BRITISH ROWING

# Honorary Rowing Safety Adviser Monthly Report

## December 2023

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TEAMWORK | OPEN TO ALL | COMMITMENT

# Incidents in December

## Incidents on the tidal Thames

There were recently three incidents on the Tidal Thames in which rowing boats were swept into fixed objects by the ebb tide. In all cases the crew entered the water and crew members were subsequently rescued with no lasting harm, but the boats were badly damaged. This summary identifies common issues and areas where more care should be taken to prevent reoccurrence.

All three incidents shared the following common features: -

- The boats all contained a cox (two 8+s and one 4+)
- The incidents occurred in daylight in the afternoon
- The incidents occurred on the Ebb tide
- The boats were rowing downstream or about to row downstream
- The boats were swept into fixed obstructions and became fast on them
- The boats capsized and the crews went into the water
- The crews stayed with their boats and awaited rescue
- Crews were rescued and taken to safety, two by coaching launches and one by RNLI
- Crew members became wet and cold, but all recovered quickly
- Their boats were badly damaged

There were also the following individual issues: -

In the case of the first incident the experienced J15 eight stopped upriver of Barnes Bridge to adjust steering and drifted onto Barnes Bridge Surrey Buttress; the boat stuck fast. The crew stayed with the boat holding on until RNLI lifeboat picked up the crew around 5 minutes later.

In the case of the second incident the Beginner Senior 4+ was returning to the boathouse on a high ebb tide. The cox took the turn after Kew Rail Bridge slightly wide, causing the boat to be close to the semi-submerged posts of the old pier. The cox tried to correct the course, but this proved unsuccessful and the four was still on a course to row between two of the posts. The cox attempted to align the boat to get between the posts and continue but got too close to one of the posts, which became caught on a rigger. The cox and crew attempted to free themselves from the post in various ways, and the coaching launch tried to assist by pushing the stern away from the post, but the boat remained solidly stuck in place. The crew started to panic, and a blade became stuck in the water which the rower could not remove, and the boat eventually capsized.

In the case of the third incident the cox, who is very experienced, did not anticipate that a mixed ability crew may take longer to respond to calls, and may not be as effective as a more senior crew. It is believed that this incident was caused by the combination of the cox expecting better response to calls, and the rowers being less effective at manoeuvring the boat and having lower general watermanship skills.

There are several lessons that can be learned from these incidents, they include: -

- Rowing in conditions of ebb flows is hazardous, only crews that are competent, strong, and experienced should attempt to do so.
- Stopping, turning or being stationery upstream of an obstruction should be avoided. When a boat is drifting on the steam and not moving through the water then its rudder will not be effective, and it will be difficult to steer.

- The capsize training given to rowers encouraging them to Stay with the Boat and await rescue is appropriate and effective.
- Having coaching launches in the vicinity of rowing crews provides a rescue capacity. It is quite normal for launches from another club to go to the assistance of any crew that needs help.

To avoid this happening to you and your crews then understand the lessons learned and-

- Take extra care with the pre-outing risk assessment to consider the capability of the crew. This should include their rowing ability, their ability to understand and comply with instructions immediately and their ability not to panic. Crews that are not capable, responsive and mature should not be afloat in these conditions.
- Ensure that coxes know the river well and are capable of steering a course that is safe in these conditions, they should also know the capabilities of the crew and be able to command them.
- Instruct crews to never slow down, stop, or turn upstream of any obstructions. They should remain positive and row past the obstruction at sufficient speed for their steering to be effective.
- Ensure that all rowers understand the action to take following a capsize.
- Encourage launch drivers to be aware of their surroundings and to provide assistance to anyone who needs it.
- Brief coxes on the effects of bends on surface water flow as explained in the Safety-Alert-Flow-around-bends-in-rivers.pdf (britishrowing.org)

In tidal waters, when the tide is ebbing (going out) then the flow speed is a combination of the tidal current and the fluvial flow. The fluvial flow is the flow of what was rainwater from the catchment area of the river. This is an additive effect, and the flow speed can be very high. When the tide is flooding (coming in) then the fluvial flow tends to counteract the tidal flow, and this results in the flow speed being reduced. This is a subtractive effect. For this reason, it is safer to row on the flood tide than it is on the ebb tide.

