

BRIEFING NOTE: USING CANOES & SMALL UNPOWERED BOATS ON THE INLAND WATERWAYS

There is nothing quite like messing about in boats, and small boats such as rowing boats, dinghies, canoes or stand-up paddleboards are a great and affordable way to get afloat. It's also a great way to introduce children and young people to sport and the great outdoors. This briefing note sets out advice from The Inland Waterways Association to people using small unpowered boats, gives details of where further information can be found, and also gives recommendations for users of powered craft when meeting smaller boats.

How to get afloat

On most inland waterways you must register or license any boat, including small unpowered craft, with the navigation authority responsible for the waterway you intend to use. Navigation authorities typically offer licences for different time periods, often from as little as one day, through to a full year. Membership of some canoeing, rowing and sailing organisations includes a licence for access to some waterways. See 'Further information' below for further details of specific waterways and navigation authorities.

Insurance

Whilst most navigation authorities don't insist on insurance for unpowered boats, it is strongly recommended. Insurance for unpowered boats is readily and cheaply available and is often included with governing body memberships.

Water Safety

IWA strongly recommends the wearing of personal flotation devices when using small boats on the inland waterways. Even if you are a strong swimmer, cold water shock can seriously affect your breathing and movement, and can occur when falling into water as warm as 15 °C. The risk is significant most of the year as on many rivers the temperature never exceeds 12°C. A buoyancy aid will help keep you afloat, while a properly fitted life jacket is designed to turn your body over and keep your face clear of the water, even if you are unconscious or injured.

Canoeing

You usually need to register or license a canoe with the navigation authority. If you're an individual member of British Canoeing this provides a licence for 4500km of waterways in Britain, including navigations operated by Canal & River Trust (CRT) and the Environment Agency (EA).

British Canoeing is the national governing body for paddle-sports in the UK. Formerly known as the British Canoe Union, Canoe England and GB Canoeing, they are now one unified organisation, which also incorporates – Canoe Wales, Canoe Association of Northern Ireland and Scottish Canoe Association. Further information on the four organisations can be found here: www.britishcanoeing.org.uk. Membership of each also provides civil liability insurance.

Rowing

On most waterways you will need to register or license smaller craft such as rowing boats and skiffs with the navigation authority. Rowing Clubs affiliated to British Rowing are able

to purchase reduced price EA Boat Registrations through British Rowing. British Rowing has a block licensing scheme with CRT. Membership of each also provides civil liability insurance. For further information see www.britishrowing.org/clubs/ea-boat-registration

If you are interested in rowing and sculling as a sport look on the British Rowing website (www.britishrowing.org) to find your nearest club. The website also gives useful information about different types of rowing and ways to get involved. Many rowing clubs are ready to welcome juniors into their membership and teach them how to scull. It is only when they reach sixteen that they are introduced to the art of rowing with sweep oars as rowing at a young age can cause an imbalance in the body's development. There are opportunities for smaller individuals to learn the art of helming and coxing crews. Junior coaches at clubs are well aware of these issues and will ensure that all of their charges are capable scullers who will develop into capable oarsmen or oarswomen. To take up the sport of rowing each aspiring club member must be able to show evidence that they can swim in rowing kit (singlet and shorts) a distance of 50 metres as minimum.

Sailing

Whilst sailing is not generally feasible on most canals, it is popular on the larger rivers as well as reservoirs and lakes. On most waterways you will need to register or license sailing dinghies with the navigation authority. It is worth noting that the increase in the cost of a licence if using an outboard motor is considerable. There are many sailing clubs around the country, many are affiliated to the Royal Yachting Association and further information can be found on their website, www.rya.org.uk

Paddleboarding

Stand-up Paddleboarding is an increasingly popular way to get afloat affordably. Many stand-up paddle boards are inflatable which makes them very portable. They are easy to get on and off the water and access is available at many points inaccessible to other users.

Sources of advice for stand-up paddle boarders include British Canoeing www.britishcanoeing.org.uk and the British Stand Up Paddle Association www.bsupa.org.uk/. BSUPA aims to protect and promote the sport of paddle boarding in the UK by providing safe entry routes and sustainable ongoing club activities for SUPers, alongside quality and participation-rich events for all abilities.

Access to navigations and other rivers

There is a right of access on most rivers and some canals maintained as navigations in England and Wales, and access is permitted on most others, subject to a payment of a licence fee, registration or toll where required. However, a public right or permitted access on other non-tidal waterways cannot be assumed. Both the bed and riverbanks will be owned by someone, and technically their permission is required before accessing the river. Some landowners, especially public sector bodies and charities, may welcome canoeists and other unpowered small boats, but many will not. Where navigations have been abandoned it can be unclear if there is still a public right of access.

The situation in Scotland is different; here there is a responsible right of access to most land and inland waters. Throughout the UK there is generally a public right of access on all tidal waters, sometimes subject to payment of harbour dues and/or restrictions by the Ministry of Defence. The tidal limits on coastal waterways are shown on Ordnance Survey maps. There may also be a right of navigation further upstream (to the original tidal limit) if a tidal river has been impounded.

IWA supports increased access to navigation of rivers by smaller craft where a right of navigation exists or where navigation has traditionally been allowed, such as the upper reaches of the River Severn between Pool Quay and Stourport, and the river Wye downstream of Hay-on-Wye. IWA also encourages all landowners to permit the use of canoes and other small unpowered craft on all rivers and water bodies wherever possible.

