



PADDLING ON THE TIDEWAY

A Code of Practice for Paddling on the Tidal Thames

FIRST EDITION 2017

INTRODUCTION..... 2-3

TIDE & STREAM..... 4-7

Ebb, flood tide & tidal stream.....	4-5
Factors affecting the tide & stream.....	6
Set of the tide.....	6
Fluvial flow.....	7

BEFORE YOU GO AFLOAT..... 8-11

Planning a trip.....	8
Topical river information.....	8
Who is afloat?.....	8
Weather conditions.....	9
Tide & water conditions.....	10
Time of day.....	10
Experience.....	11
Group management.....	11
Group briefing.....	11
Dynamic Risk Assessment.....	11

EQUIPMENT & CLOTHING..... 12-23

Personal floatation devices (PFD).....	12-13
Boat Buoyancy.....	13
Personal clothing & equipment.....	14
Additional kit for group leaders.....	14
Boat choice.....	15
Kayaks.....	16
Canoes.....	17
Stand-up paddleboards.....	18
Outrigger canoes.....	19
Dragon boats.....	19
Boat Identification.....	20
Paddling in the dark & poor visibility.....	21
Lighting your boat.....	22-23

PRINCIPLES OF NAVIGATION..... 24-39

BASIC PRINCIPLES	
Accessing the river.....	24
Port & starboard.....	24
Lookout.....	25
General navigation rules (Col Regs).....	26
Positioning on the river.....	27
Right of way.....	27
Group management.....	28
Solo paddling.....	28
Crossing the river.....	29
Avoiding collisions.....	30
Overtaking.....	31
Bridges.....	32
Piers, buoys and moorings.....	33
Shouted warnings.....	34
Sound signals.....	34-35

FURTHER PRINCIPLES	
What is working the slacks?.....	36
Rowing Code Areas.....	37
Paddled boats working the slacks.....	38-39

ROLES & RESPONSIBILITIES..... 40-45

Personal responsibility.....	40
Group leaders' responsibility.....	40
Responsibilities of clubs etc.....	41
Commercial paddling.....	41
Events' responsibilities.....	42
Qualifications & restrictions.....	43
British Canoeing & PLA.....	44
Environment.....	44
Pollution & health.....	45

COMMUNICATION & REPORTING..... 46-49

London VTS.....	46
VHF radio communications.....	46
Incident reporting.....	47
Emergencies.....	48
RNLI & other emergency services.....	49

UPPER TIDEWAY DIRECTIONS..... 50-57

The Upper Tideway.....	50-51
Teddington Lock to Syon Crossing.....	52-53
Syon Crossing to Chiswick Bridge.....	54-55
Chiswick Bridge to Putney Bridge.....	56-57

CENTRAL LONDON..... 58-65

Central London.....	58-59
Putney Bridge to Chelsea Bridge.....	60
Chelsea Bridge to Tower Bridge.....	61
Heart of London.....	62
Westminster (& Embankment).....	63
Bankside Pier.....	64
HMS Belfast & the Upper Pool.....	65

LOWER AREA DIRECTIONS..... 66-69

Lower Tideway.....	66
Lower Rowing Code Area.....	67
Tower Bridge to Greenwich.....	68
Greenwich to the Thames Barrier.....	69

Contacts.....	70
Acknowledgements.....	72

paddling on the Tideway - A Code of Practice for Paddling on the tidal Thames

Navigating any paddled boat on the tidal Thames, or Thames Tideway as it is also known, requires knowledge of the river and how it operates. The Tideway is by far the busiest inland waterway in the UK which, coupled with a fast-flowing tide and many bridges, piers and moorings, creates a challenging waterway on which to navigate.

The Port of London Authority (PLA) and British Canoeing (BC) have produced this code to advise both existing users and those planning to navigate between Teddington and the Sea.

It is the responsibility of clubs, organisations, individuals and commercial providers to ensure all participants can cope with the expected conditions and that the boats being used are suitable and correctly equipped for busy tidal waters. Activities should be risk-assessed and undertaken safely with appropriate good environmental practice and consideration for other river users.



Types of paddled boat

This Paddling Code essentially refers to five different types of paddled boat. There are slightly different rules for each of these boat types which are highlighted throughout the Code:

- Kayaks – [page 16](#)
- Canoes – [page 17](#)
- Stand-up paddleboards (SUP) – [page 18](#)
- Dragon boats – [page 19](#)
- Outrigger canoes – [page 19](#)

Paddling does not include any type of rowing boats (i.e. where the participants have their back to the direction of travel). Rowers have their own Code of Practice, similar to this one and paddlers are advised to have a working knowledge of “*Rowing on the Tideway*”, especially in the Upper area. The Rowing Code can be found on the PLA leisure users website: www.boatingonthethames.co.uk/Rowing

As well as the Paddling and Rowing Codes, paddlers on the Tidal Thames should also refer to the following:

- PLA publication: “*The Tidal Thames - Recreational Users Guide*”
- PLA Leisure users website: www.boatingonthethames.co.uk
- British Canoeing publication: “*You, your canoe and the marine environment*” – also see [page 45](#)
- British Canoeing website: www.britishcanoeing.org.uk/guidance-resources/waterways-environment
- RNLI publication: “*Kayaking Safety Pack*” – [also see page 12](#)
- RNLI website: www.rnli.org/safety/respect-the-water/

The tidal Thames between the estuary and Teddington Lock comes under the jurisdiction of the Port of London Authority (PLA) who regulate navigation on the tidal Thames in a number of ways:

- Collision Regulations (CoI Regs)
- Port of London Act
- Thames Byelaws
- General Directions
- Notices to Mariners (NtMs)

By its very nature, the Paddling Code must, in part, refer to and recognise these various regulations. Where navigational regulations are quoted in this Code they are enclosed in a coloured panel for ease of recognition.

The PLA keeps all its regulations under regular review and the latest additions can be found in their entirety on the PLA website – pla.co.uk

Ignorance of the regulations is not a defence in the event of an incident.

Ebb tide, flood tide and the tidal stream

The Thames below Teddington Lock is a **tidal river** and navigation is essentially based around the behaviour of the tide, which changes regularly.

The tidal rise and fall can be as much as seven metres and the flow can reach 4 knots – more around bridge buttresses etc. – so attention must be paid to both the direction and the strength of the tide and stream.

Paddlers need to be especially aware of the tide direction with regard to working the slacks against the tide and how this affects navigation, particularly with regards to rowing boats above Putney. More detailed information can be found on [pages 36–39](#).

It is therefore vital that you understand the tidal stream conditions and tidal sets – [see page 6](#) – and maintain situational awareness at all times. On the Tideway the tide will always turn first at the estuary.

What is ‘the stream’?

The visible flow on the surface of the river is referred to by many Thames paddlers and rowers as ‘the stream’. Although they almost always flow in the same direction, the stream’s direction can occasionally differ slightly from that of the tide.

This effect happens during periods of prolonged, heavy rainfall when there may continue to be a visible outbound flow even though there is an inbound flood tide. During this rare occurrence, known as **swelling**, paddlers above Putney should **navigate according to the visible stream direction** and not the tide predictions.

To avoid any confusion, this code presumes the normal state of the stream and tide flowing in the same direction. This direction of flow is referred to as the **‘tidal stream’**.

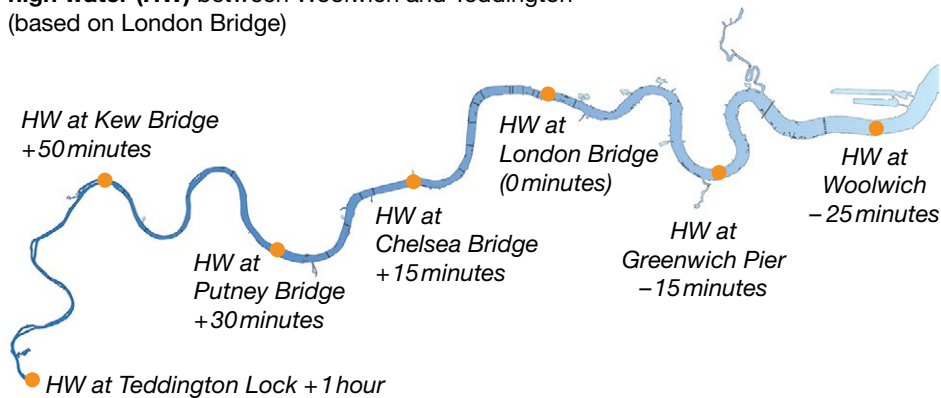
Tables of predicted tide times are available on the PLA website and there are various other websites and smart phone apps. that can also provide this information.

Apart from tide tables, which show predicted tide times, there are several ways to check the tidal stream direction, although you must always account for the strength and direction of the wind:

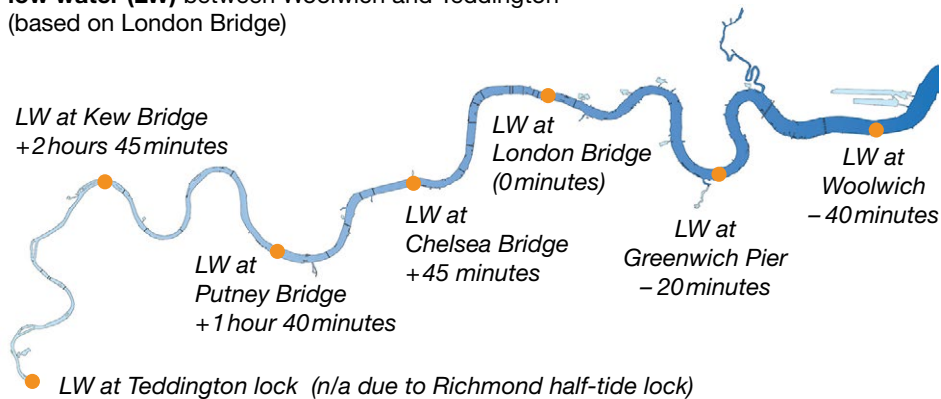
- Look at boats moored only at one end, they will hang downstream from their mooring
- See what direction floating objects drift in
- Look at which direction the water is flowing past a bridge buttress or buoy - see below



This diagram shows approximate time differences for **high water (HW)** between Woolwich and Teddington (based on London Bridge)



This diagram shows approximate time differences for **low water (LW)** between Woolwich and Teddington (based on London Bridge)



▼ The Ebb tide

is when the tidal stream is flowing **outbound** and the water level is **dropping**.

Above Putney the ebb tide takes approximately 8.5 hours to run out from high water to low water.

▲ The Flood tide

is when the tidal stream is flowing **inbound** and the water level is **rising**.

Above Putney the flood tide takes approximately 4.5 hours to come in from low water to high water.

Turn of the tide

At the top (high water) or bottom (low water) of the tide, as it is changing from one direction to the other, there is a period called '**slack water**' where there is no tidal stream. Slack water can last for up to 10 minutes and requires extra care to navigate.

Factors affecting the tidal stream

Wind

The wind can have a considerable effect on the river. If the wind is in the same direction as the tide it will speed up the stream. If it is against the tide, it will chop up the top of the water and can make for very difficult conditions, especially at high tide.

Sometimes a very strong wind can give a false impression of the tidal stream direction.

The Tideway meanders considerably so it is important when planning a trip to remember that wind will affect the river differently along its course.

Thames Barrier closures

When the Thames Barrier is closed, it will have a noticeable and confusing effect on the tidal stream. It may be hard to tell which way the tidal stream is flowing. Indeed, the flood tide may not really feature at all.

Draw-offs (normally October – November)

The draw-off usually lasts for four weeks and is when the half-tide barrier at Richmond is left open over low water for maintenance. This allows the river to drain to its natural level, which is much lower than usual. This also has an effect on the river flow and low water level down as far as Kew Bridge and sometimes beyond.

Swelling

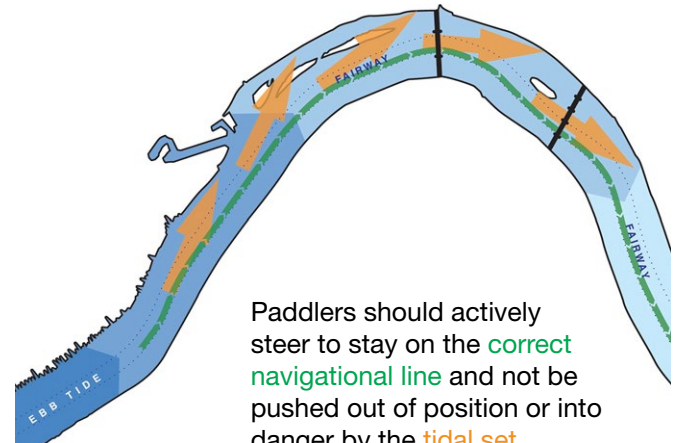
[See page 4](#) for details. Swelling is rare and generally only occurs during the winter months after heavy rain.

Tidal 'set'

Paddlers need to be aware of the **tidal set**. This is caused by the tidal stream which will always 'set' to its natural course around the outside of a bend. However, the natural course of the tidal stream may not be the correct navigational course expected of a boat.

See the example shown below:

Around this bend during an ebb tide, the correct navigation is to stay on the **starboard side of the Fairway**, towards the inside of the bend. However the **tidal set** will naturally push boats towards the outside of the bend.



Paddlers should actively steer to stay on the **correct navigational line** and not be pushed out of position or into danger by the **tidal set**.

Fluvial flow

Fluvial flow is the amount of water flowing downriver from the non-tidal Thames. There is always water flowing outbound (downriver) and is the reason that the river fills up very quickly when it meets the inbound (flood) tide. After heavy rainfall, the fluvial flow will increase causing the outbound stream to increase in speed. When combined with an ebb tide this can make the river more difficult to navigate on and in some cases, dangerous.

Ebb tide flag warning system

A flag warning system is in place to help indicate the speed of the river to paddlers. It is similar to the red and yellow board system used above Teddington but on the Tideway **it only applies to an ebb tide**. Use this system to help judge if paddlers are suitably experienced for the conditions.

Ebb Tide Flag Warning



Extreme Caution –
Very Strong Fluvial Flows

The Port of London Authority advise all river users that the fluvial flows are very strong and conditions are difficult and dangerous. All man-powered vessels are advised not to go afloat on the Ebb Tide.

Ebb Tide Flag Warning



Caution – Strong Fluvial Flows

The Port of London Authority advise man-powered vessels, in particular: Beginners, Novices, Younger Junior (J15's and younger), or any weaker crews, and those that do not usually navigate on the tidal section of the river Thames not to go afloat on the Ebb Tide. 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.

Ebb Tide Flag Warning



Average Fluvial Flows

The Port of London Authority advise all river users to navigate with caution and maintain a proper lookout.

Ebb Tide Flag Warning



Caution – Low Fluvial Flows

The Port of London Authority advise all river users that the fluvial flow is less than usual and lower than predicted tides may be expected, especially around low water.

The PLA provide an 'Ebb Tide Flag Warning' system to warn of abnormal fluvial flows and all man-powered vessels should monitor and note the advice.

This advice is updated daily on the PLA leisure website – boatingonthethames.co.uk. It is also provided as a widget which should be installed on all club websites.

This information can also be sourced online on the main PLA website – pla.co.uk

Other information regarding scheduled Thames Barrier closures or Draw-offs are available via the Notices to Mariners page on the PLA website:

www.pla.co.uk/Safety/Regulations-and-Guidance/Notices-to-Mariners/Notices-to-Mariners

All clubs and group leaders should sign-up on the PLA website to automatically receive, by email, Notices to Mariners pertaining to their stretch of the river. These Notices are also available on the PLA website – pla.co.uk

The PLA also have an online events calendar which shows all recreational events happening on the Tideway
www.pla.co.uk/Events/Annual-Events-Calendar

Topical river information is also available via social media, particularly Twitter:

[@LondonPortAuth](https://twitter.com/LondonPortAuth)

[@AlanBarrierEA](https://twitter.com/AlanBarrierEA)

[@MrSafeT_Tideway](https://twitter.com/MrSafeT_Tideway)

[@ThamesPoo](https://twitter.com/ThamesPoo)

[@Thames21](https://twitter.com/Thames21)

[@BritishCanoeing](https://twitter.com/BritishCanoeing)

[@ChiswickRNLI](https://twitter.com/ChiswickRNLI)

[@TowerRNLI](https://twitter.com/TowerRNLI)

[@ocukcoach](https://twitter.com/ocukcoach)

Planning a trip

It is the responsibility of **all** paddlers whether paddling solo, as a group member or a group leader to ensure that they have assessed all factors which may affect their trip.

Do not proceed with a trip if the outcome of these checks shows up a problem with your equipment, knowledge, experience or fitness.

Inexperienced paddlers should not be coerced (or allow themselves to be coerced) into going afloat if they are not comfortable with any aspect of the planned trip.

Topical river information – see panel left

Recreational river users must be aware of the information and guidance regarding the Thames Tideway which is available via email alerts and the PLA website.

Who is afloat?

Clubs and centres are advised to keep a log or sign-out board of who is afloat and when they expect to return, in case of an accident. Members should also know what to do if a boat fails to return or is overdue. This information should be part of the club's standard operating procedures and ideally be displayed near the signing-out board.

In addition to signing-out (or in non-club situations) paddlers are strongly advised to inform London VTS prior to going afloat and on return.

Paddlers going afloat in the dark below Putney Bridge must always inform London VTS, either by phone or VHF – [see page 46](#).

Group leaders, small groups and solo paddlers below Richmond Lock should carry either a mobile phone (in a buoyant, waterproof case) or a personal VHF radio set to communicate with VTS or to summon help in an emergency.

Weather conditions

Weather conditions on the tidal Thames can have a significant effect on the safety and handling of small boats. The river is often exposed and weather conditions can create big waves and very choppy water, especially when combined with washes from motor vessels. Conditions can become awkward and physically demanding in a matter of minutes.

Wind

SUPs and open boats are particularly vulnerable to the effect of the wind although all small boats must take the wind into account.

Wind against tide is a serious factor to consider as it can create steep standing waves.

Wind speeds can vary and noticeably increase through and around bridge arches as well as in areas with tall buildings, where there can also be sudden changes of wind direction.

The wind can have an extra chilling effect on the body which will lower the level at which cold is felt and can lead to exposure and even exhaustion, especially if wet.

Rain

Rain can very much affect the perceived temperature. You will feel much colder when wet especially if it is also windy.

Rain can also seriously reduce visibility, particularly the ability for large motor vessels to spot small boats.

Temperature

High temperatures as well as cold ones should be considered when deciding on what kit to wear and the duration of your trip. Very hot weather can be as physically demanding as cold weather.

Visibility

As well as rain causing visibility issues, the Tideway is prone to fog and **no attempt should be made to go afloat if the visibility is less than 200m.**

A good guide is that if you cannot see the opposite bank clearly then you should not go afloat.

For example: the river is 300m wide at Greenwich, 200m wide at Putney and Hammersmith Bridges but narrower than 200m above Hammersmith.

If you encounter reduced visibility during an outing you should find a safe haven. Fog is often a more serious hazard than darkness and, although large motor vessels may have radar, small paddled boats do not show up on radar.