The PLA has issued a Safety Bulletin entitled Know Your Limits. It contains the following information about the warning information available to rowers: -

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|---|---|
| **RED** | **Extreme Caution – EBB TIDE Very Strong Fluvial Flows**<br><br>Fluvial flows are very strong. Conditions are difficult and dangerous. All man-powered vessels are advised not to go afloat on the ebb tide. |
| **YELLOW** | **Caution – EBB TIDE Strong Fluvial Flows**<br><br>All river users of man-powered vessels should navigate with extreme caution and consider whether it is safe for them to go afloat on the ebb tide.<br><br>PLA advise man-powered vessels - in particular schools, novices, junior crews - or those that do not usually use the tidal Thames not to go afloat on the ebb tide. |
| **GREEN** | **Average Fluvial Flows**<br><br>All river users to navigate with caution and maintain a proper look out. |
| **BLACK** | **Caution - Low Fluvial Flows**<br><br>Tidal flow is lower than usual. River users should expect lower than predicted tides especially around low water. |

### Cox's blind spot excuse

There was a head on collision between two 8s, in darkness when one strayed to the wrong side of the waterway. It was claimed that the other boat was in the cox's blind spot; this is no excuse. There were some injuries and boat damage. Please instruct your crews that if the view ahead is obstructed then ask a member of the crew to check and, if they are still not sure then stop.

### Good response to an incident

After finishing a head race the stroke of an 8 collapsed, laid back, letting go of their blade, and became unresponsive, rigid, and convulsing. The rower was supported by the rower at 7. The cox quickly moved the boat to the bank whilst the bank party sought medical attention. The rower was lifted out of the boat, while still unresponsive but no longer having seizures, and remained breathing throughout. She was placed in the recovery position and covered with coats and a foil blankets. Meanwhile 999 was called. The race first responder arrived and around 10 minutes later the rower regained consciousness and was lucid enough to be taken by taxi to the nearest A&E.

### Support your rowers

An angler shouted abuse at a group of J16-J18 scullers and threatened to throw his fishing hook at them. The coach talked to the angler, and he calmed down but, when the coach had left, the fisherman threw his fishing hook and line at one of the scullers, just missing the sculler. The coach told rowers to move on and informed the fisherman that this would be reported. The rower who had the fishing line thrown at them was a little shaken. If this could happen where you row then please reconsider the level of support and supervision that your club provides, particularly for juniors.

### Take care on land too

A rower was running around a lake and was on their second lap when they found a slippery part of the path, probably due to ice, and fell, They put out their arm to break the fall and this caused a radial fracture. The rower will not be able to row, train or drive for a month. Please be aware that there are hazards and risks on land too, not just on the water.

### Check your launch steering before you depart

All three of a club's safety launches were found to be unserviceable due to frozen controls, due to the overnight freezing conditions. As a result, the water-based training outing was cancelled in favour of gym-based training. Please check you steering before you start to use a launch.

### Take care with launch motors on land

Whilst moving a coaching launch on land the engine was accidentally lifted and then fell into the down position, trapping a rower's finger and causing a severe cut to the tip of their finger. First aid was applied at the boathouse. The rower was taken to A&E where the wound was stitched. Please take to ensure that launches are only moved by competent people.

### Take care on flooded landing stages

A novice crew in an 8 placed the boat on a flooded landing stage with the fin in a crack in the grating. They entered the boat and pushed off and this caused the fin to break. Please take care and teach novice crews that when they transfer their weight into the boat then their boat will not be as high in the water.

There was another similar incident at another club where the landing stage was covered with water making it difficult to see the edge. The bows mounted the landing stage as the crew was coming into land. This caused a scrape on the bow.

### Take care when driving a launch

There was an item in last month's report about a launch being driven with the bows so high that the launch driver's view ahead was restricted. There was a similar incident this month. In this incident the launch was heading the wrong way (contrary to the circulation pattern). There were two people in the launch, one was filming, and the other was driving, but they were both looking at the rowing boat, and not looking ahead. The simple advice is never drive a launch unless you know, for sure, what you are moving towards.

### Take care to check buoyancy compartments before going afloat

An 8 took on water in rough conditions. The boat became swamped by the black buoy and had to stop. The crew was able to move it inshore and were assisted by three coaching launches. The boat was fully swamped but the buoyancy compartments all stayed dry. The crew were rescued by two of the launches and the other launch took the boat in tow. There were no injuries or damage. Please ensure that your crews check the integrity of buoyancy compartments (check that the hatch covers are correctly fitted) before they go afloat.

## British Rowing Certificates of Commendation

The September report included an item on the presentation of Royal Humane Society Awards to rowers at Cape Cornwall Gig Club who had been directly involved in the successful resuscitation of a member of their crew. Other members of the crew kept their heads and rowed the gig back into Penzance harbour without delay. They were very much part of the successful outcome. In recognition of their contributions, the following crew members: -

- John Lewry
- Adrian Whittaker
- Mike Pakeman

have been awarded British Rowing Certificates of Commendation.

## Tide and stream information for rowers on the Tidal Thames

My colleagues at British Rowing HQ have developed a webpage providing information on tide times and Ebb Tide Flag Status. This can be found here. If you row on the Tidal Thames, then please bookmark the page.

## Safety in Club Premises

I was asked separately about the use of high racking for boats and the need for periodic examinations of fixed electrical installations. Both of these topics are covered in the British Rowing Guidance on Safety in Club Premises.

