

Information paper to UMBEG, 23rd October 2014.

The River Isis and Oxford college rowing

Themes:

- To inform UMBEG about Oxford college rowing use of the river
- To discuss OTTA moored narrowboat as an example case

Background

The River Thames, or Isis (as it is named from the Head of the River to Iffley Lock), is heavily used by rowers from both the city and the University colleges:

- 36 college boat clubs, with approx. 3000 members per year
- 4 locally based boat clubs (City, Falcon, Academicals and Oxford Adaptives)
- Occasional visiting semi-local clubs and crews
- Experience levels from hundreds of novices to the occasional Olympian, juniors to seniors and veterans
- Boat classes from single scullers to racing eights
- Particularly crowded during OU 8-week terms (Oct-Nov, Jan-Mar, May-June)
- Primarily used by students during weekday early mornings (sunrise to 8:30am), weekends, and in the summer from 5pm to sunset. Non-students have similar times due to work commitments, and the local non-student clubs have Sunday mornings from 8am to 1pm left free for them by arrangement. *Note that many of these training times are during half-light/dawn/dusk.*
- By common agreement no rowers use coaching launches, so aid and guidance must come from the towpath.

All the rowing clubs use the river for competitions. Within the colleges this takes three main forms:

- Low-key timed 'head' or processional races between October and March
- Some side-by-side regattas (typically four a year) of variable standard
- Bumping races, one regatta in late spring ("Torpids") and one at the end of May ("Eights Week"), each taking 4 days (Wednesday to Saturday inclusive). Each is preceded by a qualifying processional race on the previous Friday.

The bumps events have considerable historic importance to the University and its colleges, and indeed celebrate their 200th anniversary this coming summer. They attract a large number of student competitors (approx. 1,500 per regatta), lots of affiliated supporters, alumni, curious passers-by and tourists. It is no overstatement to say that these races, with their unusual format, are world renowned.

The format is unusual: 14 boats race at a time, 'winning' by catching and making contact with the boat racing immediately ahead of them. Those who 'win' may pull out of the race early, coming to a stop anywhere on one of the adjacent banks. Races have brief temporary river closures agreed with the Environment Agency, with time for river traffic to move every half hour or so between divisions. Nevertheless there are serious safety implications attached to the event for the (largely student) organisers and the (non-student) Senior Umpires. [REDACTED] who have been invited to UMBEG today, are the [REDACTED] from the six-strong team responsible for ensuring safe plans are laid and carried out, and the races started in an orderly and timely fashion.

Current issues

As UMBEG is aware, there are significant numbers of itinerant (but recently fairly static) boats moored on this stretch of the river. Some are lived in, some only visited at weekends, and they are of varying states of occupation and repair. Many are moored in areas which cause safety obstructions during our races, particularly during bumps. For some events we are granted a Harbour Master's Notice by the Environment Agency, prohibiting mooring in selected areas. While we find this extremely helpful, we are increasingly concerned that this will be ineffective in persuading some boats to move on. If they fail to do so, particularly between Donnington Bridge and Iffley Lock for our bumps events, it may not be possible to run an event safely. Too many boats near Folly Bridge also cause potentially disruptive congestion

There are also safety hazards from moored boats during training:

- Double-parking obstructs the already narrow watercourse, especially during crowded training sessions.
- Driving poles into the towpath damages the surface and recently repaired edges, causing costly repairs and hazards to bicycles (both rowing coaches and commuters.)
- Access to the river for throwlines is impeded: this is our only practical means for a coach to rescue a crew in difficulty or an ejected rower.

This paper is presented to UMBEG as a confidential document, representing the views of two senior umpires and is intended to be used by group members only, as an aid to free and frank discussion and the formulation of policy.

A few moored boats is not an issue: a continuous line of wide or double-parked boats is.

We are also concerned, both from personal experience and reports from college coaches, that some of the people either living on or frequenting these boats are engaging in what is best described as low level anti social behaviour. Rubbish has been dumped and furniture such as benches and chairs put out beside the towpath as if colonising it. Very clearly there is anti social alcohol consumption going on, at all times of the day and night, and often smells of other illicit substances. Presumably as a result, people have been sworn and leered at, or obstructed on the towpath. Frequently our coaches are lone student females who are clearly particularly intimidated by this sort of behaviour. We are concerned for general safety of people using the towpath – from our point of view as rowing coaches, but also for commuters using the towpath to get to work or simply people out to enjoy one of Oxford's nicest open spaces.

The [redacted] is a narrow boat currently precariously moored about [redacted] downstream of Donnington Bridge. We are aware that it is tied to the bank with only one rope, regularly partially sinks and appears to leak fuel oil into the river. Its fuel tank has been topped up at least twice that we know of and it has been moved at least three times. At present the pollution is unpleasant to rowers regularly coming into contact with the water and a risk to aquatic life. As the winter, and almost inevitably flooding, approach, in our view this boat is at risk of capsize and sinking into the navigation, possibly breaking up. To remove it once this has happened will be difficult and hugely expensive.

A boat sunk, resting on the shallow river bed, is clearly liable to be struck by rowing boats which might well fracture, with serious safety implications. We would urge UMBEG to act decisively and remove this boat as quickly as possible from the river, before it deteriorates from a potential safety hazard which could easily be removed, to a sunken obstacle. We are happy to cooperate in whatever way we can to aid this.

Discussion Points

We recognise that, as representatives of college rowing, we are only one stakeholder group with an interest in this stretch of river. However, we hope to work with UMBEG to help to solve not only our particular issues but those identified more generally along this stretch for other river users.

Mooring. While we understand the needs of boat owners, of many different types, and respect their rights to use the river bank, we do have to ensure that the bank, especially in the identified start area, is clear of moored boats for the duration of our bumping races. We would like to work with UMBEG to identify appropriate but guaranteed ways of achieving this. In our opinion there is now a strong case for slightly extended our Harbour Master's notices to begin the day before our events and we seek the assistance of the Environment Agency and any other suitable agencies to help enforce it. Our early spring Torpids event has a further issue: the presence of semi-permanent moored boats can lead to them being unable to respond to the Notice because they are advised not to navigate on yellow boards, even though we can row safely on the river during these conditions. This could obstruct our ability to run a safe event. We assume there are certain synergies between UMBEG's desire to regulate mooring and the protection of the amenity of the area from long term 'fly mooring' and our desire to see a clear bank.

More generally, we would view this area of Oxford's river bank as a communal resource, not one that should be monopolised by a small number of boat owners. To this end we would welcome the introduction of mooring restrictions and the enforcement of boat licencing and timing restrictions on this stretch.

Anti-social behaviour. We note the apparently increasing prevalence of anti social behaviour as detailed above on the river bank. We would welcome UMBEG's thoughts as to the possibility of increasing police patrols – especially in the early morning and late afternoon, as well as weekends when our river use is at its highest – to both discourage and penalise such behaviours.

Finally, we have built up excellent contact with non-student rowing clubs, the canoeing club, the lock-keeper, some riverside residents, [redacted] and the Environment Agency. However we recognise that our college rowing community can appear to be isolated. We are happy to introduce our rowing sabbatical officer to stakeholder groups and work to increase student engagement in this area if any of UMBEG's members feel this would be productive

[redacted] 19/10/14.