Navigation Advice

Keep a good lookout at all times and navigate on the right hand (starboard) side of the waterway at all times. Observe where the main river traffic flows are and position yourself well away from them. Larger boats will usually be near the centre of the waterway where it's deepest. If you are in this position return as soon as possible to the right-hand side of the river and allow other boats to pass.

It is also helpful to be aware of the effect that the passage of a larger boat will have on the water, e.g., under currents and wash, as it passes a smaller boat.

Be aware that larger powered boats can take considerable distances to stop.

Large powered boats often have restricted forward vision and users of small craft should be aware that someone steering a large powered boat may simply not see them ahead. They may also not hear shouts or whistles due to the noise of the engine.

Advice to users of Larger Powered Craft

The best advice to steerers of motorised boats when approaching smaller unpowered craft ahead of you is to slow down and stick to the middle of the channel. A long single blast of the horn should be given to alert the smaller craft of your presence and keep a steady pace as you pass through.

There may be signs warning of areas where canoe, rowing or sailing clubs are based at the furthest extent of the club's area (and where these don't exist IWA would encourage clubs to work with the navigation authority to install such signs).

Keep an eye open for notifications from navigation authorities advising that organised events by unpowered craft are due to take place so that you can know when to expect to come across unpowered craft in greater numbers.

Navigation Structures

Unpowered boats should usually be carried around locks, weirs and sluices, and portage points are often provided to assist with getting boats in and out of the water. Some locks and weirs, especially on the Thames, have rollers which can be used to get small unpowered boats from one level to the other. When portaging is not practical navigation authorities can permit the use of locks.

On many man-made navigations, an additional feature for users of small unpowered craft are canal tunnels. Canal & River Trust allows canoes and other small unpowered boats to use some of their shorter tunnels and a list can be found here:

canalrivertrust.org.uk/media/library/1424.pdf

More detailed information about navigating tunnels safely, by boats of all types, can be found in [IWA's Briefing Note on Navigating Canal Tunnels Safely](#)

Further Information about Licensing Requirements and Navigation Authorities

Canal & River Trust operates most of the canals in England and Wales and some rivers such as the Bristol Avon, Kennet, Lee, Severn, Soar, Trent, Ure, Witham and the Yorkshire Ouse. Annual licences are available, and visitor licences can be bought for one day, one week or one month. Thirty Day Explorer tickets allow non-consecutive days to be used. Members of British Canoeing (formerly Canoe England) and Canoe Wales can use one boat on CRT waterways as part of their yearly membership fee. For more information and applying for a licence, see www.canalrivertrust.org.uk/boating/licensing

The Broads Authority looks after the Norfolk and Suffolk Broads, and adjacent waters. On these waterways you will need to purchase a toll. Short visit tolls are available for periods of up to 28 days, or you can purchase an annual toll. Members of British Canoeing (formerly Canoe England) can use one boat on Broads Authority waterways as part of their yearly membership fee. For further information see www.broads-authority.gov.uk/boating/owning-a-boat/tolls

The Environment Agency is responsible for navigation on the Thames, Medway, and the rivers of East Anglia. Access to the Royal Military Canal is also available for unpowered boats. Charges vary across these waterways. In order to use a boat on an EA waterway, you must register it for the waterway you wish to use and pay the relevant fee. Members of British Canoeing (formerly Canoe England) and Canoe Wales can use one boat on most Environment Agency waterways as part of their yearly membership fee. Members of a British Rowing affiliated club can register their boats with British Rowing at a reduced rate. This should be done through their club. More information can be found here: www.gov.uk/register-a-boat/who-to-contact

Essex Waterways Ltd (a subsidiary of The Inland Waterways Association) manages and maintains the Chelmer and Blackwater Navigation which connects Chelmsford with the tidal estuary of the river Blackwater at Heybridge Basin. Canoeists are welcome on the Chelmer & Blackwater Navigation although it is not covered by the British Canoeing arrangement and a separate licence must be obtained. Camping is available at Hoe Mill Lock adjacent to the Navigation. Licences are available for a single day, one week, one month or a full year and there are discounts for multiple non powered craft registering together. Licences can be obtained from the lockkeeper or kiosk at Heybridge Basin, the Paper Mill office, or online. [Further information can be found here](#)

Scottish Canals – In Scotland there is a responsible right of access to most land and inland waters, giving a wide range of rivers, lochs and sea lochs suitable for canoeing. Access rights extend to non-motorised water-based activities such as canoeing, rafting and rowing. So far as the waterways operated by Scottish Canals are concerned (Forth and Clyde Canal, Union Canal, Crinan Canal, Caledonian Canal and the Monkland Canal), access for non-powered boats is free, but they do encourage people to register. Registration is voluntary but highly recommended, particularly on the Caledonian Canal. Further information including safety advice and how to register can be found here:

<https://www.scottishcanals.co.uk/activities/paddling/>

Other navigations – IWA's Waterways Directory includes contact details for navigation authorities for all navigable and formerly navigable canals and all rivers that were made navigable or used for inland navigation in their natural state. Details of the content of the directory and the rationale for inclusion of waterways are provided in a comprehensive set of accompanying explanatory notes. Information on other rivers suitable for canoeing and paddleboarding can be found on the [British Canoeing website](#).