file formation.

RIVER CLOSURES AND EVENTS

The Tidal Thames is closed to traffic from time to time for races and events and you will not be permitted to paddle during a closure. For information, regular river users should sign up to receive Notices to Mariners (or sign up to the Tidal Thames Navigators Club) which give details of these. The sign up page can be found at: www.pla.co.uk.

KEEPING IN TOUCH

As well as informing a contact ashore it is recommended that paddlers about to go on the river should contact **London VTS (Vessel Traffic Service)** on **VHF Channel 14** or on **020 8855 0315**. VTS can provide details of anything happening on the river that might affect your trip and they broadcast a routinely half-hourly traffic update for all river users. You must always remember to tell them when you have finished your trip.

A personal VHF handset can be very useful on the river for making other river users aware of your intentions, especially when intending to cross the river. It can also be used to check with passenger vessels whether they are about to leave a pier. All users of VHF must have proper training and certification. Information can be found at:

BE SAFE BE SEEN

Being as visible as possible is one of the best ways to avoid incidents. The PLA has produced "**A Practical Guide to Lighting and Other Safety Tips for Small Leisure Craft**" with tips on how to be as visible as possible which can be found at <http://www.boatingonthames.co.uk/Canoeing>

Below are some easy to follow tips on how to be "**highly visible**":

- Retro-reflective strips placed on clothing/buoyancy aids and also on the shaft of the paddle near the blade
- White LED lights worn either on a helmet or about the shoulder can be very effective, but care must be taken to avoid impairing night vision
- Neon coloured clothing is very effective in low visibility conditions but is not as effective at night as retro-reflective strips.

SAFETY KIT

Personal Flotation Devices are very useful equipment, which all Canoeists and Kayakers should use. Wear it correctly and check it is in good order. Have clothing with you for the forecast weather conditions. A combination of water/wind proof outer items and lightweight manmade fibre sports clothing with thermal quick drying properties are suitable. Also, consider choosing clothing that makes you as visible as possible, **with hi-visibility attire being especially recommended**. Foot wear is important as you may need to walk on an uneven riverbed or bank and sharp objects may be present. Most water sports shoes/boots are fine. Going barefoot is not recommended. Ensure your canoe/kayak is properly fitted out with buoyancy, toggles and on kayaks the spray decks securely fits.

PADDLING ALONE

It's always safer paddling with a group. Make sure you stay together and avoid spreading out widely across the river and getting in the way of faster river users.

NIGHT PADDLING

Canoe and Kayaking at night is more hazardous than in the day, always make sure that someone knows you are out on the water, call the Duty Officer at **London VTS (Vessel Traffic Service)** on **VHF Channel 14** or on **020 8855 0315** and for preference always paddle in a group. Please refer to the guide to lighting at night, otherwise known as the '**Be Safe – Be Seen**' guide for full details of how to make sure that you can be seen. If you are going out for an evening paddle, even if you intend to return in daylight you should take lights with you as the light can fade very quickly.

BRIDGES AND CLOSED ARCHES

There are 29 bridges over the main channel between Teddington and Tower Bridge. The height and width are no concern to paddlers, but currents can be strong around the bridges and you should always keep well away from bridge piers and avoid passing other vessels close to a bridge, who will often be very limited in their manoeuvring room. No vessels should navigate closed arches.

BRIDGE SIGNS



PLA EBB TIDE FLAG WARNING

During abnormal fluvial flows there is a PLA 'Ebb Tide Flag Warning' system and all man-powered vessels should note the advice, as detailed in **Notice to Mariners U4 and M12 of 2014** and updated daily on: www.boatingonthames.co.uk.

OTHER RIVER USERS

Wash and draw-off from power driven boats can be difficult to handle if the wash is coming from the side or unexpectedly from behind. Turn to face the wash and paddle straight through it. Always keep well away from large commercial boats as they take a relatively long time to stop and change position. More information can be found in the recreational users' guide, which can be found at www.boatingonthames.co.uk.

Between Teddington Lock and Putney the "**Code of Practice for Rowing on the Tidal Thames**" details local navigation rules for vessels under oars to include canoes and kayaks as posted at www.boatingonthames.co.uk/Rowing. A rowing eight should be the fastest boat you should meet in this section of the Thames, travelling at speeds up to 15 knots. Due to the nature of rowing craft the vision of the coxswain is often obscured. If you are in doubt as to whether you have been seen call out "take a look" followed by the size of boat i.e. "take a look four". Unlike your Canoe or Kayak, rowing boats can't easily stop and turn so when overtaking or crossing in front of them make sure you give them a clear berth. Also keep a lookout for any accompanying powered vessel used by rowing coaches and wash. They are required to pay attention to their wash at all times which can be significant and a hazard to less experienced paddlers.

We also recommend that you avoid obstructing slipways and towpaths when launching and landing. Keep a lookout for cyclists and other users.

There are a number of active sailing clubs along the tidal Thames who tend to boat around high tide. Clubs train novices that combined with the prevailing light winds and strong tides can often lead to sailing boats with little control. You have priority over vessels tacking back and forth, and to avoid collision give them a wide berth particularly during race events or when winds are strong. Shouting to gain attention may be the best means to avoid a collision situation developing.

Commercial operations on the tidal Thames above Putney Pier are generally limited to the summer season. Canoes and kayaks should allow these vessels to use the main deep water channel, which is generally in the center of the river. Downriver of Putney Pier, the river has numerous different types of vessels operating; from passenger cruise ships coming up as far as HMS Belfast, high speed Thames Clipper passenger ferries (operating at speeds between 8-30knots) and large freight vessels with tugs towing barges behind. They will be maintaining a good lookout but we would strongly urge you not to get in their way, as these vessels are relatively difficult and slow to manoeuvre.

EXCLUSION ZONES

Canoes and Kayaks should keep clear of; bridge abutments, moorings, piers, vessels manoeuvring – remember to **maintain a good lookout at all times**. For the security (exclusion) zones at Vauxhall Bridge and Westminster – please refer to Permanent Notice to Mariners.

POLLUTION

The Tidal Thames is much cleaner than it used to be and most of the time any pollution is a low level risk. After heavy/prolonged rainfall, raw sewage is often released into the river from combined sewage outflows. Avoid canoeing when pollution is likely and a possible risk to health increased. A visual check of the river will generally provide a good indication if it's polluted evident by excess litter and debris as will the river tending to have a greasy brown film on the surface from sewage discharges. Pollution alerts can be received from Thames Water. The risk of Weil's disease from rodents is increased in all rivers after heavy rainfall.

USEFUL NUMBERS AND LINKS

Port of London Authority (PLA):	www.pla.co.uk
PLA Recreational Users website:	www.boatingonthames.co.uk
Canoe England:	www.canoe-england.org.uk
Royal Yachting Association:	www.rya.org.uk
London VTS: 020 8855 0315	London Coastguard: 999
Harbour Master Upper (Teddington to Barking)	020 7743 7912
Harbour Master Lower (Barking to Sea)	01474 562 212