Lightning

If you experience lightning in your vicinity you should get off the river as soon as possible.

No one should go afloat unless 30 minutes have elapsed since the last visible lightning.

Planning a trip

Tidal and water conditions

The Thames Tideway meanders considerably along its course, it is therefore important to understand how this can affect water conditions on different parts of the river, especially with regard to the state of the tide, wind direction and tidal sets:

- *What is the direction of the tide?*
Will the direction of the wind or tidal sets become a factor on your intended course?
- *When is the tide predicted to change?*
Long trips are best arranged to go with the tide as much as possible. Plan return trips around the change of tide.
- *How high is the tide?*
High tide means lumpier water but more space. Low tide means better water but shallows and less space. Towards the end of an ebb tide the stream will be relatively slow.

Also getting off the river two hours either side of high tide can be difficult, as there is little or no foreshore exposed and in places there are few egress points. When you plan an outing find out where you can exit safely.
- *What colour is the Ebb tide warning flag?*
- *Will anything else affect the water?*
E.g. is the Thames Barrier shut or is Richmond Lock and Weir undergoing maintenance (the “Draw-off”)?

Time of day

Consider the time of day when planning your trip. Weekend mornings and summer evenings are often very busy in the Upper Area where there is a lot of rowing activity.

Central London is almost always busy but even more so in the summer months. Commuter services are less frequent at weekends above Chelsea Bridge but sightseeing trips still operate, beginning at around 10.00am. The PLA therefore strongly encourage leisure craft to transit Central London before 10.00am on weekend mornings for the quietest conditions.

Time restrictions for SUPs

- **Below Putney Pier**
No paddling three hours before and two hours after high water (at London Bridge) due to freight vessel movements at Wandsworth
- **Between Chelsea Bridge and Tower Bridge**
(in addition to the above)
No paddling between 11:00 and 18:00 from Good Friday and 30th September. Due to busy commercial traffic in Central London
- **Below Chelsea Bridge**
No paddling after dark

Equipment and Clothing

See next section – [pages 12–23](#)

Experience – see [page 28](#) and [page 43](#) for further guidance

The experience of all paddlers, whether as soloist or as members of a group, should be taken into account, particularly with regard to the water and weather conditions:

- Long distance trips may not be suitable for inexperienced paddlers
- Trips through Central London should not be undertaken by inexperienced paddlers in unstable boats. The tidal Thames should be treated as ‘exposed water’ and paddlers using it require suitable knowledge and experience for the potentially demanding conditions
- For inexperienced paddlers consider using stable double kayaks accompanied by leaders who are familiar with the tidal Thames
- Leaders must have the required qualification or experience to take a group out on the tidal Thames

Group management – see [page 28](#) and [page 43](#) for further guidance

A ‘group’ should consist of no more than 10–15 boats. If there are more participants then consider splitting them into smaller groups, each with a suitably qualified leader.

As well as leaders having suitable qualifications, groups should have a sufficient ratio of leaders to participants. This ratio will vary depending on the experience of the group and where on the river they are paddling. Clubs and organisations should produce their own guidelines for this. SUP groups should have a minimum 1:4 ratio of leaders to paddlers.

Group briefings

In situations where a group is going out for a journey or for instruction it is important that all are briefed by an experienced leader on what to expect before going afloat. The briefing should cover all of the points detailed in this section and also include any relevant information regarding group management – [page 28](#) – and emergency situations – [pages 48–49](#).

Dynamic Risk Assessment

However well you plan your trip, there will be times when afloat that you will have to make critical decisions regarding choosing the safest option or line, due to the busy nature of the river and changing conditions.

This is described throughout this code as a **Dynamic Risk Assessment** and certain key situations are marked with this symbol.



Individuals and group leaders must always take into account the conditions and their competence and must ensure that all group members are able to cope with the choice that is made.

This is important in the Upper Rowing Code Area and especially in Central London where early judgement calls are often needed due to the nature of the river and traffic volumes – see [pages 60–65](#).



Personal Floatation Devices (PFD)

All paddlers should wear a Personal Floatation Device (PFD) at all times while afloat on the tidal Thames.

The most suitable type of PFD for paddle sports is a buoyancy aid (BA). It should have an EN/ISO number and be rated to support the size of person wearing it. Having a whistle attached to your PFD is also recommended.

Fitting

- The PFD should be worn on top of all other clothing and **must remain done-up at all times while afloat**
- It should be easy to put on, take off and adjust
- The fitting should be a snug but not tight. It should let you move your arms freely and allow you to bend at the waist
Loose-fitting PFDs may come off in an emergency scenario so always ensure that they are properly adjusted before going afloat
- The PFD should allow you to swim easily in water and keep your head above the water

Maintenance

- Check your PFD on a regular basis, if you notice any rips or stitching coming undone, broken buckles, ties or zips, take it back to the retailer or manufacturer for advice or, if necessary, replacement
- Don't wash your PFD in a washing machine or dry in a tumble dryer.

Storage

- After use always rinse your PFD in clean water, hang it up and allow to dry naturally
- When dry, store your PFD in a cool dry place ideally out of direct sunlight and away from direct heat

If you are unsure about any aspect of a PFD, do not go afloat with it and contact the manufacturer or an approved retailer for further advice.

Boat Buoyancy

In addition to a PFD, your boat is also a useful aid in keeping you afloat in an emergency situation – but only if it is itself buoyant.

Paddleboards are inherently buoyant, as are most kayaks and outrigger canoes due to their decks – but only if any hatches are correctly done-up.

It is highly recommended that open boats such as canoes and dragon boats are fitted with additional, suitable buoyancy bags to ensure they remain afloat even if swamped.

If a club or an individual determines that their boat is an adequate substitute for a PFD when paddling above Richmond Lock, where the river is more benign and semi-tidal, a careful risk assessment should be carried out.

Conditions

Conditions on the tidal Thames can vary considerably and should always be taken into account when choosing the most suitable PFD for a trip.

The main benefit of buoyancy aids over other types of PFD is that they are ‘inherently buoyant’ (i.e. you don’t need to inflate them for them to do their job).

Therefore, ‘bum-bag’ or pouch style PFDs are strongly discouraged for use on the tidal Thames as they would be very difficult to don and operate if you are already in the water.

Weak or non-swimmers should consider a higher rated PFD or possibly even a manually-inflating life jacket if necessary.

Further information regarding PFD choice, fitting, maintenance and storage is available from the RNLI: www.rnli.org/safety/respect-the-water

- > Choose your Activity
- > Kayaking and Canoeing



A jacket-style buoyancy aid with side and shoulder adjustment (for a snug fit) and easily accessible pockets – in this case containing a hand-held VHF. Also note the sun glasses and hat for the obviously bright conditions – [page 14](#)

Additional kit for Group Leaders

Additional equipment that should be worn or carried by group leaders (and assistants) below Richmond lock:

- Personal VHF radio set*
- Mobile Phone (in a buoyant, waterproof case)
- Whistle
- Spare Paddle
- Throw line / spare line
- Tow line
- Knife
- Torch / SOS light
- Laminated map
- First Aid kit (+ qualification)
- Spare / emergency clothing (and / or foil vests)

NOTE: SUPs **must carry VHF below Putney Bridge and it is strongly recommended for all paddlers for keeping a listening watch on commercial vessel activity – see [page 46](#) for more details about VHF.*

Personal clothing and equipment

- You must ensure that you are wearing suitable clothing for the (forecast) conditions. A combination of water/wind proof outer items and lightweight man-made fibre sports clothing with thermal quick-drying properties are most suitable
- Wind, rain and cold temperatures will require additional layers or possibly wetsuits. Perhaps even dry suits in the winter months
- Peaked hats and sunglasses are recommended in sunny weather
- Suitable water sports shoes/boots are very important as you may need to walk on an uneven riverbed or bank with the risk of sharp objects. Going barefoot is not recommended on the Tideway
- It is strongly recommended that paddlers wear **bright-coloured or hi-vis clothing** to improve their visibility to other vessels. This is particularly important in low light conditions or darkness

Other items that paddlers may want to consider wearing or carrying, depending on the conditions:

- Whistle (ideally attached to your buoyancy aid)
- Mobile phone (in a buoyant, waterproof case)
- Spare clothes (in a dry bag)
- Paddle leash / Spare paddle(s)
- Drinking water & snacks
- Pump
- Gloves or Pogies
- Sun cream

If paddling after dark your boat must be appropriately lit and you should wear appropriate clothing – see [pages 21–23](#) for details.

If choosing to paddle alone, ensure you are suitably equipped – see [page 28](#) for details.

Boat choice – is your boat suitable for the conditions?

Considerations

Freeboard: is the amount of hull above the waterline.

All small man-powered boats have minimal freeboard in comparison to motor vessels and this very much affects their ability to cope with rough water. Sufficient freeboard is a vital consideration on the tidal Thames as wash and draw-off from motor vessels can be difficult to handle if the wash is coming from the side or unexpectedly from behind. Certain weather conditions can also cause very rough water.

Decking: is the boat is 'open' or 'closed'?

The integral decks on a closed boat allow water to pass over the boat without taking any on board (swamping) - especially if spray decks are fitted. Open boats are more susceptible to swamping.

Buoyancy: affects a boat's ability to remain afloat even if swamped

Most modern paddled boats have inherent or built-in buoyancy but some, especially open canoes and dragon boats, may require buoyancy to be retro-fitted.

Conclusions

Open boats (canoes or dragon boats) and very narrow racing-style boats are not well suited to rough water or big waves. Neither are SUPs, due to their almost non-existent freeboard.

Recommendations

Conditions are often demanding below Putney and only the more experienced paddlers should venture below this point using a suitable kayak or canoe. It is strongly recommended that dragon boats, SUPs and particularly inflatable boats remain above Putney Bridge where water conditions are less demanding.

Paddlers must be aware that the tidal Thames is categorised by the Maritime and Coastguard Agency as follows:

- **Above Gravesend**
Category C waters, expect waves of up to 1.2 metres in height
- **Below Gravesend**
Category D waters, expect waves of over 2.0 metres in height



Kayaks

Kayaks can have a single or a double-seat arrangement where the paddler(s) is seated facing forward, legs in front and uses a double-ended paddle. The traditional type of kayaks as illustrated have enclosed decks whereas the sit-on-top-kayak is an open top design.

Certain parts of the tidal Thames such as Central London can get very rough so sea and touring class kayaks, with enclosed cockpits and spray decks, are most suitable for these conditions.



- 1** Choose a suitable type of kayak for the conditions and experience of the paddler. Long, wide hulls are more stable and doubles are ideal for initially placing novices with more experienced paddlers
 - 2** Paddling racing kayaks (such as K1 and K2) is a custom and practice above Richmond, where the tide is much less of a factor and the water much more suitable for these fast boats
- Inflatable kayaks are not considered to be suitable for the Tideway below Putney



Canoes

Lightweight narrow boats, typically pointed at both ends and open on top, propelled by one or more seated or kneeling paddlers facing the direction of travel using a single-bladed paddle. Sometimes more specifically described as “Canadian canoes”.

Open / touring canoes have a higher freeboard and wider beam so are better suited for use in Tideway conditions compared with racing canoes.

- 1 It is recommended that all open boats are retro-fitted with buoyancy (usually air bags) if it is not already integrally built-in to the design.



Touring canoe

- 2 Choose a suitable type of canoe for the conditions and experience of the paddler. Long, wide hulls are more stable and novices should initially be placed with more experienced paddlers
- 3 Paddling racing canoes (such as C1 and C2) is a custom and practice above Richmond, where the tide is much less of a factor and the water much more suitable for these fast boats
 - Inflatable canoes are not considered to be suitable for the Tideway below Putney



C2 racing canoe

Stand-up paddleboards (SUPs)

Stand-up paddleboarding is an offshoot of surfing and an SUP is essentially a surf board whereby paddleboarders maintain an upright stance on their boards and use a long paddle to propel themselves through the water.

SUPs are comparatively unstable craft and have no freeboard. Inflatable boards are even more susceptible than regular boards to water and weather conditions (particularly the wind). Long, wide boards are slightly more stable and recommended for Tideway use.



SUPs at Chiswick Pier

SUPs are best suited to the calmer waters found above Putney and there are **strict conditions regarding which parts of the Tideway SUPs may use** according to their experience and other factors – [see page 43](#)

- ❶ If choosing to wear a leash it should be a quick-release waist leash. Ankle or knee leashes may prove difficult to reach in strong-flowing water and should be avoided
- ❷ **On the tidal Thames all stand-up paddlers must use a buoyancy aid**



Quick-release waist leashes are recommended

Outrigger canoes

Outrigger Canoeing, or Va'a, has Polynesian origins as native sports in Hawaii, New Zealand and Tahiti. Outrigger canoes are stable boats built to cross ocean channels with a narrow main hull and an outrigger stabiliser or ama. Boats vary in size from 7m single person (OC1) to 14m six person (OC6). Outriggers generally have a deck fore and aft but are otherwise considered to be open boats. Though the waters of the Thames are considerably calmer than the ocean, spray skirts are recommended for OC6s in Central London and bailers are recommended at all times.



Dragon boats

Dragon boats are long open boats where the crew sit abreast and drive the boat along with a single paddle to the beat of a seated drummer in the bow and are steered by a coxswain with a paddle who stands in the stern.

Dragon boats are considered to be open boats and as such their use is recommended only on the calmer waters found above Putney.



Port of London
Thames Byelaws 2012
- Byelaw 53

VESSEL IDENTIFICATION AND MARKING

A vessel to which this byelaw applies must exhibit its name painted in letters (or numbers) of a length not less than 0.1 metres and of proportionate breadth one each side of and in a colour contrasting with that of the hull or superstructure, provided that, if the vessel is of less than 20 metres in length and compliance with the foregoing requirements is impracticable, the name or number must be otherwise exhibited in one or more positions as prominently and clearly as practicable.

Boat Identification

Club Boats

Boats that belong to a club or commercial provider must display a five-character identification marking: a two digit unique number followed by the club's ID. To register an ID please contact the PLA.

Personal Boats

Non-club boats, owned by individuals, are required according to byelaws (see panel left), to be marked with a **name**. They are not specifically required to display a five-character ID associated with a club but are strongly encouraged to do so for the reasons below. Owners are also strongly advised to display contact information on their boats, such as the ID sticker found in the RNLI's Kayaking Safety Pack.

These various ID markings allow boats to be more easily identified in an emergency or if found unattended, returned to their owner. Also, if more than one group is out on the river, particularly in Central London, using the boat's ID as a call sign assists vessels to distinguish between the groups and in making contact via VHF. Identifying a specific group can also help with incident investigation.

ID Specification



16CKC

- **Cap height:** 40mm minimum
- **Typeface:** Ariel, Helvetica or similar 'sans serif' style font
- **Colour:** any colour but must contrast with the hull colour and be easily legible from 30m in daylight. A recommended option is to place the ID on retro-reflective SOLAS tape, to increase visibility of both the boat and the ID itself
- **Position:** in a prominent place on both sides of the boat, ideally on the most vertical surface possible above the waterline – see below



Paddling in the dark and poor visibility

Paddling in the dark or in poor visibility is obviously much more hazardous than in bright daylight so requires additional equipment and different clothing – as well as more thorough planning and risk assessment.

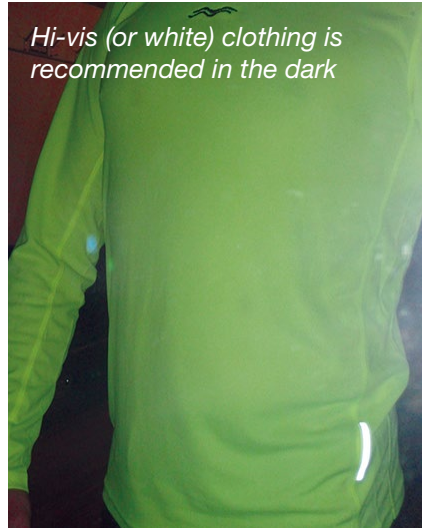
Use of retro-reflective SOLAS tape (as shown below) is very effective and can be combined with your boat ID (see left). However, **by law you must also correctly light your boat in darkness and reduced visibility**. More details about how this should be achieved can be found overleaf.

In the dark it is always preferable to paddle in a group as it can be more easily seen (see below). Paddlers should try as much as possible to wear high visibility clothing (white or bright colours) with reflective trim.

Retro-reflective tape and a large group vastly increase visibility



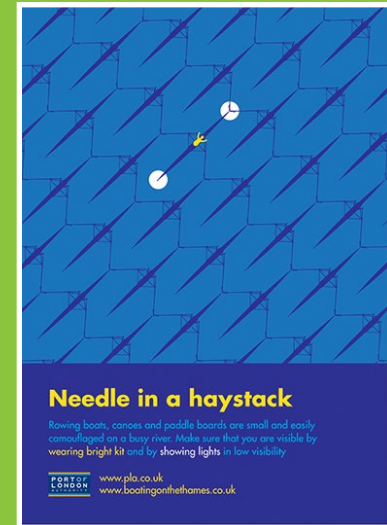
Hi-vis (or white) clothing is recommended in the dark



After dark it is essential to ensure that someone knows you are afloat.

All paddlers **must** inform London VTS if they are out in the dark below Putney Bridge, either by phone or VHF radio.

SUPs may not paddle after dark below Chelsea Bridge.



Col Reg Rule 25 Sailing vessels underway and vessels under oars

d (ii) - A vessel under oars may exhibit the lights prescribed in this Rule for sailing vessels, but if she does not, she shall have ready at hand an electric torch or lighted lantern showing a white light which shall be exhibited in sufficient time to prevent collision.

Col Reg Rule 20 Application (Lights and Shapes)

The lights prescribed by these rules shall, if carried, also be exhibited from sunrise to sunset in restricted visibility and may be exhibited in all other circumstances when it is deemed necessary.

For the purposes of this rule paddled boats are also considered to be 'under oars'.

Lighting your boat

By law, you must correctly light your boat in darkness and reduced visibility.

Paddlers need to be as visible as possible, so lights must be displayed at all times of restricted visibility such as mist, fog, rain or snow and at night or in the early morning. If you are going out for an evening paddle, even if you intend to return in daylight, you should take lights with you as daylight can fade very quickly. If in doubt, use lights.

Lighting must be a constant **white** light which should be firmly fixed to the bows and to the stern of the boat. Each light should be **visible for approximately 800m** and **through 180°**. The boat should effectively have white lighting visible through 360°.

Lights should be waterproof and also diffused, so as not to impair the vision of anyone in your group or other river users. On SUPs or kayaks and canoes low to the water, it is recommended that lights be fixed to the chest and back of the paddler. When paddling as a group, **all boats in the group must carry lights**. It is not sufficient to have a single set of lights to cover the whole group.

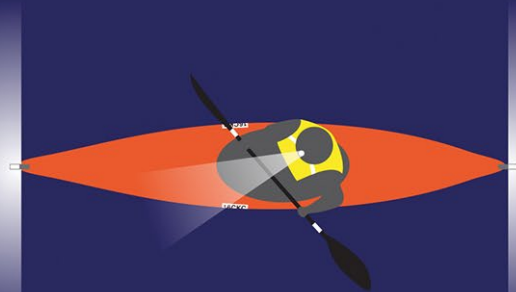
Unidirectional lights are not permitted as they are not safe. Spare lights should also be carried. *Additional* lights such as head torches can be used to warn approaching vessels of your presence, but can also 'dazzle' other river users if used inconsiderately.

