



## NAVIGATION FACT FILE 5/9

*“The Thames is an international landmark and an invaluable asset for all who use it or live by its banks.”*



**ENVIRONMENT  
AGENCY**

"We also receive valuable guidance from the Thames Regional Fisheries Advisory Committee. Membership is drawn from a wide range of local and national bodies. Meetings of this committee are open to the public."

# the environment agency



The Environment Agency for England and Wales is one of the most powerful environmental regulators in the world. It provides a comprehensive approach to the protection and management of the environment, emphasising prevention, education and vigorous enforcement wherever necessary. The Agency's creation on the 1st April 1996 was a major step, merging the expertise of the National Rivers Authority, Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Pollution, the Waste Regulation Authorities and several smaller units from the Department of the Environment.

## Thames Region

England and Wales are divided into eight Environment Agency regions. Thames Region is responsible for the protection of a 13,000 square km area of great diversity. The Region extends from Cirencester in the west to Southend in the east and from Luton in the north to the Surrey Downs in the south. Because this area contains a fifth of the nation's population, development pressures and demands on natural resources, particularly water, are greater than elsewhere in England and Wales. Thames Region is sub-

divided into three areas (West, North East and South East) which are the first point of contact for local issues.

Navigation, the subject of this leaflet, is one of our key responsibilities. The others - Conservation, Water Quality, Fisheries, Flood Defence, Recreation, Water Resources, Waste Regulation and Integrated Pollution Control are covered in separate leaflets.

In reality, we can't treat these responsibilities separately. Whatever we do must be done in the context of the whole catchment. This means that the work of one specialist department can only be effectively carried out in collaboration with others. (So it's a good idea to read all the leaflets, and not just this one. In that way you'll get a better understanding of what we are trying to do.)

The collaboration extends well outside the Environment Agency. In Navigation, for instance, we work closely with people and organisations who want to maintain and improve navigation on the rivers of our region.

But the most important collaboration is with individual members of the public. The media - newspapers, magazines, TV and radio - help by keeping people informed about navigation issues, but only public

opinion can ensure that the water environment continues to be given the care and attention it needs. That is why your interest and support is so critical.

## Some of our external 'partners'

(In addition to ones mentioned above.)

- Royal Yachting Association
- Association of Thames Yacht Clubs and other boating groups
- British Canoe Union
- Amateur Rowing Association and Thames Rowing Council
- British Waterways and other navigation authorities
- Inland Waterways Association
- River User Groups
- British Marine Industries Federation and Thames Boating Trades Association
- Marine Safety Committees and Marine Safety Agency
- English Nature and Countryside Commission - both statutory advisers to the Government
- National Trust

*"For many centuries the Thames Navigation has been regulated by Crown and Parliament."*

### A river of history

Today, the River Thames is among the most popular pleasure-boating waterways in the country.



However, recreation wasn't always the main reason for boating. In the past, the Thames had more serious business to handle. For the Romans it was a valuable trade route. The Saxons sailed up it to establish their settlements. The Danes used it for their raiding expeditions.

Then, for most of the next thousand or so years, the Thames became the pre-eminent commercial thoroughfare of south central England. It brought the produce of the up-river farms down to London. And it brought the products of the city back to the country. Because the navigation was so important, any interference with it was strictly controlled. Before the Conquest, Edward the Confessor's 'Ancient Laws' emphasised the pre-eminence of navigation rights on the Thames as a Royal river and demanded the removal of obstructions. Down the centuries through Royal Prerogative and then Acts of Parliaments the Thames navigation rights continue to today.

### All change

The coming of the railway in the middle of the last century drastically reduced the role of the Thames as a commercial highway between the country and London (although the tidal Thames grew in importance as an international port). So far as the inland transport of cargo was concerned, the railway was quicker and cheaper.

But the railway also carried people, making the whole length of the river accessible to thousands of would-be navigators (of one kind or another) from London and its suburbs, indeed from towns and cities all over the country.

In the last 100 years, as working hours shortened and holiday times lengthened, and as both rail and road transport improved, people became increasingly able to savour the delights available on and around the river. Yachtsmen, oarsmen, punters (in the literal sense), people who just like messing

about in boats and people who just like sitting in boats while someone - or something - propels them, were all able to do their thing on the river.

*"We want to make boating on the Thames more enjoyable and safer for all."*

### Thousands of boats

The river's popularity with amateur inland sailors has continued to grow, until today no fewer than 21,000 boats are registered with the Agency's Thames Region. Two thirds of them are motorised craft. And there are another 8,000 craft visiting the Thames from other waterways (they only need a short-stay certificate).



Registration is important - and compulsory! Every pleasure boat, including inflatables and tenders ('tenders' are small boats towed or carried by another larger boat) must be registered with Thames Region before being used in any way on the River Thames upstream of Teddington. Moreover, every boat with an engine must have a licence to navigate. These licences are issued free to registered boats.

Without control, there would be conflict and danger. Just think- 30,000 pleasure boats on 217 kilometres of navigable river - about 7 metres per boat, but fortunately not all at the same time!

