

**5. ROWING RULES: EXTENT OF KNOWLEDGE AND APPLICATION**

**5.1 Rowing Community**

**5.1.1 *Knowledge Base, training and instruction***

5.1.1.1 The knowledge base within the Rowing Community has altered over the recent to medium past. Historically, many Rowing Clubs employed a professional, qualified Waterman. With years of experience and inherited knowledge the Watermen provided the Clubs and wider rowing community with detailed information on the characteristics of the Thames in their area, to provide advice to and control over the rowers in their care. From our observation, received submissions and anecdotal evidence, a decrease in overall levels of general watermanship and rivercraft is apparent.

5.1.1.2 With the demise of this system it is apparent that good deal of knowledge was lost, not just of the detail of the Rules but of their application, river craft and interaction with other river users. Combined with the changing commercial/leisure/sport balance on the river and changes in enforcement and control the changes in knowledge and attitude have had a detrimental effect on the interaction of the various communities. These issues need addressing alongside application of the Rules.

5.1.1.3 This study has found a generally consistent acknowledgement amongst the rowing community of the dip in standards over the recent past. A recent drive towards improved knowledge and awareness has also been found and a number of safety initiatives have either been commenced or proposed by the ARA (see Attachment H), and amongst individual Clubs and the wider rowing Community.

5.1.1.4 Amongst the visited Rowing Clubs the knowledge of the overall Rules was found to be relatively high, at least amongst the senior members. Training programmes including tests for junior members were in place in a number of Clubs. Other Clubs exhibited lists of approved coxes and steers persons. However, there was a noted variation in the understanding in particular of the Rule with regards craft following the tidal stream. In several cases it has been found that use of the centre line, as opposed to the starboard side of the fairway, is either the understood requirement or the promulgated practice.

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- 5.1.1.5 Safety Representatives interviewed were found to have a generally high level of knowledge of the Rowing Rules and an appreciation of the overall problems. There has been widespread recognition of shortcomings in the rowing community, relating to safety and interaction with other stakeholders. A move was apparent over the last three or four years to introduce a risk-based approach to the sport, better knowledge of the requirements and regulations, and enforcement.
- 5.1.1.6 Coaches, particularly the senior coaches interviewed, likewise held a good level of awareness of the requirements. Even within the rowing community there were reservations as to the application on the river, consideration and interaction between other users (including rowers). A shift in attitude was recognised along with a need to address the shortcomings.
- 5.1.1.7 During one witnessed regional presentation, aimed at members of various Clubs, particularly coxes and steersmen, the rule with regards rowers going with the stream was incorrectly described as to follow the centre, rather than the starboard side of the channel. Similarly the diagrams showing the track to be followed when proceeding with the stream used in this presentation and shown on the TRRC website indicate that the track is along the centre of the river rather than the starboard side of the channel. By observation we found that this practice was widespread in application, though not universal.
- 5.1.1.8 The rowing community has a broad range of membership including juniors, novice pleasure users, competitive rowers, full time professional sportspersons and veterans. Similarly the level of safety culture and systematic approach varies from Club to Club and some variation has been noted within the governing bodies. Some organisations visited exhibited extremely high and systematic approaches to all aspects of the sport. These included the physical and technical development of the athlete, as well as river and safety issues, taking complete novices through to experienced rowers and veterans. The format and level of training schemes and assessment varied amongst the Clubs from some rudimentary system through to a highly developed SMS type organisation. Assessment of rowing ability, river craft and understanding of the Rules similarly varied; predominantly made on a practical level employing the expertise of senior Club members, rather than a formalised assessment and certification scheme.

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- 5.1.1.9 There remain significant areas of weakness, but a general groundswell appeared to be present that had at least recognised in part the failure and lapses in standards. Endeavours were underway to address recognised failings (as a TRRC responsibility initially, but also being monitored at ARA level) though the process is at the early stages in some areas. It is noted that other previous initiatives have been undertaken in this regard and the momentum has died. It will be necessary for such momentum to continue. Apparent isolation of the various user groups combined with lack of enforcement permit the momentum to dissipate – more active cross user groups and enforcement should assist.
- 5.1.1.10 Principally, and fundamentally, the knowledge is centred around positioning on the river (with the discrepancy concerning the use of the centre line), knowledge of the characteristics of the river and physical safety in the event of getting into trouble. Together with refinement of technique etc this forms the main body of knowledge. The main concern highlighted by this study is the failure by many rowers to fully comprehend the interaction between the Rowing Rules and the COLREGS. In particular a lack of understanding that when risk of collision exists, the actions taken to avoid that collision should always be in accordance with the COLREGS. Also there is a lack of awareness that the Rowing Rules do not stand alone but are special rules under the COLREGS, and that the latter should be reverted to except as specifically covered under the Rowing Rules.
- 5.1.1.11 Whilst a majority of rowers were seen on the River to be applying the Rowing Rules to a greater or lesser extent, it is evident that application is to a lower standard than awareness of the Rules. Transgression from the Rules varied from minor infringements, to dangerous violations by rowers proceeding on the “wrong” side of the fairway. Many rowers follow concentrated training programmes which often incorporate the use of “set pieces” rowed between convenient locations (often bridges). These “pieces” are rowed particularly when proceeding with the tide and following “the racing line”, possibly not keeping an adequate lookout and unaware of other craft ahead.