LED sticks, attached to the paddler, are recommended as is high visibility clothing and reflective tape on clothing and paddles (see photo on previous page). **Red or other coloured lights should never be used.**

NOTE: In the [Rowing Code Areas](#) a flashing white light is required on the bows of rowing boats to help determine their direction of travel. It is not required by, and should not be used by, paddled boats.

From above

White or hi-vis clothing



BOWS *Kayaks & Canoes* STERN

Constant white lights both visible through 180°



FRONT *Stand-up paddleboards* BACK

Constant white lights both visible through 180°

Head torches or LED sticks
used as *additional lighting*

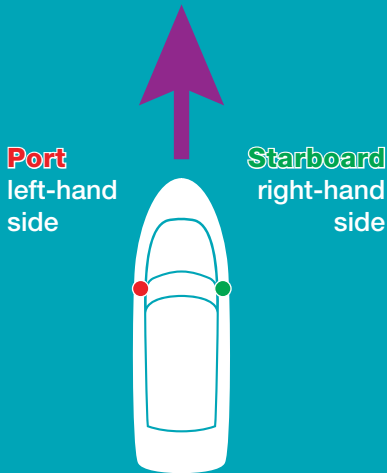


Reflective tape
on paddles and kit

From the side

Port and Starboard

Because the tidal Thames (below Teddington lock) is an international seaway, **Port** and **Starboard** are the conventions used to describe navigation. They are always used in the **direction of travel** of the vessel.



In the dark, motor vessels will display a [forward facing] red light on their **Port** side and a green light to **Starboard**.

Accessing the river

River access for paddled boats is considered safest from a draw dock, slipway or foreshore/beach as these provide a firmer footing to get into a boat or onto a board. There are often eddies or sheltered areas of slack water around these areas which can be utilised. Access points can be found on the interactive map at www.boatingonthethames.co.uk as well as on the Recreational Users Guide or charts produced by the Port of London Authority. Principal draw docks are also noted on the diagrams in the Direction sections of this code – [from page 52](#).

- Avoid obstructing the tow path with boats waiting to go afloat
- Take care not to damage any rudders or skegs the boat may have – it may be best to enter the river stern first, with caution
- SUP should remain on knees until comfortable / in a safe area
- Be aware of the slipping hazard especially on steps or ramps
- Know which way the tidal stream is flowing and ensure there are no obstructions downstream of the launch site
- Lookout for other traffic before entering the main flow of the river and be aware of wash
- When getting novices afloat, make sure there are experienced paddlers already afloat to accompany / manage them

Getting off the river two hours either side of high tide can be difficult, as there is little or no foreshore exposed and in places there are few egress points. There are a fair number of draw docks above Putney Bridge but very few below. Pontoons and piers are privately owned and should only be used to exit in an emergency or with permission. Location of recommended access and egress points should always be included in your outing plan, which should be guided by the club's procedures.

Lookout

Keeping a proper lookout is the single most essential feature of safe navigation.

Failure to keep a proper lookout is the single biggest factor in collisions and near-misses. For paddlers it may be that the biggest risk is as likely to come from behind them as from in front.

Paddlers face in the direction of travel so can easily see oncoming hazards but they must also be very aware of quicker vessels that may be approaching from behind. Motor vessels can be easily heard and may even give a sound signal on their horn. Rowing boats however are much smaller and quieter and very often the steers person is facing away from their direction of travel. Rowers may make their presence known by shouting a warning.

It is therefore essential that paddlers check behind them at regular intervals and in addition, is recommended that groups have one or two experienced paddlers at the rear of the group whose specific role it is to keep a lookout behind. This includes being aware of wash from behind or reflected off walls which can cause irregular wave patterns.

Always when in heavy traffic, poor visibility, at the turn of the tide or navigating in the vicinity of bridges, a more proactive lookout should be employed. This includes lookout by hearing, considering both sound signals – [page 34–35](#) – and VHF – [page 46](#).

Col Reg Rule 5

Lookout

Every vessel shall at all times maintain a proper lookout by sight as well as by hearing as well as by all available means appropriate in the prevailing circumstances and conditions so as to make a full appraisal of the situation and of the risk of collision.



Port of London Thames
Byelaws 2012 - Byelaw 27

**Vessels navigating above
Cherry Garden Pier** (Cherry
Garden Pier is downstream
of Tower Bridge) **and above
Westminster Bridge**

27.1 (& 27.2) A vessel of less
than 40 metres in length
navigating above Cherry
Garden Pier (or 20m in
length navigating above
Westminster Bridge), and
a sailing vessel navigating
above Cherry Garden
Pier must not impede the
passage of:

- (a) a vessel of 40 metres (20m)
or more in length; or
- (b) a vessel engaged in towing.

For the purposes of Byelaw 27 and Col Reg Rules 9 and 18, paddled boats must act as power-driven vessels and must keep out of the way of all the types of vessels listed. They must also give priority to vessels such as (but not limited to) Class V Passenger vessels, tugs and tows and large Dutch barges. Paddled boats must also give way to sailing boats (unless the sailing boat is crossing the fairway).

Col Reg Rule 9 Narrow Channels

(a) A vessel proceeding along
the course of a narrow channel
or Fairway shall keep as near
to the outer limit of the channel
or Fairway which lies to her
starboard side as is safe and
practicable.

Col Reg Rule 18 Responsibilities Between Vessels

18 (d) Any vessel other than a
vessel not under command
or a vessel restricted in her
ability to manoeuvre shall,
if the circumstances of the
case admit, avoid impeding
the safe passage of a vessel
constrained by her draught

Col Regs

Because the tidal Thames is an
international seaway, the navigation
rules that apply are **Col Regs**:

The International Regulations for Preventing Collisions at Sea.

Col Regs Rule 9a essentially states
that all vessels should navigate to
the **starboard** side of any channel
so as to pass **port-to-port**.

All along the tidal Thames, it is vital
that you **keep a good lookout** and
navigate on the **starboard side** of
the river as per **Col Regs**. Observe
where the main river traffic flows
are and position yourself well away
from them.

NOTE:

The navigation rules differ from
Col Regs in two sections of the
Tideway, where man-powered
boats are allowed to **work the
slacks** against the tide. More
details about this alternative
navigation pattern can be found
on [pages 36–39](#).

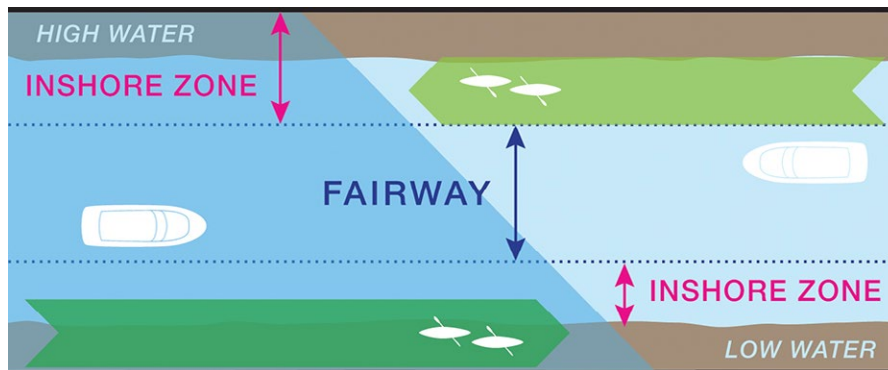
Positioning on the river

The river can be roughly divided into three lanes which remain in place whether the water level is high or low.

The centre lane is the main navigation channel and is called the **Fairway**. It is a deeper channel for larger boats and is not generally marked. Large vessels have more draught (hull under the water) so will usually be near the centre of the river, in the **Fairway**.

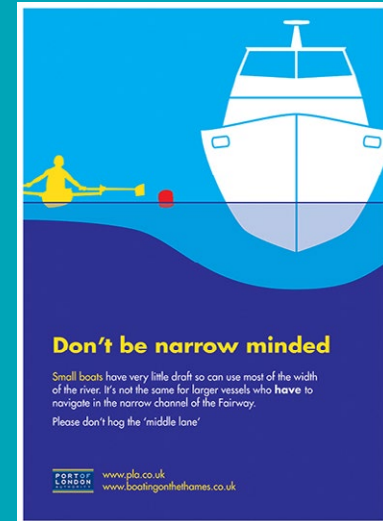
The lanes between the **Fairway** and the banks are referred to as the **Inshore Zone (IZ)**. Paddlers are encouraged to navigate outside of the **Fairway**, in the **Inshore Zone** and as close to the **starboard** bank as is safe and practicable. That is because paddled boats have minimal draught and are able to use the shallow water outside the **Fairway**.

NOTE: In a number of places the **Fairway** is not in the centre and large boats can appear to be in the “wrong” place on the river, especially at low tide. You should always ensure that at such times you give way and show your intentions clearly.



All vessels in the Fairway have right of way.

Paddled boats **must give way** to larger motor vessels in the Fairway. That is because these vessels are restricted in their ability to manoeuvre and although relatively slow, paddled boats are also generally much more manoeuvrable than most larger vessels.



Solo paddling

Paddling alone inherently carries more risk than when paddling in a group which can rely on safety in numbers both in terms of being seen by other vessels and by having assistance on hand to cope with a problem.

Solo paddling should only be undertaken by paddlers experienced in Tideway navigation and conditions.

Soloists are very strongly advised to carry at least one method of communication and to make sure someone knows they are afloat and what their intended plan is, including anticipated return time. That information could be left with London VTS, another club member or a friend.

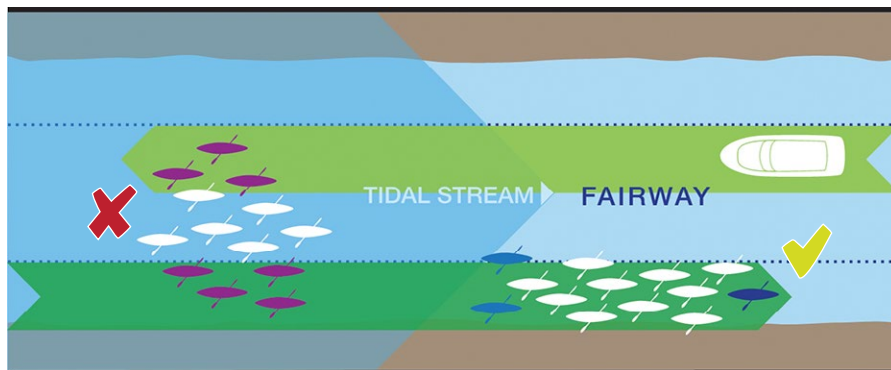
Every effort should be made to be as visible as possible to other river users by means of hi-vis clothing or lights where necessary.

Solo paddling in the dark is not recommended.

Group management

Paddling in groups is safer than paddling alone since groups of very small boats are much easier for other vessels to spot. However, it is important that groups stay close together and are of a size and formation that does not baulk or otherwise impede the safe navigation of other, usually faster river users. Thames Byelaw 15 does not, in fact, allow boats to proceed abreast (side-by-side) but it is accepted that paddled boats are an exception as their visibility to other vessels is improved as a group. This formation also allows for easier communication within the group.

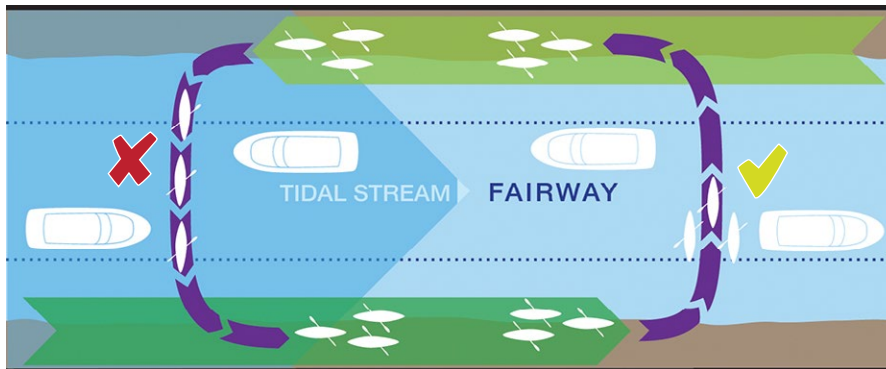
- ✘ Group paddling does not give paddlers *carte blanche* to **spread out across the river** and groups must always consider the amount of space they take up. The **group leader** must take responsibility for maintaining a suitable group size and shape in any given situation
- ✔ As well as the **leader**, groups should ideally have **one or two experienced paddlers at the rear** whose specific role it is to keep a lookout behind and inform, direct or control the group as necessary



Crossing the river

At some time paddlers will have to cross the **Fairway** in order to commence their return journey. That can be the most hazardous part of the outing. Please consider the following in order to effect a safe crossing:

- Cross where you can see other vessels and you can be seen by them
Make your intentions and your crossing obvious to other river users
- ✗ You may not cross unless the **Fairway** is clear and never in front of oncoming traffic or close to a bridge – [also see page 33](#)
- ✓ **Any boats in the Fairway have right of way** so be prepared to have to wait until the **Fairway** has cleared
- ✗ Groups should not cross the **Fairway** strung-out in single file
- ✓ Groups should cross the **Fairway** in close formation
- Crossing must take place as quickly as is safely possible and by the **shortest possible route**
- Be aware of the effect of the tidal stream which will push you sideways
- **Keep a good lookout**



Port of London Thames
Byelaws 2012 – Byelaw 24

Modifications of the International Regulations for Preventing Collisions at Sea (Col Regs) - Crossing

- (a) a vessel must not cross or enter a fairway so as to obstruct another vessel proceeding along the fairway.

Port of London Thames
Byelaws 2012 - Byelaw 15

Modifications of the International Rules

- (c) a power-driven vessel must not proceed abreast of another power-driven vessel except for the purposes of overtaking that other vessel.

*For the purposes of this rule
paddled boats must act as
power driven vessels.*

Col Reg Rule 14 Head-on situation

- (a) When two power driven vessels are meeting on reciprocal or nearly reciprocal courses so as to involve risk of collision each shall alter her course to starboard so that each shall pass on the port side of the other.
- (c) When a vessel is in any doubt as to whether such a situation exists she shall assume that it does exist and act accordingly.

For the purposes of this regulation, paddled boats must act as power-driven vessels.

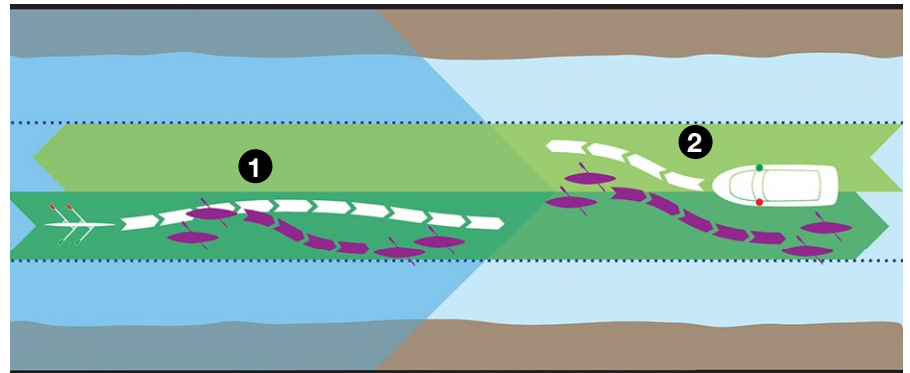
Notwithstanding the above points and other advice on this page, all vessels have a duty of care to avoid a collision (Col Reg, Rule 2).

Avoiding collisions

Because of the relatively slow speed of paddled boats the most likely danger of collision is, in fact, from faster vessels approaching from behind. It is recommended that groups have one or two experienced paddlers at the rear of the group whose specific role it is to keep a lookout behind. Motor vessels may use a sound signal to communicate their presence or intentions and rowing boats may shout a warning – [see page 34](#).

- 1 When approached from behind, paddlers should preferably steer to **starboard** and thus leave the passage clear for the faster moving vessel
- 2 In a head-on situation you should also preferably steer to **starboard**. That means that ideally both vessels should pass **port-to-port**

In extreme situations **any action should be taken to avoid a collision** even if it breaks all the rules. Boats should always then return immediately and safely to the correct station before continuing.



Overtaking

It is unlikely that most paddled boats will be sufficiently fast enough to overtake other vessels but they may have to go around stationary boats or other, slower paddled boats. Please observe these overtaking rules:

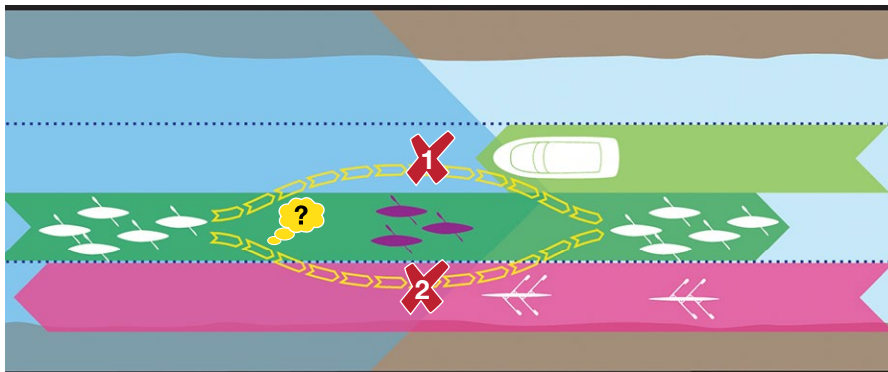
- **The overtaking crew does not have right of way.** If it is not clear to overtake then you must wait

? Overtaking should not take place if it puts the overtaking boat into the path of oncoming traffic, either:

1 Any vessels in the Fairway

2 Rowing boats in the Inshore Zone – see [pages 37–39](#)

- Overtaking should, in general, be on the outside (in the faster tidal stream)
- Any boat(s) being overtaken should maintain course and speed, baulking the passage of an overtaking vessel is not permitted
- Do not overtake under bridges



General Directions for Navigation in the Port of London 2011 (as amended)

Direction 24

Overtaking Manoeuvres

- (1) Overtaking manoeuvres shall only be undertaken so that the vessels involved do not prejudice their ability to navigate safely, particularly in areas of additional constraint such as river bends and bridges.

Col Reg Rule 13

Overtaking

- (a) any vessel overtaking any other shall keep out of the way of the vessel being overtaken.

Port of London Thames Byelaws 2012 - Byelaw 15

Modifications of the International Rules

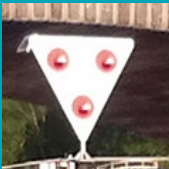
- (d) a vessel in a fairway above Tilburyness must not overtake a vessel which is itself overtaking another vessel.

Port of London Thames Byelaws 2012 - Rule 36 Bridges

36.1 When the arch or span of a bridge is closed to navigation, the person in control of the bridge must display at or as close to the centre as practicable of that arch or span, or in a position agreed with the harbourmaster:

- (a) by day, three red discs 0.6 metres in diameter at the points of an equilateral triangle with the apex downwards and the base horizontal; and
- (b) by night, three red lights in similar positions to the discs displayed by day.