The need for periodic examinations of electrical installations is in Section 3 starting on page 8, where it says: -

> *The appropriate frequency of testing of the electrical installation will depend on many factors such as the age of the installation and its state of repair. If there are any doubts or suspicions about the system then it should be checked. As a guide, landlords of domestic properties are required to have the electrical installation checked every five years. There is advice on how to find a Registered Electrician here.*

The guidance on lifting equipment is in section 8 starting on page 20.

## National Water Safety Forum (NWSF) Newsletter

The NWSF December Newsletter can be found at NWSF Newsletter - December 2023 | National Water Safety Forum. It contains information of drowning and drowning prevention together with links to other relevant information.

## Space Blankets or Bivvy Bags?

Last month's report contained advice on the use of bivvy bags rather than foil (space) blankets. I asked the RNLI what they use, the reply was that they do not use foil blankets because they are too flimsy. They will wrap casualties in thick orange plastic sheets. This is the material that bivvy bags are made from; these are large enough to be able to be wrapped, double thickness, about most casualties, they are substantial and provide good thermal insulation and protection from the wind.

## Rescue at sea

There was recently a rescue of the crew of a coastal C2x by a Royal National Lifeboat Association (RNLI) Lifeboat. There is a video and description on the RNLI website here Rowers rescued by RNLI after boat capsizes off coast of Whitby. | RNLI. I commented on this rescue to colleagues, the comments were: -

> *As far as Rowing is concerned, this is a good news story, almost. The rowers did most things right. They were wearing lifejackets, and they had a means to call for help. Also, they were sitting on their upturned boat and the video shows how easy it is to move from this position into the Lifeboat. They had previously completed capsize training. They were trying to get back into the harbour having noticed that the conditions were getting difficult when they capsized. They were accompanied by a rower in another boat who was able to call for help.*

## Self-rescue techniques for Coastal Rowers

I was asked by a colleague in Australia for advice on advanced techniques by which rowers can rescue other rowers at sea. This organisation does not use launches at sea. They are trying to balance what, in a two-boat situation, a conscious rower can safely do without putting themselves at risk. They have discovered that the ability to rescue increases with the number of boats present. With one rescue boat it is difficult. If there are two rescue boats, then it is possible to create a two-boat raft that provides a good platform.

I replied to suggest that they could prepare their boats for towing by connecting ropes at both ends so that it would be easy to link the stern of the rescue boat to the bow of the casualty boat and they tow the casualty to safety. I also sent a link to the RNLI video noted above.

My colleague replied to say that they have trained for towing. It works well if you have an injured person in the boat and you make sure you have a good distance between the boats. The issue they discovered is that the unconscious person may fall into the water and getting them into the boat is very difficult. The rower rescuer can move down to the transom and pull them some distance, but this compromises the rower rescuer who has had to give up control of their boat to get to the transom. They also tried hauling the "unconscious" victim over the side, but this was not successful.

They have determined that the more people who are present, the more rescue assets you have to work with. Rafting has proven a great strategy because it creates a wider more stable platform but this has not been tried in other than ideal conditions.

If you know of other ways in which rowers in coastal rowing boats can assist each other at sea, then please let me know (at safety@britishrowing.org) and I will forward the information. Please include what you know as fact rather than as opinion. Please do not be concerned about the water temperature as, in Western Australia, the sea temperature in the summer is 21-23 °C and in the winter it is 19-21 °C.

## Taking a risk-based approach to safety

There was a time when providing safety advice was easy, it was simply a matter of referring to rules. One only has to look at the Factories Act 1961 to see the way in which actions and standards were proscribed. This may be easy, but it was often not effective. Some hazards were over regulated while others were not recognised. (It is interesting to note the special provisions in Part VI, "Employment of Women and Young Persons"; how times have changed!).

The modern approach to safety is more nuanced, it is based on assessing and understanding risk and acting accordingly. This approach is enshrined in section 2(1) of the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974 which states: -

*It shall be the duty of every employer to ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, the health, safety, and welfare at work of all his employees.*

It does not define specific rules.

This is all supported by copious Regulations, guidance and Approved Codes of Practice (ACOPs). ACOPs do contain detailed guidance and the requirement is for employers to comply with this guidance UNLESS they can show that the alternative action that they have taken will deliver the same level of safety, or better. This is all supported and enforced by the Health and Safety Executive.

Rowing Clubs are expected to use their risk assessments and, where necessary, introduce Barriers, to reduce the probability of a hazard causing a hazardous event, and Controls, to reduce the severity of harm should a hazardous event occur. This may include the club making rules to keep its members safe. These rules should be specific to the venue where the club operates.

It is not enough to simply make rules; it is also necessary to educate members so that they understand what the rules are and why they are needed. If rules are not understood, then they are unlikely to be accepted and some people will use their initiative to try to circumvent the rules. This can lead to situations like this: -

**Do not just tell people what to do**
**they also need to understand why**


- Rules often do not have the desired effect even if people do what they were told to do.
- People are more likely to do things because they think it a good idea rather than because someone told them to.