**5.1.2 Application amongst Rowers**

- 5.1.2.1 Observation during river trips and walks along the tow or river path and on bridges provided practical assessment of the actual day-to-day application of the Rowing Rules and Collision Regulations. Generally, during these Autumn and Winter periods of observation, rowers were either the sole users of the river or virtually so, and as a result little risk of collision with anything but another rower existed, apart from the PLA Harbour Services launch or occasional Class V passenger vessel.
- 5.1.2.2 The main observed variation from the Rowing & Collision Rules was the positioning of rowers proceeding with the stream. Instead of keeping to the starboard side of the channel, many were generally in the centre of the deep water fairway. When overtaking or when more than one craft were rowing abreast, they were often spread across much of the river, including over towards the port side.
- 5.1.2.3 Another variation was that whilst many rowers proceeding against the ebb tide and taking advantage of the Rowing Rules kept close in to the bank, others had a more liberal interpretation of the requirements and were in effect well within the port side of the fairway. Sometimes this was during overtaking but not always. The main violation of the Collision Regulations was that many rowers whilst proceeding with the stream and positioned on the centreline or to port of the main channel, altered course further to port when in an end on situation so as to pass starboard on starboard.
- 5.1.2.4 Actions taken in a head on situation have already been identified as the main cause for concern with regards the assessed risk factor for navigation on this stretch of the Thames. A significant number of rowers travelling with the ebb tidal stream and positioned in the centre of the river, when meeting head on to a power driven vessel constrained to the centre of the channel, chose to alter course to port so as to pass starboard to starboard. A number of users described the example of a rowing craft on the Surrey shore working the inside of the bend on the ebb stream, which on meeting a powered vessel head on altered course to port towards the bank at the same time as the powered vessel altered to starboard. Such a scenario had caused at least one accident and other near misses.
- 5.1.2.5 Other witnessed and anecdotal transgressions from the Rules and lack of consideration for other river users included:

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- Poor lookout and awareness of other vessels and physical obstructions.
- Proceeding along the “wrong” side of the fairway, particularly when rowing with the stream
- Rowing three abreast and blocking the channel for other users
- Overtaking at inappropriate locations (approaches to Bridges)
- Holding and slowing at inappropriate places (approaching and under Bridges)
- Collision with and close approaches to stationary fixed and floating objects
- Excessive speed of coach boats whilst not actively escorting
- Excessive wash of coach boats
- Lack of appreciation of the needs of other craft, particularly with respect to deep draught requirements.
- Failure to recognise or respond to sound signals
- Failure to take any action to avoid risk of collision
- Rowing at night or in poor visibility without adequate lights
- Baulking of vessels in the main channel
- Offensive language to other river users, including Class V passenger vessels crowded with passengers, motor cruisers and PLA Harbour Services launches

## Crossing

- 5.1.2.6 Notice U6 of 2002 identifies the approved crossing points. Crossing does take place at other locations along the river, such as above Hammersmith Bridge and above Chiswick Bridge. Crossing at other locations was found by the hazard identification process to be a significant hazard.
- 5.1.2.7 At some locations, such as Chiswick Bridge the observed practice separated vessels crossing whilst in transit from those departing from / arriving at the adjacent Clubhouse, who predominantly remained clear of the crossing point when manoeuvring in the water at the start / end of their river time.
- 5.1.2.8 Evidence was that, combined with “loitering” at inappropriate places such as bridge approaches and arches, the main problem associated with crossing would be any tendency to cross at inappropriate times e.g. ahead of oncoming vessels, at an oblique angle, or without due dispatch. This is addressed in the Rowing Rules and the wider COLREGS. Education and a continuation of efforts now commenced or proposed amongst the rowers appear to be key.