(Any arch closure will also be announced via an NtM)



Closed arch marker



Fairway marker

Bridges

The Tideway has 29 bridges over the main channel between Teddington and Tower Bridge. The height and width of bridges are of no concern to paddlers but they can present particular hazards to safe navigation:



Visibility of small boats can be very easily obstructed by the bridge buttresses and large vessels may often be very limited in their ability to manoeuvre. Small boats should always try to keep well away from bridge buttresses and avoid passing other vessels close to a bridge.

Another hazard for small boats is the current which flows much faster around bridge buttress drawing small boats towards them and affecting paddler's ability to control their boat. There may also be shallows to look out for at low tide, particularly under the arches closest to the banks.

Paddlers should keep well clear of all bridges for their own safety except when transiting a bridge.

- 1 Whenever possible (or as appropriate), use the arch closest to the shore
 - Do not stop under or near a bridge (unless in an emergency)
- 2 ~~Do not cross~~, turn or overtake under or near a bridge
 - Do not baulk (obstruct) faster vessels under or near a bridge

Arch marking

-  The **Fairway** is marked with two amber lights above the arch
-  A closed arch is marked with an inverted triangle of 3 red lights or disks
- 3 ~~For safety~~ **no vessel should ever navigate through a closed arch**

Arch numbering

Bridge arches over the river are numbered, starting from the north bank, with **Arch #1** (see diagram opposite)

Piers, buoys and moorings


Similar dangers [to bridges] are also presented by piers, buoys and moorings – and the vessels manoeuvring around them. Paddlers should apply the same precautions for bridges to all other large obstacles in the river – of which there are many!

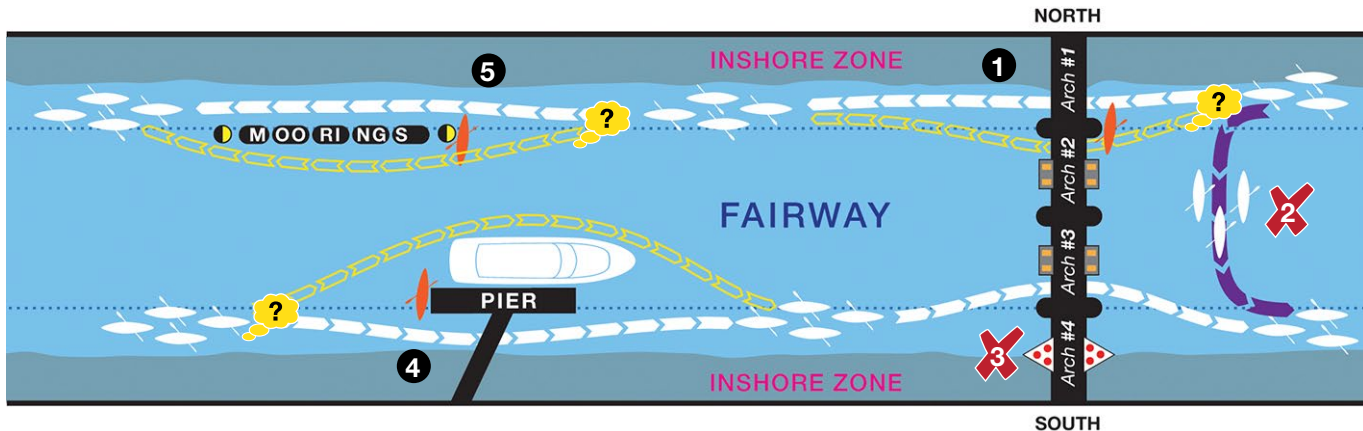
Always keep an especially good lookout when navigating around bridges, piers, buoys and moorings.

Groups of paddlers should remain tightly spaced rather than spread out in a long line. A compact group is easier for larger vessels to see than a line of small boats.

There are some specific exceptions to this general advice about navigating bridges, piers and moorings. They are detailed in the Directions sections – [from page 50](#).

- 4** Whenever possible paddlers are advised to navigate behind (or under) a pier. This is mostly to avoid the passenger vessels and work boats that are using the outside of the pier
- 5** Whenever possible paddlers are advised to navigate inside (Inshore Zone) any moorings which are positioned on the edge of the fairway

 Paddlers must also be aware of the dangers of being pushed onto any man-made obstructions by the tidal stream. Once trapped on the upstream side of a fixed obstruction, it can be almost impossible to get free and there is the real risk of being pushed under by the force of the water.



Shouted warnings

If you feel that a risk of collision is developing do not assume that the other boat is aware of it and call out in good time to warn them. The conventional calls for rowers and paddlers are:

- **“Take a look [other boat]”**
potential risk of collision
- **“Ahead [other boat]”**
imminent risk of collision
- **“Hold it up”**
precautionary stop
- **“Hold it hard!”**
Emergency stop

All paddlers when hearing such a call in their vicinity should take a good look to ascertain whether it pertains to them or not.

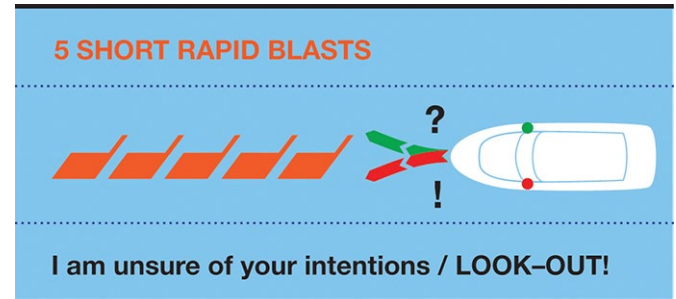
Calling other boats is particularly important where paddlers are sharing the river with rowers. Calling is common (and indeed good practice) amongst rowers and paddlers should not be inhibited about doing the same. It is better to assume that other boats have not seen you than to leave your call until it is too late.

It is recommended that all paddlers also carry a whistle (attached to their buoyancy aid) to attract attention in an emergency and where conditions make shouting ineffective.

Sound signals

- Power-driven vessels, especially the larger commercial (passenger) vessels are much more likely to use sound signals than they are to shout
- Emergency vessels such as the lifeboat and police will use their siren rather than shout
- Paddlers must be aware of the meaning of sound signals, usually given via a horn or whistle
- In the [Upriver Area](#) sound signals are most likely to apply to the Class V passenger vessels, especially when using Kew Pier. Below Putney use of sound signals will be common amongst the busy commercial traffic
- In addition to sound signals, all paddlers are advised to carry VHF and keep a listening watch

The most important **sound signals** for paddlers to remember are as follows:



1 SHORT BLAST



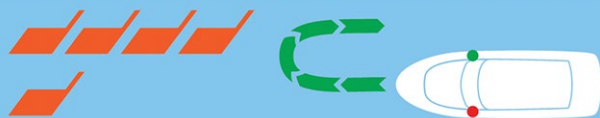
I am turning to **starboard**

2 SHORT BLASTS



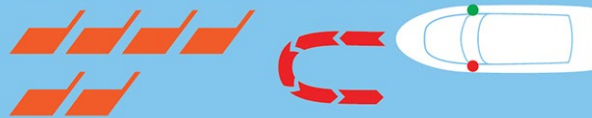
I am turning to **port**

4 SHORT BLASTS THEN 1 SHORT BLAST



I am turning 180° in the **Fairway** to **starboard**

4 SHORT BLASTS THEN 2 SHORT BLASTS



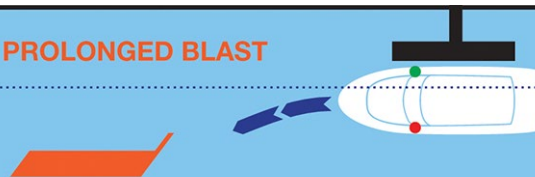
I am turning 180° in the **Fairway** to **port**

3 SHORT BLASTS



I am operating **astern propulsion**

1 PROLONGED BLAST



I am leaving the pier / entering the **Fairway**

What is “Working the Slacks”?

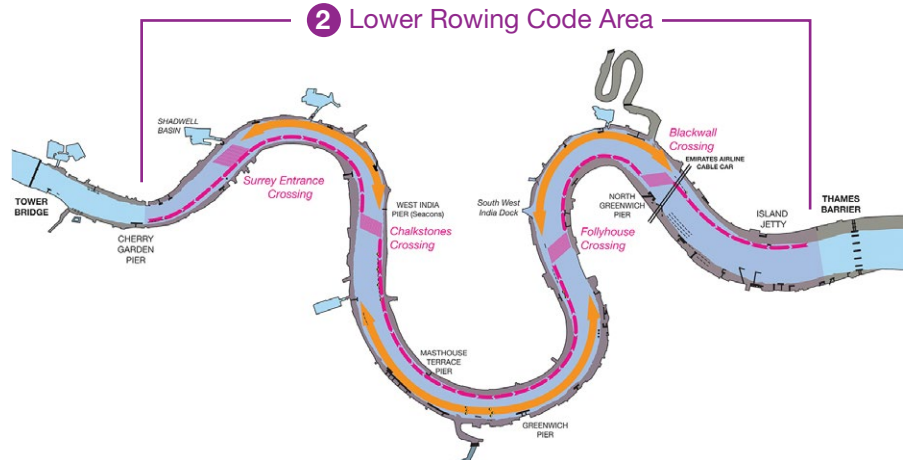
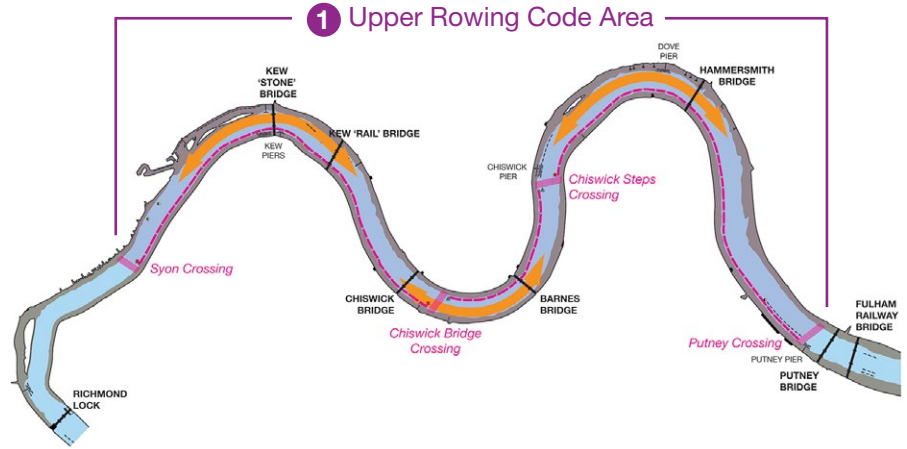
Working the slacks is a navigation system historically developed by working oarsmen to use the easier ‘slack’ water when rowing against the tide, rather than have to force their boat into a strong current.

In general, water flows faster around the **outside of bends** (also creating **tidal sets** – [see page 6](#)) with slower or ‘slack’ water being on the inside of the bend.

Traditionally, oar-powered boats have been allowed to break with the normal navigation rules (of staying to starboard) by rowing in the slower moving, ‘slack’ water **on the inside of the bend** – **but only against the tide.**

Because the Tideway meanders so much, boats have to swap banks to stay in the slack water. They may only do this at pre-arranged **Crossing Zones**.

It is this practice that is known as **working the slacks** and it’s a bit like being allowed to ride a bike on the pavement against the flow of the traffic.



Rowing Code Areas

On the Thames Tideway there are two specific areas where the slacks are worked. Because rowing boats make up the vast majority of recreational craft on the river in these areas, they are known as the **Rowing Code Areas** (see diagrams left).

- 1 **Upper Rowing Code Area** also applies to paddlers and is between Syon Reach and Putney Pier
- 2 **Lower Rowing Code Area** doesn't apply to paddlers and is between Cherry Garden Pier and Island Jetty

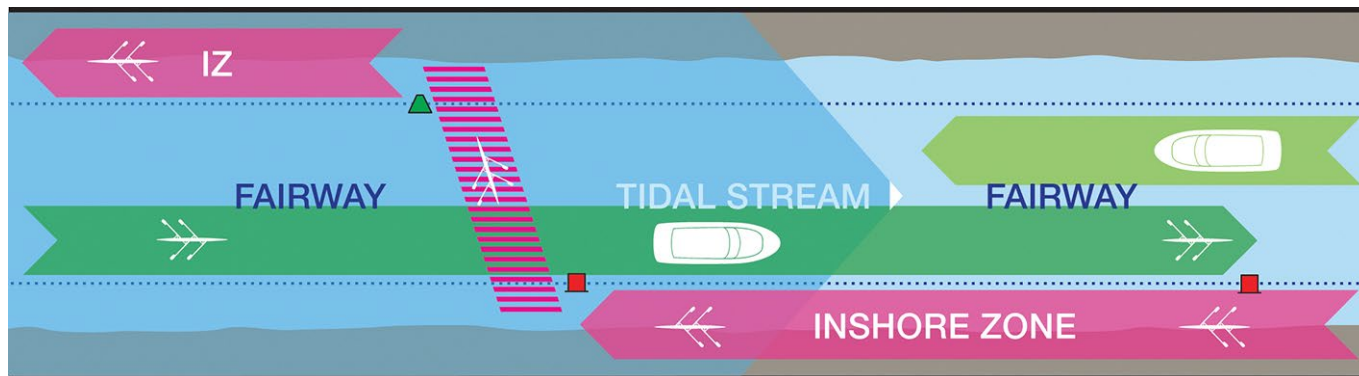
Within those areas, rowers should **work the slacks** meaning that when rowing *against* the tidal stream they use the lanes between the **Fairway** and the river's edge, known as the **Inshore Zones**. When using the **Inshore Zone**, rowers should be positioned as close to the bank as safe and practicable, however high the water is.

In both rowing code areas the **Inshore Zone** is only used when rowing *against* the tidal stream. When rowing with the tidal stream rowers are positioned on the **starboard side** of the **Fairway** as per Col Regs (Rule 9a). Think of it as a river within a river.

Only in the **Upper Rowing Code Area** the lanes are occasionally marked with buoys in important areas and at **Crossing Zones**:

- ▲ **Green** buoys are always on the Middlesex or north edge of the **Fairway**
- **Red** buoys are always on the Surrey or south edge of the **Fairway**

Outside the Rowing Code Areas, Col Regs (Rule 9a) **starboard** side navigation, applies to all vessels at all times, as described on [pages 26–27](#).



Why do paddlers need to know about the Rowing Code Areas?

Because in the Upper Rowing Code Area (Syon to Putney) **paddled boats should work the slacks**. The navigation rules for paddled boats are the same as for rowing boats.

The fundamental points are covered here but a more detailed explanation about working the slacks within the Rowing Code Areas can be found in the Rowing Code. That is available on the PLA leisure users website:

www.boatingonthethames.co.uk/Rowing

In the Lower Rowing Code Area, the rules for paddlers are different. Unlike rowing vessels there, **paddled boats should *not* work the slacks in the Lower Rowing Code Area**. See [pages 67–69](#) for more details.

Paddled boats working the slacks

Only in the **Upper Rowing Code Area**, paddled boats should use the **same navigation pattern as rowing boats** so it is vital to understand the specific issues that arise where paddlers and rowers use the same **Inshore Zone to work the slacks**:

- Paddled boats are usually slower than rowing boats
- Paddlers face in their direction of travel
- Rowers have their backs to their direction of travel

The consequence of that situation is very obvious – that there is an increased possibility of a rowing boat colliding into the back of a paddled boat when both types of boat are working the same slack water.

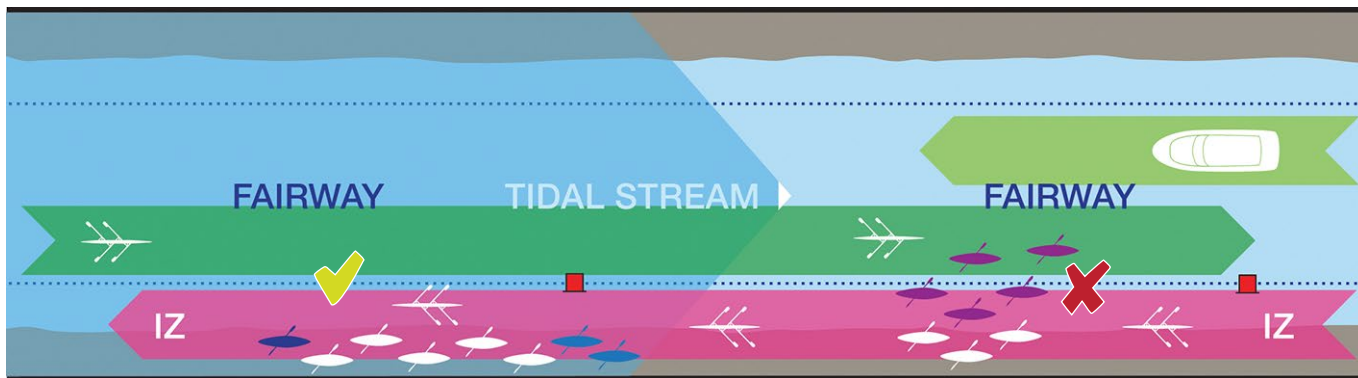
It is vital therefore that paddlers also keep a good lookout behind them as well as in front when navigating within the **Inshore Zone**. Paddlers should make themselves as visible (and audible – [see page 34](#)) as possible to rowing boats and to avoid impeding their progress by filling the whole **Inshore Zone**.

- 1 The rule on paddling in groups is different within the Rowing Code Areas – Paddlers should be no more than two abreast and should stay as close to the bank as is safe thus allowing rowing boats to pass them unhindered on the outside.

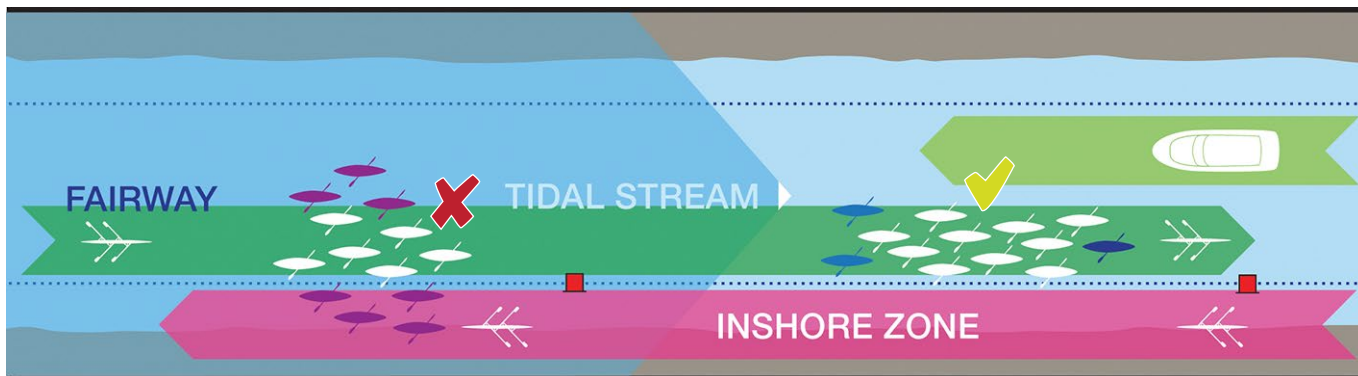
When proceeding with the stream in the **Fairway**, the responsibility is very much the other way around, with rowing boats, as the faster vessel, being obliged to lookout for and safely overtake paddled boats.