### Boating as part of the balance

As well as the boats and their users the Thames attracts hundreds of thousands of other river lovers and users. Walkers, strollers, naturalists, people who just sit and watch, anglers and tourists from all over the world. Just to our locks, apart from visitors on boats, seven million visits are made each year.

The River has many vital practical uses. It is essential for land drainage, for irrigation, as a source of drinking water, and as a disposal system for treated outfalls from sewage works.

It is home to a wonderful variety of wildlife.

It is also an international landmark - one of the most famous rivers in the world, and part of our national heritage, as well as a valuable community asset for those living on or near its banks.

So, looking after the Thames is an immense privilege and an extremely demanding one. Not surprisingly for such an important asset, a management responsibility emerged over the centuries, mainly but not wholly concerned with navigation. The Agency's Thames Region has inherited this responsibility. Our task is to maintain it for today's needs, adding where necessary but above all conserving and protecting it for present and future generations.

## The authority

As the navigation authority for the River Thames between Cricklade near the source and Teddington Lock where the river becomes tidal, the Agency is responsible for maintaining the navigation rights, the locks and weirs, providing a wide range of services to river users and for managing the river on behalf of the whole community.

The task of balancing all the varied needs of all the different river-users lies at the heart of that responsibility. Like you, and every other river user, we want our rivers to remain in as unspoilt a condition as possible, and we want them to be shared, enjoyed and valued by present and future generations.

Among our tasks in the Navigation Service we encourage boat-users to play their part in creating and preserving an acceptable balance. Boat owners and users have to abide by rules governing safety, hygiene, respect for other users, and care for the environment.

*"We have produced leaflets which give useful advice and information of direct interest to every river user."*

## Responsible enjoyment rules



In brief we want all river users - whether on boats or not - to recognise and be considerate for the legitimate needs of others, to respect the rights of private landowners, and to care for the river environment.

No-one would openly deny those ideals. But in order to implement them in every day situations, a number of rules have been agreed, some of them in the form of laws (which the Environment Agency is empowered by Parliament to promote and enforce). Most of the rules and laws are obvious common-sense.

Many of the controls are directly concerned with safety. It is not simply a question of whether a boat is river-worthy or not. No boat should ever be a cause of danger to others. The truth is that if a boat were to sink in mid-channel because it was not river-worthy, and no other vessels were in the vicinity, that would be a tragedy to those sailing in it, but no-one else need be seriously affected. If a boat caught fire in a crowded lock, that could be a tragedy not only for those in it, but for all the other

people in the nearby boats. Fire, often following an explosion, is a frequent cause of disaster. Petrol-engine launches if not properly maintained and serviced are at great risk of a fire or explosion. We must do everything we can by education and by law to reduce those risks.

Other rules relate to the environment and consideration for others, and enforce procedures that prevent pollution (from on-board lavatories, for instance). No-one should any longer think that the Thames is a personal dustbin.

## Read all about it

We have produced leaflets which give useful advice and information of direct interest to every river-user - and summarise the rules which apply on the river.

The leaflets give succinct but comprehensive descriptions of the needs and likely problems of all the major types of river user. You are likely to be familiar with your own rights, aspirations and problems. In the heat of the moment, you may not always appreciate the rights etc of other people (who may just happen to be feeling the heat at the same time).

A familiar situation, which can easily lead to hard feelings and perhaps worse, is conflict between anglers and sailors. It so happens that some anglers choose to sit where they are hidden from the river by bankside vegetation. Assume that an angler has just felt a bite and is about to play the fish. Assume that a sailing dinghy is making a particularly difficult tack. Inevitably, the dinghy hits the line - with dire results. Who is to blame? Neither of them and both of them! Care, alertness and tolerances on both sides would have prevented the accident.

## Convenient addresses

The leaflets also contain many useful addresses - where to launch your boat, where to moor it and where to pump out your sewage. They also give a table of the distances and measurement of the headways of bridges for the whole length of the navigable river from Lechlade to Teddington.

## Boat Safety

Licences for motor launches are granted on condition that the boats meet our requirements for construction and safety equipment. In co-operation with British Waterways, other navigation authorities, representatives of the marine industry and not least boat users representatives we have produced a common set of safety standards for boats on inland waterways.

From 1997 onwards, depending on the age of the boat, a boat safety examination to check compliance with the requirements will be needed every four years before the boat can be licensed. Booklets are available giving details of the requirements.

## We patrol the river

Our patrol launches can make spot checks on all vessels on the rivers in our Region that come within our authority - and generally enforce the rules of the river, including speed limits. We have 14 such vessels, all of them purpose-built and easily recognisable, even by those new to the River ( we like people to know that we are around!)

But regulation is only part of their duty. The main aim of our patrol crews is to help and advise anyone about the river, and particularly navigators, whenever help or advice is needed.



## Navigation means more than that

Our work extends beyond what the word 'Navigation' is normally taken to mean. We are, in fact, responsible for managing the rivers.