5.1.2.9 Identification of the crossing points on the bank side is also recommended; coloured post markers would suffice and be most practicable. Signage in advance of crossing points would also assist to warn other users, particularly visitors. Signage elsewhere e.g. on bridges would also alert visitors to the special rowing rules in place.

5.1.2.10 Whilst opinions amongst the rowers were divide as to the relative merits of other crossing points the consistent argument was against that introduced at Syon.

## **5.2 Operators of Class V vessels**

5.2.1 Levels of knowledge and application amongst operators of Class V vessels were found to be uniformly high.

5.2.2 Whilst there were undoubted instances of problems between rowers and Class V vessels, and varying degrees of mutual respect, interaction of these two types of craft was not found to be the major concern amongst either the rowing community or the commercial operators.

5.2.3 There was a view amongst some Class V operators that over the last few years the attitude of rowers in general had become more insular and less aware of other users. To some extent this was upheld within the rowing community, with efforts now proposed to counter the decline.

## **5.3 Powered Leisure Craft**

5.3.1 Other than rower on rower situations the interaction of powered leisure users and rowing vessels is the main area of concern. This is twofold e.g. risk of collision through incorrect avoiding action and excessive wash.

5.3.2 Some operators of power driven vessels based on the Thames appeared aware that rowing vessels would be operating in ways outside the COLREGS, although many were unaware of the detail of the Rowing Rules and the differences with the COLREGS.

5.3.3 As previously stated, the main concern was interaction between the two classes where risk of collision exists. There was expressed confusion as to the probable actions of rowing vessels, particularly in head on situations. Knowledge of the Rowing Rules themselves does not address this issue.

5.3.4 Observation of a relatively small number of powered leisure craft seen during our study showed that some users don't strictly apply the Collision Regulations, either by maintaining a position to port of the centre of the channel or by failing to alter course to starboard in an end on situation.

#### **5.4 Visiting Craft**

5.4.1 Visiting or infrequent users, both rowers and other leisure users were felt to introduce an increased risk because of non-familiarity with the geography, tidal conditions and rowing rules.

5.4.2 A degree of control is available among the rowing community, particularly when visitors are hosted and launching facilities provided by a Tideway Club. The host Club must ensure that all visitors are provided with suitable and sufficient information to ensure awareness of the tidal river and its navigation. Rowers based outside the tidal Thames were felt to have a lower level of understanding and application of the Rules and other Tideway safety issues. A significant number of the casualties on the ARA database involved visiting crews attending prior to or during races, particularly Heads. Also, interviews during visits to Clubs showed that even some experienced coxes based on the Thames, whilst familiar with the sections of the river that they rowed regularly, were unaware of issues elsewhere on the Tideway, e.g. not aware of the change to the regulations around Syon reach and the reversion to right hand navigation introduced in 2002.

5.4.3 Control of other visiting leisure users is more problematic. Levels of knowledge were difficult to assess, by nature of the infrequent, unidentifiable nature of the visitor. We were hosted by a narrow boat owner on a trip from Limehouse to Brentford who had made similar transits over several years and yet despite being a safety conscious Master Mariner he was unaware of the existence of the Rowing Rules. Also exiting Limehouse Lock at the same time were four other narrow boats, including two hired vessels, none of whom had previously been on the tideway. A British Waterways leaflet giving advice on the Tideway was handed to each boat, however, although a warning was given about rowers it was unspecific and could be improved to give additional information about rowing patterns.

5.4.4 Measures to improve and control this class of stakeholder would be improved by better signage, promulgation of the rules at all entry points, etc. Most effectively, a certification / registration scheme as found on other inland waterways would appear a most valuable tool.

5.4.5 The submissions and discussions identified the need for training and education to increase awareness of other river users and their characteristics and problems. Also there is a need for all to accept that the river is a complex and dangerous common highway rather than a boating lake or a racing circuit. All river users need to have a desire to compromise on all sides. Whilst captive audience of rowers (mainly identifiable) and club based PDV users can be reached and educated through their member organisations, the question of the casual, non-affiliated user remains.

## **5.5 Sound Signals**

5.5.1 Observance and knowledge of sound signals made by other vessels appeared lower amongst the rowers than overall knowledge of the Rowing Rules.

5.5.2 Several PDV operators, particularly the Class V operators witnessed during the study, used sound signals. In some instances the sound signals produced a suitable response by the rowers, whilst in others no response or an incorrect response was achieved. This is an area that could be improved. Again, education appears key.