- 2 However, paddled boats must not spread out across the whole **Fairway** nor into the **Inshore Zone** but paddle as a compact group on the **starboard** side of the **Fairway**, as described on [page 28](#).

- 1 Paddlers **working the slacks** against the tide in the **Inshore Zone**



- 2 Paddlers proceeding with the tide on the **starboard** side of the **Fairway**, as per Col Regs



Port of London Act 1968 (as amended) - Section 108

General rules for navigation

A master who navigates his vessel on the Thames

- (a) without due care and attention; or
- (b) in a manner liable to injure or endanger persons, other vessels, the banks of the Thames (whether above or below mean high water level) or any structure or installation in or beside the Thames;

shall be guilty of an offence and liable to a fine not exceeding [the statutory maximum and on conviction on indictment to a fine].

The statutory maximum fine at time of publication (2016) is £5,000

Personal responsibility

Risk Assessment

Every paddler is responsible for checking the equipment that they are about to go afloat in and also for assessing the environmental conditions plus their own ability and experience.

They should understand the basics of this Code of Practice and be familiar with rules, regulations and emergency procedures set out by their club.

They should be able to swim and wear a suitable PFD.

The Vessel Master

In the context of PLA regulations, the steers person ('steers' for paddled boats with more than one person), is deemed to be the master of the vessel - see panel left.

As such, the steers is legally responsible for the navigation, safety and behaviour of the crew.

Group leaders' responsibility

As mentioned in other parts of this code, it's advisable to paddle in groups, which should appoint a person to 'take charge' to take an active role to maintain the size, shape, position and route of the group in line with the guidance in this code.

Whilst individuals are ultimately responsible for themselves, leaders are put into a position of trust by the other group members, so they have a duty of care to ensure their experience and 'local knowledge' are sufficient to be able to make the right decisions and dynamically risk assess the trip.

It is also recommended that group leaders hold a First Aid qualification.

Responsibilities of clubs, organisations and paddle sport providers

Clubs, organisations and paddle sport providers should have measures in place for:

- Generic risk assessments
- Standard operating procedures including identifying usable egress points
- Up-to-date Health and Safety policies
- Appointed coaches/group leaders
- Appointed Safety Officer
- Other conditions required for affiliation to a national governing body (e.g. British Canoeing) or if operating as a commercial provider.

Experience

Associate clubs, organisations or providers should consider producing their own guidelines based on British Canoeing Coaching and Personal Performance (Leadership and Star) Awards. These guidelines should take into account the level of competence required of paddlers and group leaders, as well what part of the river is being used and the expected conditions. Clubs not associated with British Canoeing are recommended to be guided by the principles within these awards.

Information distribution

Clubs are also responsible for informing members (i.e. via a notice board, website or social media) of any information relevant to safety and navigation on the Tidal Thames. This information could be any or all of the following issued by the PLA or British Canoeing:

- This Code of Practice
- [Notices to Mariners \(NtM\)](#)
- Safety Bulletins
- [Fluvial Flag warnings](#)

Commercial Paddling

Any club, individual or company which offers paid 'tour guide' style trips on the tidal Thames requires permission from the PLA Harbourmaster.

Detailed Passage Plans and Risk Assessments are required for operations such as this and these need to be approved by the PLA. Kayaks, canoes and stand-up paddleboards used for commercial trips must also be licensed by the PLA.

A leader of any such commercial outfit is required to hold a **Thames Local Knowledge Endorsement (LKE)** when operating between Putney and Margaretness.

More details on the LKE can be found on the PLA website or by contacting the Harbourmaster – [see page 70](#) for contact details.

Port of London Thames Byelaws 2012 - Byelaw 9
**BOAT RACES, REGATTAS, PROCESSIONS
 AND OTHER RIVER EVENTS**

- 9.1 A person must not organise or promote [a boat race, regatta, stunt, procession, exhibition, firework display, air race or other river event] on or over the Thames except with the consent of the harbourmaster.
- 9.2 Any person who proposes to organise [an event] on or over the Thames, must consult with the harbourmaster on the navigational and safety issues arising from the proposed event and give the harbourmaster at least four weeks' notice of the proposed event.
- 9.3 Every person navigating a vessel in or in connection with such an event must comply with the instructions of a harbourmaster relating to it.
- 9.4 Any person who proposes to organise or promote [an event] must provide to the harbourmaster the findings of any comprehensive risk assessment requested as a result of the consultation under byelaw 9.2 in respect of the event in question. The risk assessment must identify the relevant hazards and any suitable procedures, precautions and other risk control measures to be implemented to ensure any risk to persons or navigational safety or both is mitigated and maintained as low as reasonably practicable.

Events' responsibilities

An 'event' is classed as use of the river for anything other than normal training or recreational purposes. This includes mass paddles of (typically) 30-40 paddlers, races, stunts or anything with media interest. The event organiser must advise the Harbourmaster as far in advance as possible and at least four weeks beforehand.

Any event that involves more than 99 boats on the water at any one time, or if the Harbourmaster deems it necessary, must normally have a full river closure, which requires at least one month's notice.

The organiser must provide:

- Proof of public liability insurance
- A risk assessment and event plan
- A Letter of consent from the Harbourmaster containing an indemnity for the PLA against any costs or claims arising as a result of the event
- Details of any boats involved in the event working for hire or reward

Event organisers should inform London VTS that the event is about to start and again once the event has finished.

The environmental impact of an event must also be considered particularly with regards to dealing with litter – [see page 45](#).

Qualifications, experience and restrictions

All paddlers on the tidal Thames should have a thorough knowledge of this Paddling Code of Practice before going afloat – [see pages 2-3](#).

Restrictions apply in certain areas (See Directions pages)	Stand-up paddleboarding			Considerations for other paddle sports
	No TSK (minimal experience)	TSK ² Level 1	TSK ² Level 2	
Above Putney (pages 50 – 57)	Recommend beginners are accompanied by a TSK qualified paddler	No restriction		Previous paddling experience* on ‘exposed water’ is recommended <i>*Be guided by the British Canoeing Coaching & Personal Performance Awards (Leadership & Star) for determining required levels of ability and experience</i>
	Not at night			
Below Putney (pages 58 – 60) <i>No SUP 3 hours before and 2 hours after high water (at London Bridge)</i> <i>SUP must carry VHF</i>	Must have Some ¹ experience and be part of a group (3 minimum), led by Level 2 (1:4 ratio)	As part of group (3 minimum)	Lead a group of paddlers with Some ¹ experience (1:4 ratio)	
	Not at night or solo	At night (as member of a group)		
		Not solo	Solo (daytime only)	
	No paddling		As part of group (3 minimum)	
Below Chelsea Bridge (pages 61 – 65) <i>No SUP between Good Friday and September 30th, 11.00 – 18.00</i>	No paddling		As part of group (3 minimum)	Previous paddling experience* on the tidal Thames is recommended
	Not at night or solo			
Below Tower Bridge (pages 65 – 69)	SUP is not permitted below Tower Bridge			

Some¹ experience means having paddled on the tidal Thames on **at least three** previous occasions

TSK² – Thames Skills and Knowledge endorsement. Contact the PLA Harbourmaster (Upper) for details on courses

All commercial paddle sport leaders must have a **LKE** to operate on the Tideway – [see page 41](#)

Other organisations

British Canoeing

British Canoeing is the national governing body for canoeing. It is responsible for setting the overall framework for the National Associations; representing canoeing interests such as coaching and competition at UK and international level. It also formulates standards for training programmes with certification levels and administers a range of personal performance and coaching awards.

Port of London Authority (PLA)

PLA operations cover 95 miles of the River Thames between the estuary and Teddington Lock. Its role is to keep commercial and leisure users safe, protect and enhance the environment and promote the use of the river for trade and travel.

The PLA is ultimately responsible for enforcing the navigation rules of the river, including this Paddling Code.

Environmental Responsibilities

Environment

All users of the river should be environmentally friendly and take care not to disturb the wildlife while on the water. Paddlers should also not paddle towards or close by seals on the banks of the river.

Invasive non-native species (INNS) and bio-security

Paddlers should take steps to minimise the risk or prevent the movement of invasive non-native species which can be introduced and spread by all waterway users, often unknowingly via contaminated equipment and clothing left in damp conditions. Paddlers should check their gear is clean before bringing it to the Thames from other waterways to prevent INNS contamination. Please remember:



Check your equipment and clothing for live organisms, plant fragments, etc – particularly in areas that are damp or hard to inspect

Clean and wash all equipment, footwear and clothing thoroughly. Soaking small items at 45°C for 15 minutes has been shown to cause a 99% mortality rate across all species. If you do find any organisms, leave them at the body of water in which they were found

Dry all equipment and clothing. Some species can live for up to 16 days in moist conditions. Ensure you don't transfer water anywhere

Pollution and Health

Litter

Do not drop litter in the river, or leave it where it will be taken/blown back into the river. Plastic has been found in fish of the Thames, because they are eating broken-down litter mixed in the river bed with their food.

Bin it, for a cleaner Thames!

If organising an event, where litter is likely to collect with spectators, plan your event to minimise the litter generated and event-specific items like flags or banners are secured. Plan to review the area following the event to prevent any litter ending up in the river.

Water pollution

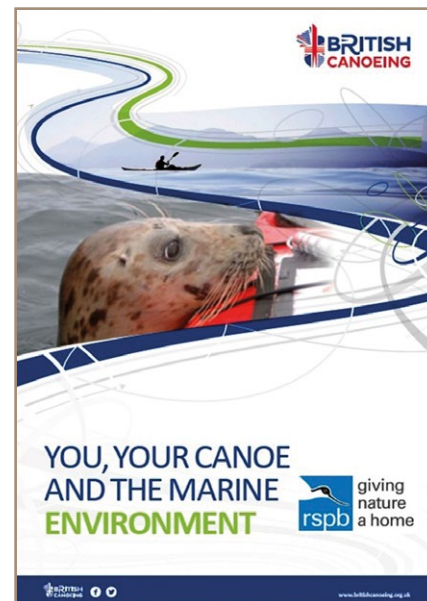
If you see any pollution of the river, please report it to the relevant London VTS channel by phone or VHF. Take photos if possible, but do not take samples and keep a distance as the pollutant may also be damaging to health. After heavy or prolonged rainfall, screened sewage is released into the river from combined sewage outfalls. Avoid paddling in or near those events as there is an increased risk to your health.

Noise Pollution

Please be considerate towards those who live on and near the river. Paddlers should avoid abusive language, playing loud music or shouting during unsociable hours.

Health

Paddlers should always be aware of the risk of Weil's disease which is spread by rodents' urine. All cuts and grazes should be covered before going afloat. If a bleeding wound occurs during an outing, wash it thoroughly as soon as you return and treat it as an infection risk. Always wash your hands after paddling and before eating.



London VTS (Vessel Traffic Services)

Teddington to Crayfordness

VHF: **channel 14** Phone: **020 8855 0315**

Crayfordness to Sea Reach 4

VHF: **channel 68** Phone: **01747 562215**

Sea Reach 4 to Seaward Limit

VHF: **channel 69** Phone: **01747 562215**

London VTS oversee safety and navigation across the whole of the tidal Thames, 24/7, 365 days a year. They are the shipping equivalent of Air Traffic Control.

London VTS have a great deal of information to hand regarding such things as river works, arch closures and traffic movements so being involved in this communication network is extremely beneficial.

- All paddled boats are *strongly advised* to inform London VTS if they intend to paddle into or through Central London – [see pages 58–63](#)
- All paddled boats **must** inform London VTS if they intend to paddle into or through the Heart of London – [see pages 62–65](#)
- All paddled boats **must** inform London VTS when they are **afloat in the dark below Putney Bridge**

VHF Radio Communications

For channels, see London VTS, left

London VTS are in constant VHF radio communication with commercial, commuter and emergency vessels as well as regularly broadcasting NtMs and other pertinent information.

The duty officers at London Coastguard and London VTS are stationed next to each other. They work closely together and with the emergency services or other vessels to coordinate, via VHF, any emergency response required on the river.

A personal VHF handset is highly recommended in busy commercial traffic areas, such as Central London. It can be invaluable for keeping a listening watch on the intentions of other vessels or to receive critical information from London VTS.

You do not need a licence to listen on VHF but users do need the appropriate **licence to broadcast** on VHF. If you have such a licence then you are also able to make other river users aware of your intentions.

SUPs must carry VHF below Putney Bridge

Many modern VHF sets also include the option of a **Digital Selective Calling (DSC)** button. DSC will send a pre-defined distress signal, including your location, and is highly recommended for small boats.

NOTE: Hand-held VHF radios may have limited range, particularly upriver and/or at low water.

Incident reporting

Non-emergency incidents

All incidents on the Tideway **must be reported** to the PLA – pla.co.uk/incidentreport – who may share the details with the relevant national association. Incidents should also be reported to your club or centre’s safety officer, particularly if it involves damage to a boat or personal injury.

That is the case for all paddlers using the tidal Thames whether or not they are based on the river.

- **Incidents should be reported as soon as possible**
- **Any incident where the RNLi is called must be reported within 24 hours**

The sorts of incidents that must be reported are:

- Capsizes caused by a third party or requiring the emergency services
- Collisions – with other vessels
- Contact – with stationary objects (bridges, piers, underwater obstructions etc.) that results in personal injury or shipwreck
- Near misses and poor or unsafe navigation
- Personal injury
- Inappropriate or inconsiderate behaviour

Behaviour of motor vessels

Any concerns about poor / abusive behaviour or navigation by motor vessels should be reported as soon as possible to **London VTS** - see left.

Port of London Thames Byelaws 2012 – Byelaw 8

8.1 Where any vessel has, whilst in the Thames:

- a) sunk or is in danger of sinking;
- b) been abandoned;
- c) become derelict;
- d) been in collision with another vessel, shore facility, the river embankment, a structure including any part of a bridge or a berthed or moored vessel or object;
- e) been damaged or caused damage to anything (including a vessel);
- f) been or is on fire or has suffered an explosion;
- g) taken the ground or stranded (not being a vessel which has intentionally taken the ground);
- h) run into, fouled or damaged any light, buoy, beacon or other aid to navigation;
- i) suffered any person falling overboard except in relation to a recoverable capsize of a sailing dinghy or a vessel propelled by paddles or oars;
- j) suffered any other accident normally required to be reported to the Marine Accident Investigation Branch or the Maritime & Coastguard Agency, or both.

8.2 A written report must be submitted by the vessel master to the harbourmaster, as soon as practicable after the submission of the verbal report, required by byelaw 8.1 above. The written report must give the full details of the occurrence, in a form prescribed by the Harbourmaster.



Who you gonna Call?

For **emergency** assistance call **999** and ask for the **Coastguard**

Call **London VTS** (Vessel Traffic Services) on **020 8855 0315**

- to report your intention to proceed through Central London
- to report your intention to proceed through the Thames Barrier
- to report a large group or event on the river
- to report unacceptable behaviour by other river users

London VTS can also be contacted on **VHF channel 14**

For **general enquiries** call the **PLA** on **01474 562200**

PORTS LONDON www.pla.co.uk
www.boatingonthames.co.uk

Emergencies

Below Richmond Lock, it is strongly recommended that paddlers, particularly group leaders, carry a **mobile phone (in a buoyant, waterproof case)** or a **personal VHF handset** to summon help in an emergency situation (SUPs *must* carry VHF below Putney bridge). This device should be carried where it is easily accessible (e.g. on a lanyard) and not tucked-away in a hatch or bag.

There are two primary communication options in an emergency:

Phone: 999 / 112 and ask for the **Coastguard** who will coordinate the appropriate response.

VHF: Teddington to Crayfordness..... **channel 14**
 Crayfordness to Sea Reach 4..... **channel 68**
 Sea Reach 4 to Seaward Limit ... **channel 69**

London VTS will either alert the **Coastguard** (who will task the appropriate emergency service) or other vessels in your vicinity who may be able to offer even more immediate assistance.

In all cases you will need to provide details of your location on the river and the direction of the tide. Use landmarks and bridge names to detail your position.

If you are unable to communicate by either of these methods then attempt to attract attention from other vessels nearby or people on the shore. A whistle, if you have one, is very effective for doing this as it carries further than a shout. You may also be able to attract attention by waving.

There are training courses available for managing on-water incidents and casualty recovery. For more information see www.britishcanoeing.org.uk/go-canoeing/build-my-skills/#safety-training

Lifeboats (RNLI) and other emergency services

River users are the best eyes and ears on the river and emergency services may depend on you to report an incident – don't presume someone has already reported it! Use your VHF or call 999 and ask for the Coastguard if:

- You see someone in difficulty
- You think someone might be in danger or is about to do something silly – report it before it happens!
- A boat or group is significantly overdue back at your club and you are unable to contact or locate them

Be aware that the Lifeboats (also the police, fire service or PLA) may need to respond to incidents at speed, signified by sirens and/or flashing blue lights. Make sure you are prepared for wash and give them space to do their jobs.



COMMUNICATION
**SAVES
LIVES**

**STAY IN
TOUCH**



Lifeboats

The Upper Tideway

The Upper Tideway is the part of the river between Teddington Lock and Putney Bridge.

Although the Upper Tideway runs through the suburbs of west London, it is more ‘rural’ than the river below it, with much more green space and wildlife. There are fewer walls and wharves on the river’s edge and much less commercial traffic in this section. As a result the water is generally calmer and therefore better suited to recreational activities.

Because of that, the Upper Tideway is very busy with recreational water users including paddlers, sailors and motor cruisers but rowing is by far the most common recreational sport in this part of the river.

