

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1 Since time immemorial waterborne traffic has proceeded along the River Thames as a major arterial route from the sea to places far inland. Because of the strong tidal flows, heavy and unwieldy unpowered vessels were only able to move either with the flow of the river or against it by hugging the banks on the insides of bends where the flow was least. Thus over centuries the system of “working the slacks” became the norm over most of the tidal section of the Thames river. This was an unregulated and unwritten system that worked safely because of the expertise and knowledge handed down from father to son and by apprenticeship as a waterman or lighterman. Even when steam and subsequently motor powered vessels were initially developed the system continued, although higher powered vessels were then able to drive through against the strength of the stream, however, at some cost in fuel and time.
- 2.2 Historically all commercial and other river traffic would have been powered by either oars or sails. Whilst no records exist of when rowing as a sport commenced, in 1715 the Doggett’s Coat and Badge race was instituted for watermen who had completed their apprenticeship. This sculling race first took place and was rowed over a 5-mile course between two pubs situated along the Thames. In 1829 the first University Boat Race was run and Henley Regatta was initiated in 1839. By around 1850 a number of rowing clubs had been formed between Westminster and Putney. The individuals who developed the use of oars as a sport were often also involved on the river professionally as watermen or lightermen, whilst non-professional rowers would utilise the assistance of professionals to look after their boats and train them in the art of oarsmanship and navigation on the river. As a result historically all the clubs had a continuous training regime with expertise being passed on to new entrants and novices.
- 2.3 With the reduction in commercial river usage and other changes that have occurred over the last thirty or so years, watermen are no longer employed by clubs. Rowers tend to row competitively for a much more intensive but shorter span of years, an enormous growth in numbers of Clubs and individuals has occurred and the result is that the level of expertise has become considerably ‘watered down’.

THE SALVAGE ASSOCIATION

- 2.4 The maritime Regulations for Prevention of Collisions at Sea evolved over many years and were to become the norm in the estuary and lower stretches of the tidal River Thames and were vigorously enforced by the authorities. Although theoretically the Collision Rules were fully applicable to all seagoing vessels using all of the tidal sections of the river Thames, in practical terms “working the slacks” generally continued to prevail. In 1982 an agreed “Code of Conduct & Safety when rowing on the Thames Tideway” was introduced following talks between rowers and the PLA to formalise the traditional rowing pattern. However, some years later, after a court case relating to a particular incident between a cruiser and an eight and following the unfortunate and controversial collision between the “Bowbelle” and “Marchioness” in August 1989, the public spotlight firmly centred on the safety of navigation on the Thames.
- 2.5 As a result the Port of London Authority (PLA) decided during 1991 to enforce the requirements of The International Regulations for the Prevention of Collision at Sea, 1972 (as amended), (COLREGS) for all river users. The rowing clubs were mandated to abide by Rule 9 (a) of the COLREGS which requires a vessel proceeding along the course of a narrow channel or fairway to keep as near to the outer limit of the narrow channel or fairway which lies on her starboard side as is safe and practicable.
- 2.6 The rowing clubs on the Thames and the governing authorities including the Amateur Rowing Association and the Thames Regional Rowing Council (TRRC) concluded that the practice of adhering to Rule 9 (a) –The Right Hand Rule - was dangerous because they believed that it exposed the rowers to numerous additional physical hazards not met when “working the slacks”. From contemporary correspondence it appears that the rowing community probably never adjusted their rowing patterns to conform with the right hand rule. Instead, submissions were made by the ARA/TRRC to the PLA setting out the hazards of the right hand rule and suggesting a Byelaw encapsulating a formalised version of the system of “working the slacks”. In February 1992 this was incorporated into the PLA regulations by means of a Notice to Mariners, rather than being introduced as a Byelaw
- 2.7 In the spring of 2001 a collision took place on the Isleworth bend in Syon Reach involving a motor cruiser, (which was proceeding downriver and keeping well to the starboard side of the channel) and a coxless four, rowing against the stream according to the Rowing Rules on the port side of the river on the inside of the bend. Within the scope of the PLA’s navigational SMS, a Navigation Advisory Panel was convened and following an in-depth review of the incident and the circumstances surrounding it, submitted a number of recommendations for consideration by the PLA’s Navigational Management Team.

THE SALVAGE ASSOCIATION

- 2.8 In summary, the investigation revealed that the Rowing Rules in force at the time were the root cause of the accident. The recommendations were duly endorsed and the Rowing Rules were subsequently amended.
- 2.9 The changes included, inter alia, the introduction of two additional crossing points, to prevent a similar incident re-occurring; and a reduction in the area covered by the Rules, thereby removing the bend near Syon where the accident occurred from the scope of the rules.
- 2.10 The revised Rowing Rules came into force on 1 May 2002 and were promulgated as Notice to Mariners U6 of 2002. In March 2003 a Consultation Notice was issued to relevant river users requesting comments and feedback on the revised Rowing Rules after their first year in operation. By the end of the consultation period, the PLA had received very few comments and those only suggested minor amendments. Disappointingly, the only responders were rowers or their clubs.
- 2.11 In November 2003 the PLA received a letter from the Safety Representative of the Thames Regional Rowing Council, stating that it was the considered opinion of the local rowing clubs that the Rowing Rules in Syon Reach should revert back to those in place before 1 May 2002, i.e. those that had been found to be the root cause of the original collision in 2001.
- 2.12 Having received the above letter it was felt that further consultation was unlikely to resolve the issue and the decision was taken to commission a comprehensive independent risk assessment into the way that rowing is regulated in the upper reaches of the tidal Thames, within the scope of its current PLA safety management system.