- We operate locks - and our lock keepers have the task of guiding craft safely on their way.
- Our Inspectors and lock keepers have a further vital job. By the control and operation of weir gates, water is held back by the weirs to levels needed for navigation and abstractors, nearly always the water companies. Without weirs holding the water back, the Thames in the summer would only be about two feet deep, compared with the average present depth of eight feet.
- Our patrol boats and our lock and weir keepers have to be constantly on the alert for obstructions in the river - which could be anything from a wrecked boat to a overhanging tree that looks likely to fall into the water at any moment.
- We have to watch over regattas held on the rivers in our Region. Henley Royal Regatta is just one of them, the best known, but there are up to 400 others, all of them requiring our supervision and guidance.



### Levels of service

So far we've talked a lot about the responsibilities of river users and the rules and regulations they must follow.

The traffic, however, is two-way. We in the Environment Agency have duties and responsibilities to you. A leaflet entitled 'Navigation Levels of Service' aims to list the ways in which we aim to help you, and

defines the level of service that we try to achieve. You may want to have your own copy. If you write to us, we will send you one.

Here are examples of the levels of service we aim to achieve:

- We will provide staff to help river users through each lock.
- From April to October, we will provide bulk water supplies on average every ten miles and sewage disposal points on average every 15 miles.
- We will inspect all hire launches once a year.
- We will inspect the River by patrol launch and report and/or deal with all relevant issues in accordance with the following minimum criteria:
  - i) Ingelsham - Oxford - once per fortnight
  - ii) Oxford - Teddington - once per week
- We will attend all major organised river events or activities ... to ensure optimum benefits to all river users.
- A recorded 'Navigation Information' service is available at all times on **0118 953 5520**

### Settling differences

Rivers have always been a source of contention. From the very earliest times, mill-owners have complained (or worse) about navigators who have complained about fishermen who have etc etc. Disputes of all kinds are still common between one or other group of water users.

A particular common form of argument is between riparian owners and boat owners because, as there is generally no right of navigation on the tributaries of the Thames, the permission of the riparian owner is needed before the river can be used for boating or canoeing.

We are more than happy to offer our expertise, experience - and independence - to help reach agreements in any kind of disputes over competing rights or interests.



In fact we see this intermediary role as one of our most important functions, one we are uniquely suited to fill. We are, after all, in the business of establishing a workable balance between all river users.

### Searching for better ways

Research and development within the Environment Agency is a national responsibility - with every Region benefiting from the work. R&D covers two main areas: management and technology.

'Management' research covers, for instance, the development of monitoring and survey techniques that will help us to improve the facilities we offer and the levels of service.

'Technology' research includes the development of environmentally acceptable boat propulsion, bank protection systems, better engineering methods for navigation installations and design standards generally.

### The next thousand years

As we said earlier, the Thames has been a much used, much loved asset for a thousand years.

The next thousand years starts now.

## MANAGEMENT AND CONTACTS:

The Environment Agency delivers a service to its customers, with the emphasis on authority and accountability at the most local level possible. It aims to be cost-effective and efficient and to offer the best service and value for money.

Head Office is responsible for overall policy and relationships with national bodies including Government.

Rio House, Waterside Drive, Aztec West, Almondsbury, Bristol BS12 4UD  
Tel: 01454 624 400 Fax: 01454 624 409

### ENVIRONMENT AGENCY REGIONAL OFFICES

#### ANGLIAN

Kingfisher House  
Goldhay Way  
Orton Goldhay  
Peterborough PE2 5ZR  
Tel: 01733 371 811  
Fax: 01733 231 840

#### MIDLANDS

Sapphire East  
550 Streetsbrook Road  
Solihull B91 1QT  
Tel: 0121 711 2324  
Fax: 0121 711 5824

#### NORTH EAST

Rivers House  
21 Park Square South  
Leeds LS1 2QG  
Tel: 0113 244 0191  
Fax: 0113 246 1889

#### NORTH WEST

Richard Fairclough House  
Knutsford Road  
Warrington WA4 1HG  
Tel: 01925 653 999  
Fax: 01925 415 961

#### SOUTHERN

Guildbourne House  
Chatsworth Road  
Worthing  
West Sussex BN11 1LD  
Tel: 01903 832 000  
Fax: 01903 821 832

#### SOUTH WEST

Manley House  
Kestrel Way  
Exeter EX2 7LQ  
Tel: 01392 444 000  
Fax: 01392 444 238

#### THAMES

Kings Meadow House  
Kings Meadow Road  
Reading RG1 8DQ  
Tel: 0118 953 5000  
Fax: 0118 950 0388

#### WELSH

Rivers House/Plas-yr-Afon  
St Mellons Business Park  
St Mellons  
Cardiff CF3 0LT  
Tel: 01222 770 088  
Fax: 01222 798 555



For general enquiries please call your local Environment Agency office. If you are unsure who to contact, or which is your local office, please call our general enquiry line.

**ENVIRONMENT AGENCY  
GENERAL ENQUIRY LINE**

**0645 333 111**

The 24-hour emergency hotline number for reporting all environmental incidents relating to air, land and water.

**ENVIRONMENT AGENCY  
EMERGENCY HOTLINE**

**0800 80 70 60**



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