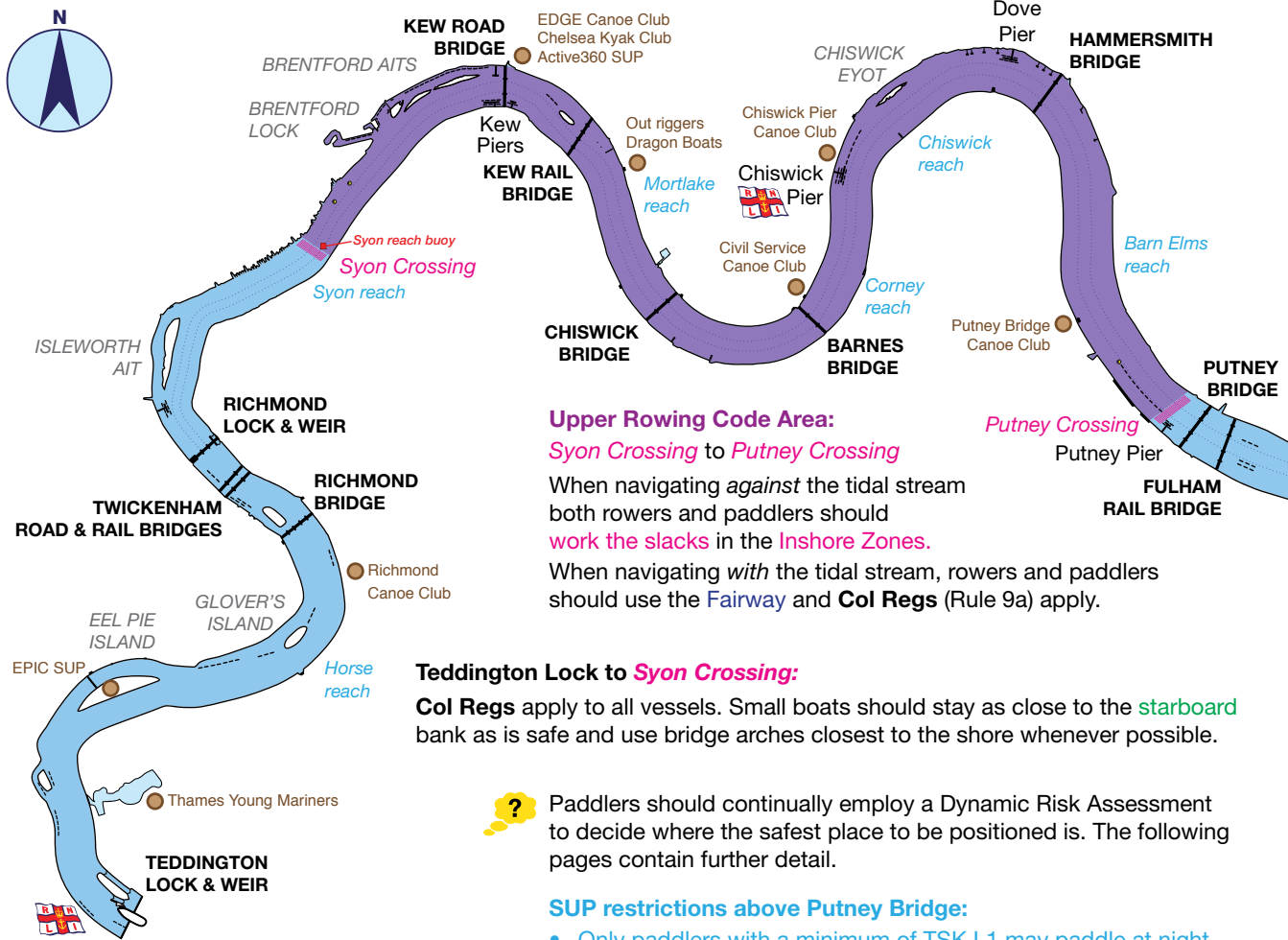
On the Upper Tideway there are two different navigation patterns (see diagram right):

- **Col Regs** apply to all vessels above *Syon Crossing*
- **The Rowing Code** (aka. working the slacks) applies to rowing and paddled boats only in the [Upper Rowing Code Area](#)

Essential details on how the Rowing Code works can be found on [pages 36–39](#) and the full Rowing Code is available on the PLA leisure users website www.boatingonthethames.co.uk/Rowing

The different navigation patterns are also described in the remainder of this [Upper Tideway Directions Section](#).





Upper Rowing Code Area:

Syon Crossing to Putney Crossing

When navigating *against* the tidal stream both rowers and paddlers should **work the slacks** in the **Inshore Zones**.

When navigating *with* the tidal stream, rowers and paddlers should use the **Fairway** and **Col Regs** (Rule 9a) apply.

Teddington Lock to Syon Crossing:

Col Regs apply to all vessels. Small boats should stay as close to the **starboard** bank as is safe and use bridge arches closest to the shore whenever possible.



Paddlers should continually employ a Dynamic Risk Assessment to decide where the safest place to be positioned is. The following pages contain further detail.

SUP restrictions above Putney Bridge:

- Only paddlers with a minimum of TSK L1 may paddle at night

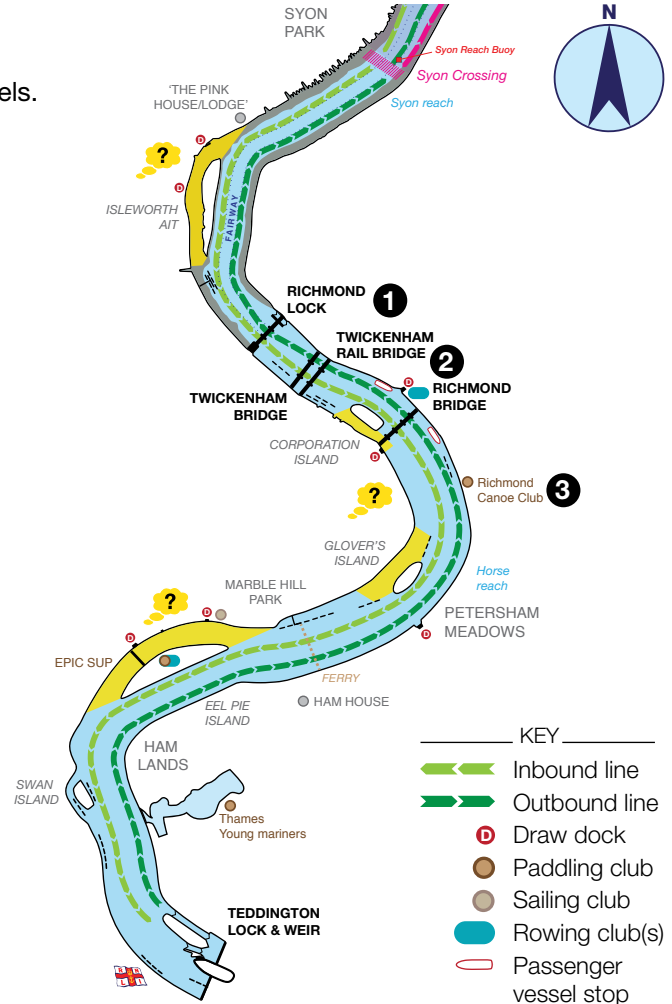
Teddington Lock to Syon Crossing

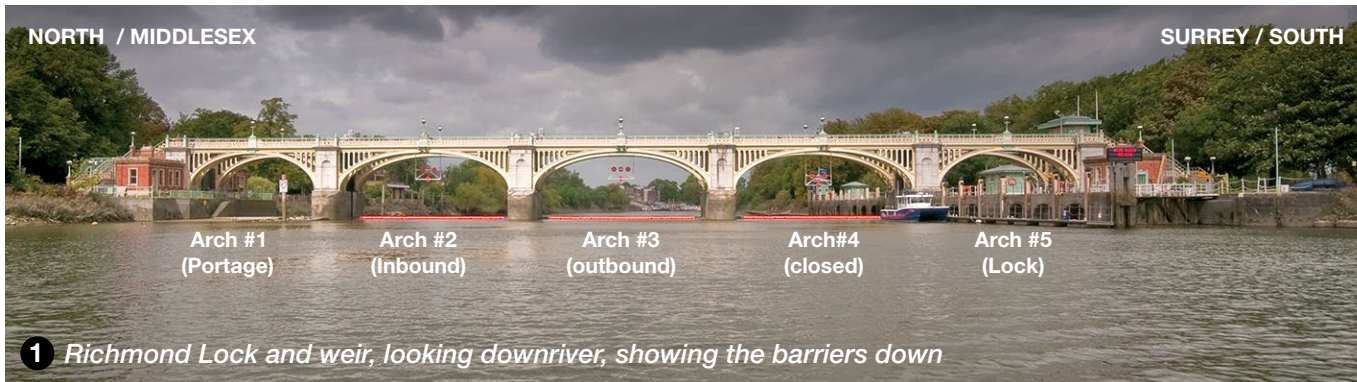
In this part of the river **Col Regs** (Rule 9a) apply to all vessels.

➔ All vessels should navigate to the **starboard** side of the river at all times, **regardless of what the tide is doing**. Paddlers should aim to be as close to the **starboard** bank as is safe and practicable – travelling in either direction.

? Paddlers may also use the water out of the main channel, behind the aits and islands, particularly when travelling inbound (upriver). This is obviously dependant on the tide and whether there is sufficient water to do so.

- 1 Richmond Lock – see opposite page for directions
- 2 Beware that in the vicinity of Richmond the river is quite narrow and can get very busy, particularly in the summer, with hired rowing boats and pleasure cruisers.
- 3 The area around Richmond is most commonly used by racing kayaks and canoes from Richmond Canoe Club. During a club race or when performing a ‘Race Start’, paddlers should ensure the river is clear of transiting vessels. Be aware of pleasure boats and consider having ‘spotters’ above and below to identify approaching craft.





Richmond Lock is a half-tide lock. For 2 hours either side of high water (earlier in drier months) arches #2 and #3 are normally open to navigation.

Otherwise those arches are closed due to weirs being lowered into the water to maintain the water level

above the lock. If the closed arch markers are down, or are being lowered, paddlers must use the portage under arch #1 or the lock under arch #5.

NOTE: Be aware that the weirs are lowered without much notice.



Syon Crossing to Chiswick Bridge Crossing



Kew bridges

Arch #3 of Kew (Stone) Bridge can get very shallow at low water and all boats using the **Inshore Zone** must take extra care in this area at low water.

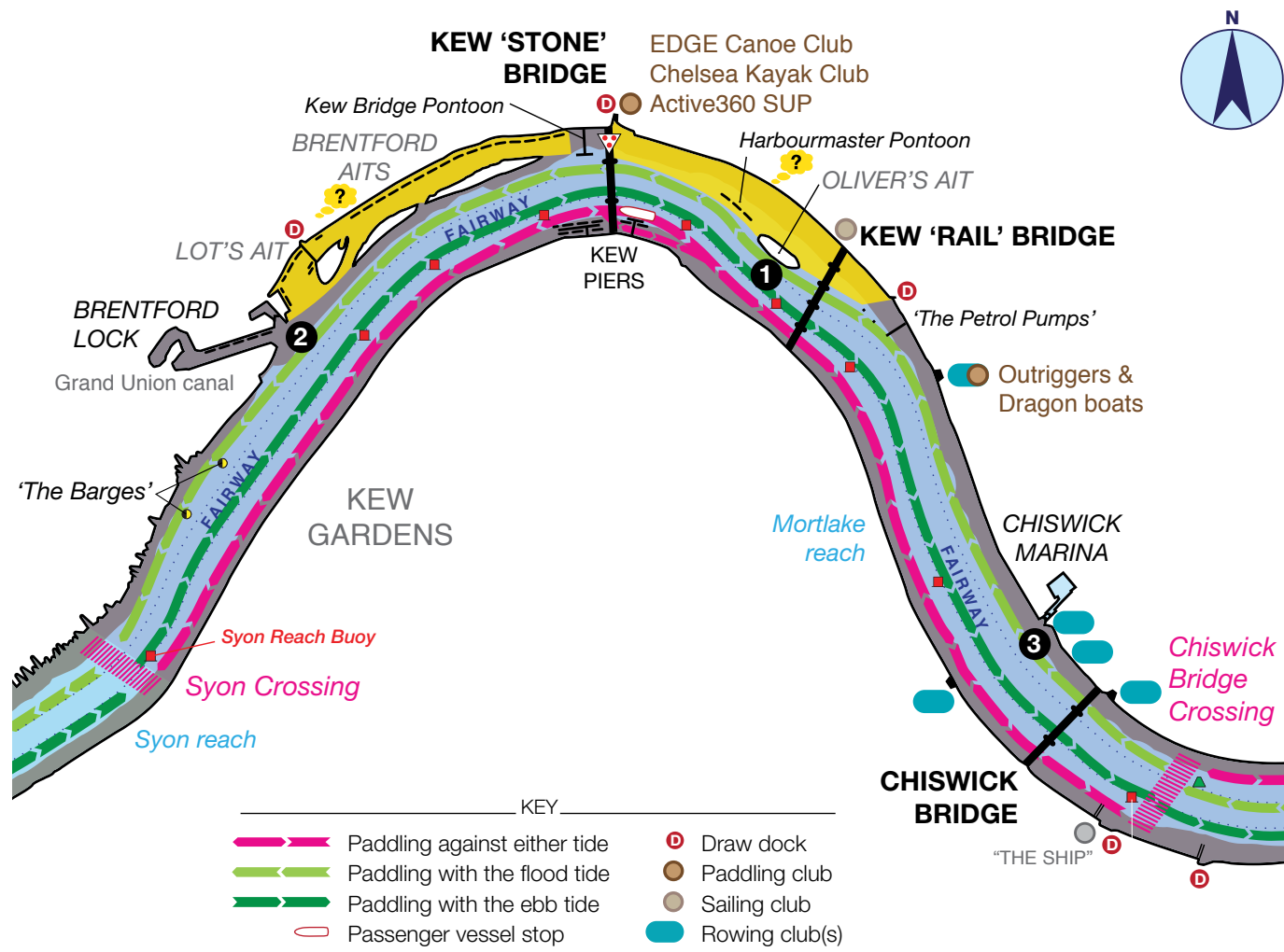
Using arch #2 (centre arch) inbound against the ebb tide is not recommended. It is hard to see boats coming downriver in the **Fairway** as they are easily hidden by the bridge buttress and the curve in the river.

The recommendation is to turn around if arch #3 of Kew Bridge is impassable. If you absolutely must use it then do so with **EXTREME CAUTION**, ensuring the **Fairway** above the bridge is entirely clear before proceeding.

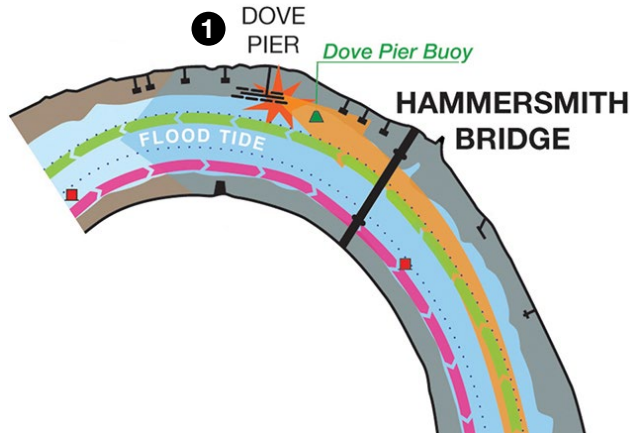
The inshore arch of Kew Rail bridge also dries out but visibility is much better. However, boats in the Inshore Zone must always give way to those in the **Fairway**

This part of the river is within the [Upper Rowing Code Area](#) and is **very busy with rowing boats**.

- Both rowing boats and **paddled boats** should use the Rowing Code navigation, i.e. use the **Inshore Zone** to **work the slacks against** the tidal stream
- When using the **Inshore Zone**, paddlers should be no more than two abreast and must look out behind for faster moving rowing boats
– [see pages 38–39](#)
- When navigating with the tidal stream, boats must stay to the **starboard** of the **Fairway**
- 💡 Paddlers may also use the water out of the main channel, behind the aits and islands, particularly when travelling inbound (upriver). This is obviously dependant on the tide and whether there is sufficient water to do so
- ➊ The main channel is very narrow at Oliver's Ait
- ⚠ Arch #1 of Kew (Stone) Bridge is closed to navigation
 - 2 hours either side of high water, beware of boats coming out of:
- ➋ Brentford Lock
- ➌ Chiswick Marina
- Be aware that Kew Pier is a scheduled stopping point for Passenger vessels



Chiswick Bridge Crossing to Putney Bridge



This part of the river is within the [Upper Rowing Code Area](#) and is **very busy with rowing boats**.

Both rowing boats and **paddled boats** must use the Rowing Code navigation, i.e. use **Inshore Zone** to **work the slacks** against the tidal stream

When using the **Inshore Zone**, paddlers should be no more than two abreast and must lookout behind for faster moving rowing boats

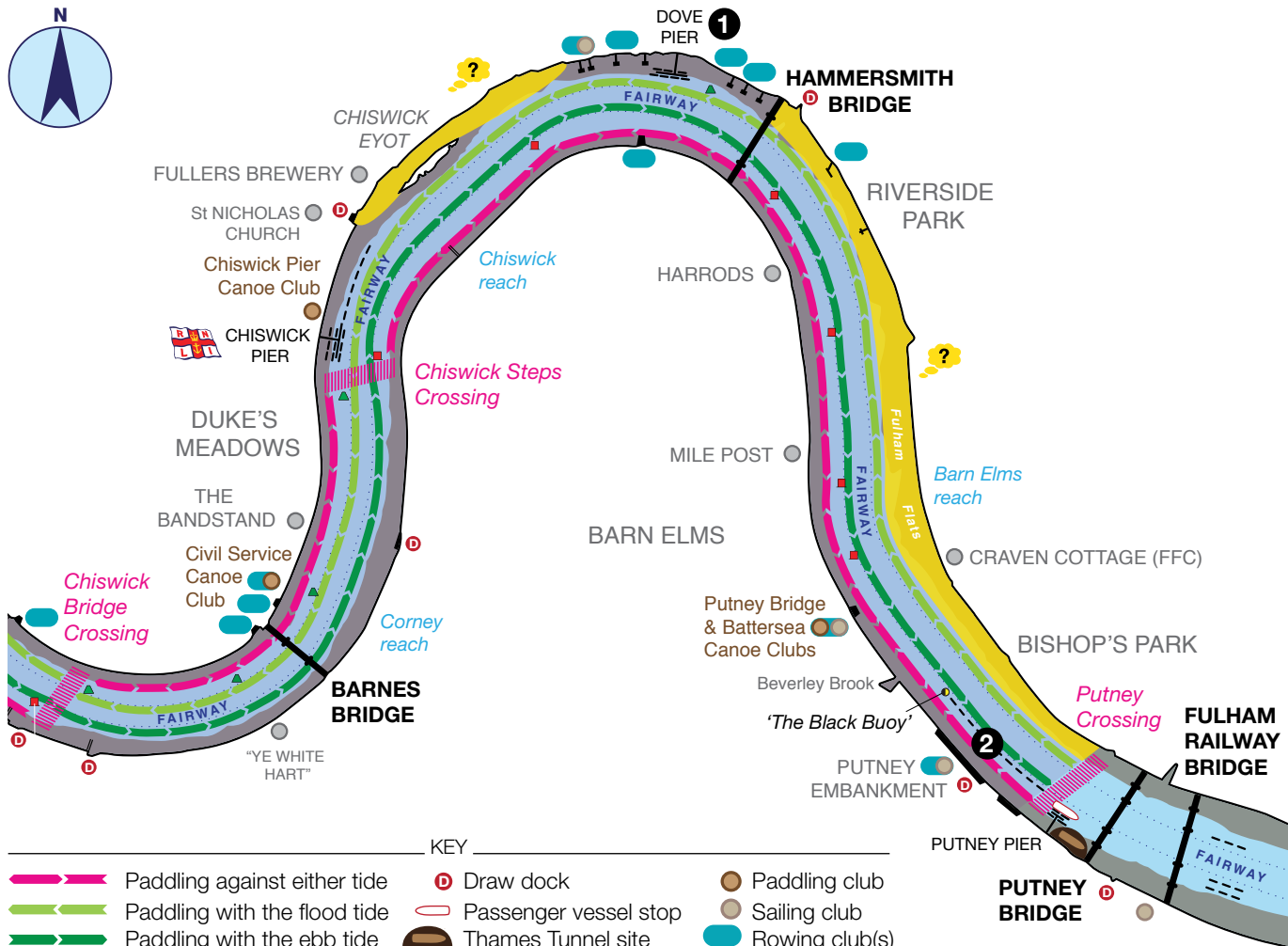
When navigating with the tidal stream, boats must stay to the **starboard** of the **Fairway**

1 Beware of being pushed onto Dove Pier (and Chiswick moorings) by the **set of the tide** when paddling **with the Flood tide**

2 Be extra careful around the moorings at Putney Embankment which is extremely busy with rowing boats and also regular passenger services running from Putney Pier

? Often, staying close to the river bank out of the **Fairway** may be the safest place for a group of paddlers to be

The area to the north of the Fairway between Hammersmith and Putney (**Fulham Flats**) is not used by large vessels or rowing boats so could be used by paddlers to keep out of the way of other traffic – *if the need arises*.



Central London

The Central London section of the Tideway is defined in this Code as being between Putney Bridge and Tower Bridge.

The river is very much more commercially orientated in this section especially below Lambeth Bridge. There are much higher volumes of passenger and commuter traffic as well as work boats and barges. The river's edge is also almost entirely walls and wharves and as a result the water is generally rougher and there are fewer places to get out of the river.

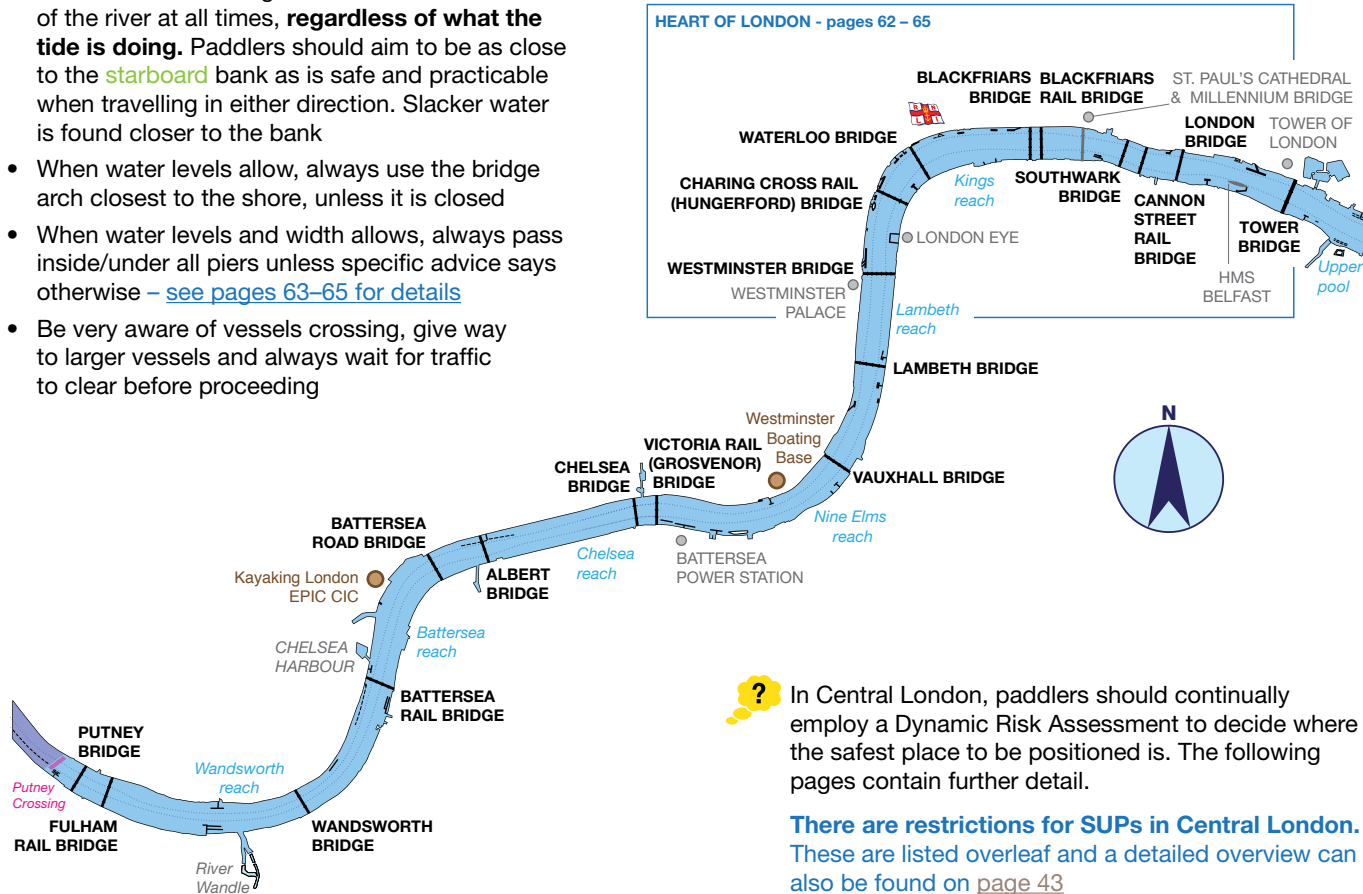
As well as being busy and choppy, there are also a large number of bridges, piers and moorings to negotiate. For those reasons Central London is not especially well suited to recreational activities, particularly in open boats and SUPs, although kayaks are better able to cope with the water.

Paddled boats are, however, allowed below Putney but more consideration must be made to the probable water conditions. [There are also restrictions on who may paddle in this section and at what time of day.](#)



In this part of the river **Col Regs** (Rule 9a) apply to all vessels.

- Paddlers should navigate to the **starboard** side of the river at all times, **regardless of what the tide is doing**. Paddlers should aim to be as close to the **starboard** bank as is safe and practicable when travelling in either direction. Slacker water is found closer to the bank
- When water levels allow, always use the bridge arch closest to the shore, unless it is closed
- When water levels and width allows, always pass inside/under all piers unless specific advice says otherwise – [see pages 63–65 for details](#)
- Be very aware of vessels crossing, give way to larger vessels and always wait for traffic to clear before proceeding



? In Central London, paddlers should continually employ a Dynamic Risk Assessment to decide where the safest place to be positioned is. The following pages contain further detail.

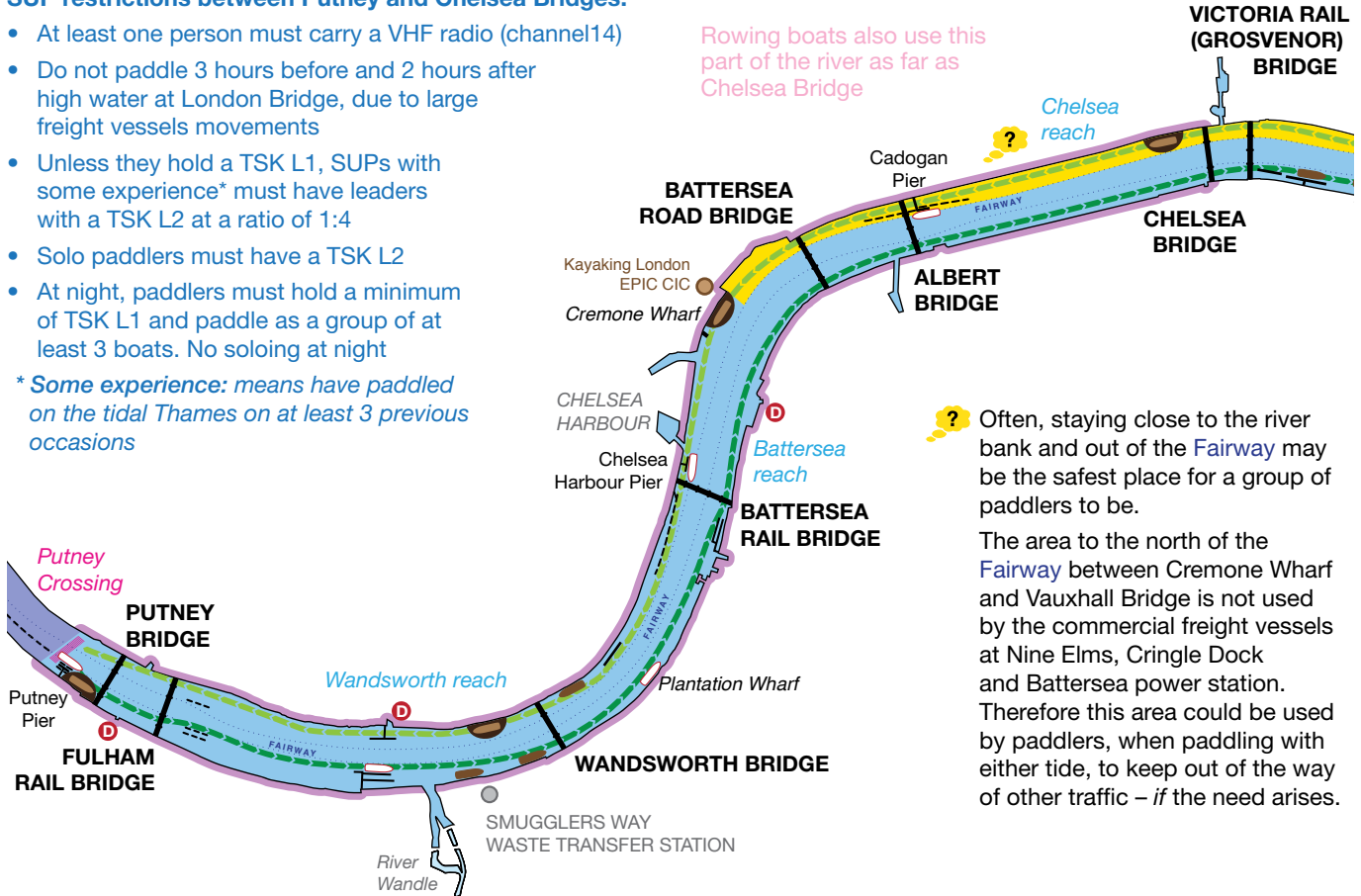
There are restrictions for SUPs in Central London. These are listed overleaf and a detailed overview can also be found on [page 43](#)

Putney Bridge to Chelsea Bridge

SUP restrictions between Putney and Chelsea Bridges:

- At least one person must carry a VHF radio (channel 14)
- Do not paddle 3 hours before and 2 hours after high water at London Bridge, due to large freight vessels movements
- Unless they hold a TSK L1, SUPs with some experience* must have leaders with a TSK L2 at a ratio of 1:4
- Solo paddlers must have a TSK L2
- At night, paddlers must hold a minimum of TSK L1 and paddle as a group of at least 3 boats. No soloing at night

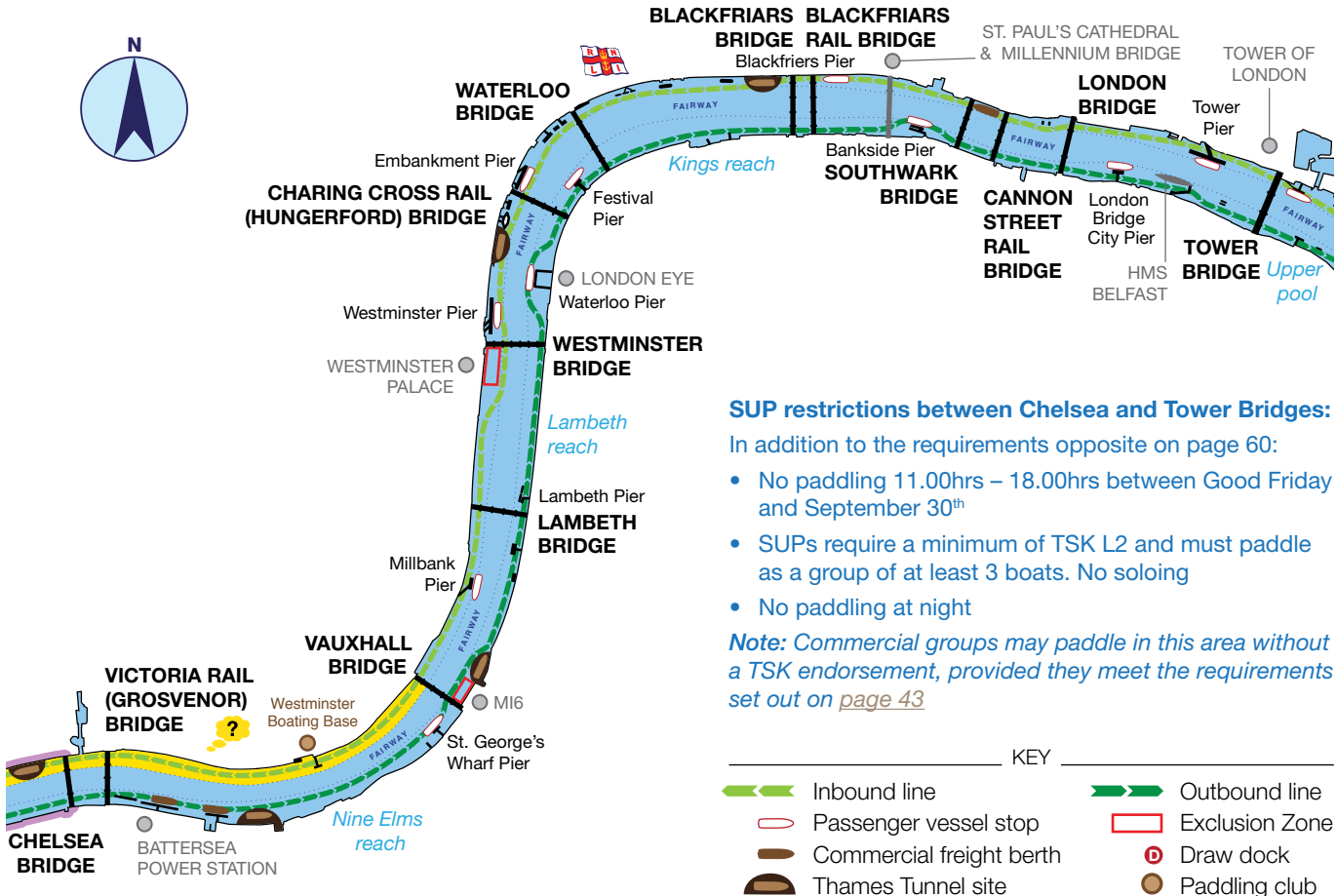
* *Some experience: means have paddled on the tidal Thames on at least 3 previous occasions*



? Often, staying close to the river bank and out of the Fairway may be the safest place for a group of paddlers to be.

The area to the north of the Fairway between Cremone Wharf and Vauxhall Bridge is not used by the commercial freight vessels at Nine Elms, Cringle Dock and Battersea power station. Therefore this area could be used by paddlers, when paddling with either tide, to keep out of the way of other traffic – if the need arises.

Chelsea Bridge to Tower Bridge



SUP restrictions between Chelsea and Tower Bridges:

In addition to the requirements opposite on page 60:

- No paddling 11.00hrs – 18.00hrs between Good Friday and September 30th
- SUPs require a minimum of TSK L2 and must paddle as a group of at least 3 boats. No soloing
- No paddling at night

Note: Commercial groups may paddle in this area without a TSK endorsement, provided they meet the requirements set out on [page 43](#)

The Heart of London

Between Westminster and Tower Bridges is by far the busiest part of the Tideway, especially in the summer months. Commuter services run less frequently at weekends above Chelsea Bridge but sightseeing trips still operate, from around 10.00am.

The PLA strongly encourage small boats to transit this section **before 10.00am on weekend mornings.**



Heart of London – General Advice

- Only the most experienced and qualified Tideway paddlers should attempt to navigate this section outside the times advised in the panel left
- **Keep a very good, proactive lookout and proceed with extreme caution at all times**
- Use of a personal VHF to help understand traffic movements is highly recommended
- Expect high waves and rough water and be aware of wash from behind as well as in front
- When water levels and width allows, pass inside/under piers. Do so as a tight group and ensure that the helm of any vessel can see you before returning to the starboard edge of the river – **exceptions to this are detailed on the following pages**
- Make your intentions clear and try to make eye contact with the helm of motor vessels
- Clipper services rarely spend long at a pier. Let them leave the pier rather than attempt to go around them while they are stopped



Westminster

The river between Westminster Bridge and Charing Cross Rail Bridge is extremely busy with tourist and commuter traffic often causing rough water conditions. There are three piers that require particular attention:

Embankment Pier

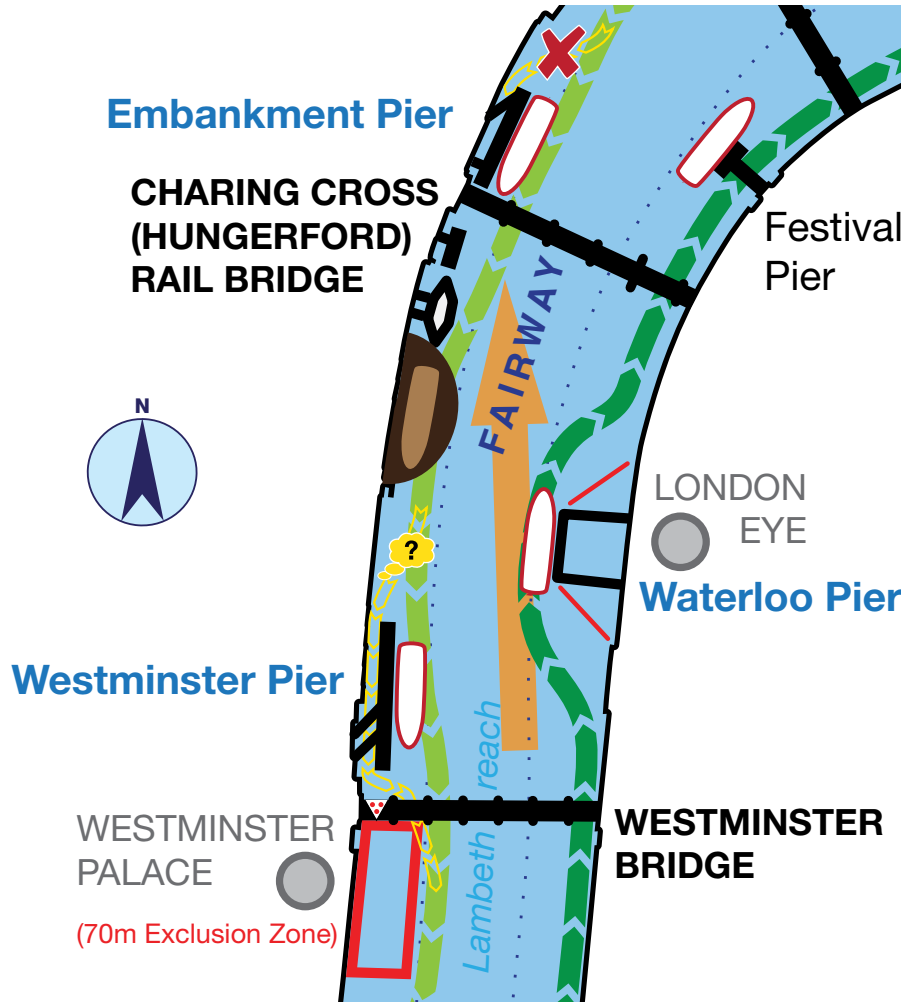
Never go inside Embankment Pier.

Waterloo Pier

There are barriers to prevent vessels from going inside/under Waterloo Pier. This is a very busy Pier. Paddlers should wait until they are certain that it is safe to go around the outside then tuck back in immediately. When waiting for the **Fairway** to clear, be aware of the **tidal set** on the ebb.

Westminster Pier

A decision whether or not to go inside Westminster Pier should only be considered by the most experienced paddlers or leaders. If in doubt go outside but with extreme caution as this pier is very busy.




Bankside Pier


The river narrows a little between Blackfriars and London Bridges. As a result the tidal stream increases in strength here which can also increase wave height.

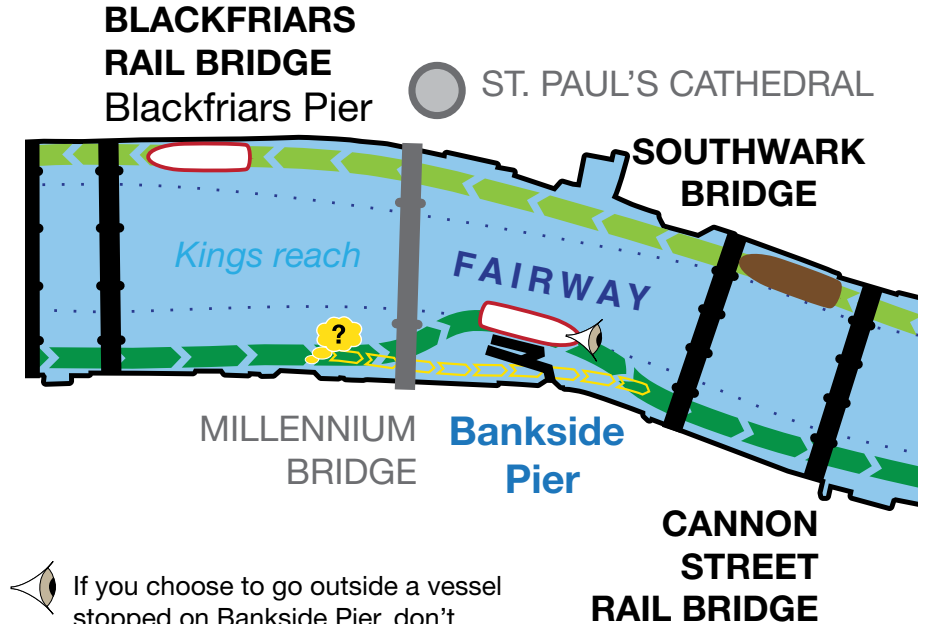
Bankside Pier


Due to the pier not being in line with the river flow or the bank, the river ‘funnels’ behind Bankside Pier so is especially hazardous.


Going outside Bankside Pier is recommended and extreme care should be taken if choosing to go inside instead. Inexperienced paddlers should not go inside.

 An early decision should be made on which line the group should take, especially on the ebb tide. You should make your intentions very clear to other vessels – which may be approaching from behind

 Remember that Clipper services will not stop at the pier for long so it is generally best to wait for them



 If you choose to go outside a vessel stopped on Bankside Pier, don't cut-in closely across her bows once passed. Continue well past the bows and if possible make eye contact with the helm to ensure that they have seen you before returning to the bank

 If you decide to go behind the pier, passenger vessels may have even less chance of seeing you as you reappear from behind it



HMS Belfast and the Upper pool

The Upper Pool, between London and Tower Bridges is another particularly busy section with a lot of tourist and commuter river traffic often causing rough water conditions. It requires good judgement and caution to navigate, especially outbound.



- 1** Just below London Bridge the effect of the old bridge foundations on the river bed can cause large wave height, particularly on the last of the ebb tide.

Tower Pier

This is an extremely busy pier and a lot of commercial vessels cross the river between Tower Pier and London Bridge City Pier.

Paddlers should go behind/under Tower Pier if the water level allows.

HMS Belfast

It is recommended that paddlers also go inside HMS Belfast although there are pros and cons. Make your decision early, especially on the ebb tide and clearly show your intentions to other vessels.

? Inside HMS Belfast?

- Less wash
- Less traffic
- Easier to recover to shore

? Outside HMS Belfast?

- More easily avoids moorings below
- More visible to other river traffic

Lower Tideway

The Lower Tideway is the part of river below Tower Bridge out to the estuary, although in practical terms paddlers rarely venture much below the Thames Barrier.

The river is less commercially orientated above the Barrier but regular commuter services do still run. The river's edge is mostly walls and wharves (a hint of the industrial past) and the river is now much wider and more open. The water can get very rough and places to get out are still few and far between. This section is less suited to recreational activities, particularly in open boats and SUP may not paddle on this section at all.

Other paddled (and rowing) boats are able to use the Lower Tideway but more consideration must be made to the probable conditions and there are two different navigation patterns (see diagram right):

- **Col Regs** apply to all vessels except rowing boats
- **The Rowing Code** (a.k.a. working the slacks) this alternative navigation pattern only applies to rowing boats in the **Lower Rowing Code Area**

Essential details on how the Rowing Code works can be found on [pages 36–39](#) and the full Rowing Code is available on the PLA leisure users website www.boatingonthethames.co.uk/Rowing



Lower Rowing Code Area

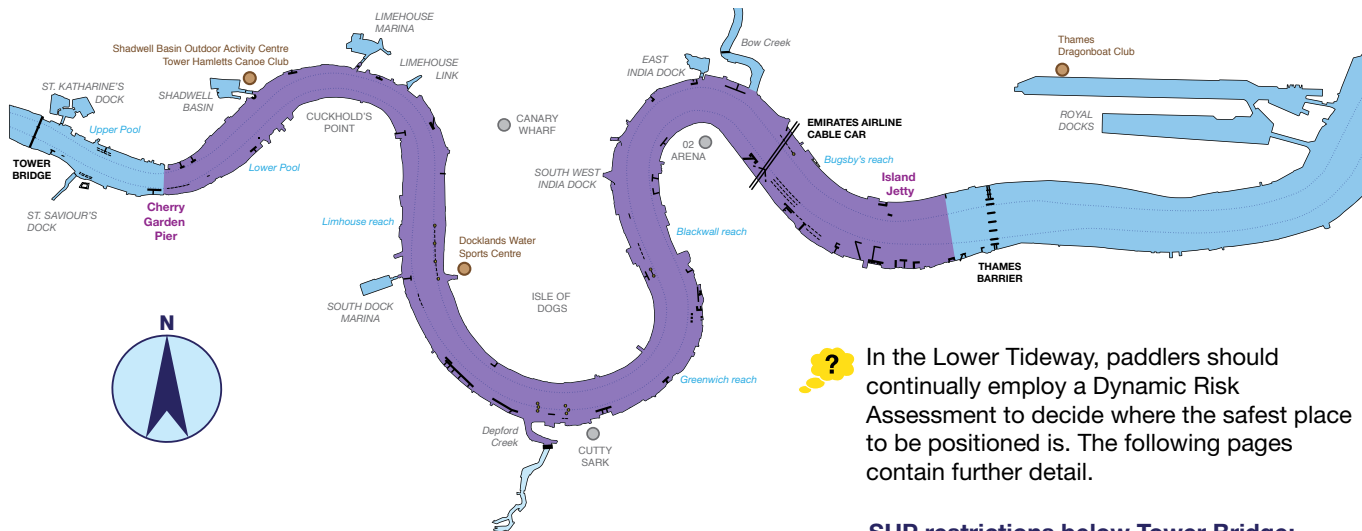
Cherry Garden Pier to Island Jetty

When navigating *against* the tidal stream, rowers should work the slacks in the **Inshore Zones**

When navigating *with* the tidal stream, rowers must use the **Fairway** and **Col Regs** (Rule 9a) apply.

Paddlers do not work the slacks so must be particularly aware of rowing boats that have to and adjust their group shape accordingly – [see page 39](#).

- Paddlers should navigate to the **starboard** side of the river at all times, **regardless of what the tide is doing**. Paddlers should aim to be as close to the **starboard** bank as is safe and practicable – travelling in either direction
- Where water levels and width allows, always pass inside/ under all piers as a tight group and ensure that the helm of any vessel can see you before returning to the shore (**starboard**)

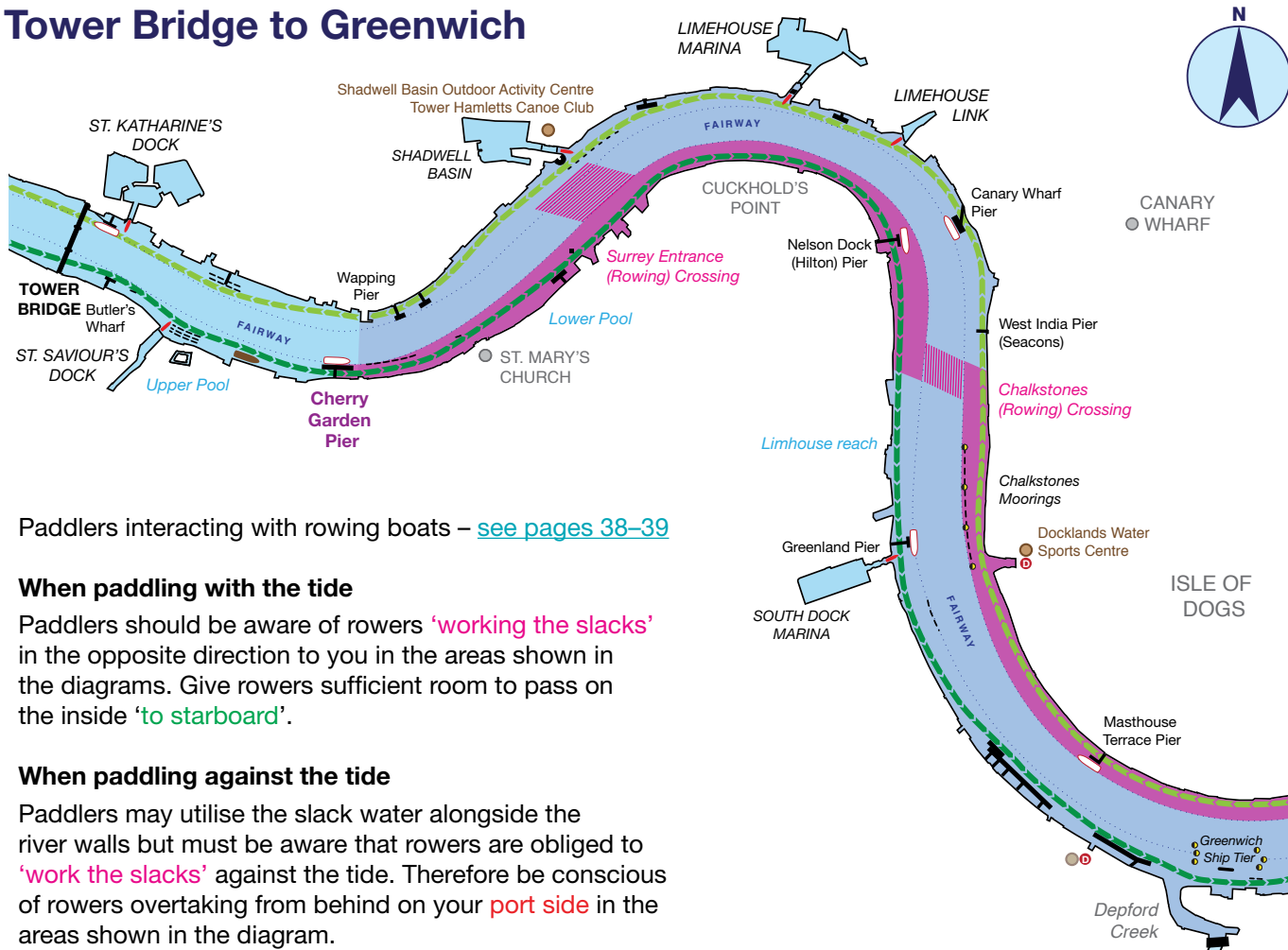


? In the Lower Tideway, paddlers should continually employ a Dynamic Risk Assessment to decide where the safest place to be positioned is. The following pages contain further detail.

SUP restrictions below Tower Bridge:

- **SUP is not permitted below Tower Bridge**

Tower Bridge to Greenwich



Paddlers interacting with rowing boats – [see pages 38–39](#)

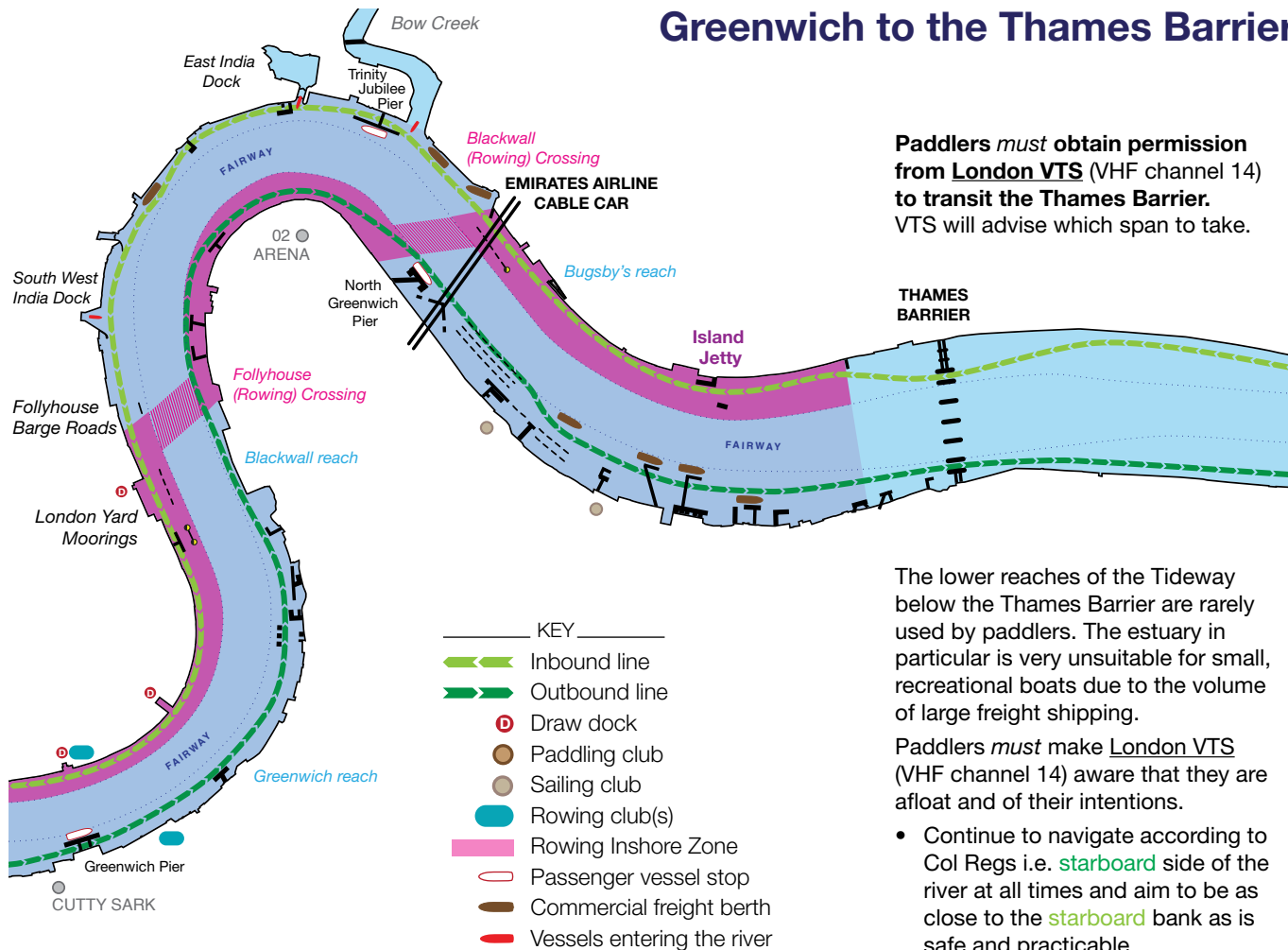
When paddling with the tide

Paddlers should be aware of rowers ‘working the slacks’ in the opposite direction to you in the areas shown in the diagrams. Give rowers sufficient room to pass on the inside ‘to starboard’.

When paddling against the tide

Paddlers may utilise the slack water alongside the river walls but must be aware that rowers are obliged to ‘work the slacks’ against the tide. Therefore be conscious of rowers overtaking from behind on your port side in the areas shown in the diagram.

Greenwich to the Thames Barrier



Paddlers *must* obtain permission from **London VTS** (VHF channel 14) to transit the Thames Barrier. VTS will advise which span to take.

The lower reaches of the Tideway below the Thames Barrier are rarely used by paddlers. The estuary in particular is very unsuitable for small, recreational boats due to the volume of large freight shipping.

Paddlers *must* make **London VTS** (VHF channel 14) aware that they are afloat and of their intentions.

- Continue to navigate according to Col Regs i.e. **starboard** side of the river at all times and aim to be as close to the **starboard** bank as is safe and practicable

The Port of London Authority (PLA)

London River House, Royal Pier Road, Gravesend, Kent DA12 2BG

Head Office: 020 7743 7909 Richmond Lock: 020 8940 0634

www.boatingonthethames.co.uk

www.pla.co.uk

London Vessel Traffic Services (VTS)

Telephone 020 8855 0315

RNLI

Chiswick www.chiswicklifeboat.org.uk

Tower www.towernli.moonfruit.com

British Canoeing

www.britishcanoeing.org.uk

Great Britain Outrigger Canoe Association

www.gboca.org

Thames Regional Rowing Council (TRRC)

www.thames-rrc.org

Thames Water

www.thameswater.co.uk

The Environment Agency

www.gov.uk/government/organisations/environment-agency

www.gov.uk/check-river-conditions-and-closures/river-thames





We hope that you have found this guide useful and informative. If you have any further questions regarding the Paddling Code or have any queries or suggestions regarding anything in this document, please contact the PLA or British Canoeing. Additional copies are available from the PLA or you can download a pdf version from their website. See opposite for contact details and web addresses.

This booklet is a new publication by the PLA.

With thanks to the contributors to this the first (2017) edition:

Port of London Authority, British Canoeing, Great Britain Outrigger Canoe Association, London Kayak Company, Active360, British Dragon Boat Association, RNLI.

Original photography by PLA, Todd-White Art Photography, London Kayak Company, Active360, Neil Pickford, Ollie Harding.

Original illustrations by Neil Pickford (Tideway diagrams based on data supplied by PLA Hydrographic services)

Designed & typeset by Neil Pickford – neilpickford@mac.com

Printed by ft solutions – info@ftsolutions.co.uk



