



Hampton Canoe Club

NOTES FOR LEADERS OF TRIPS

These notes for trip leaders are intended to inform and suggest how to make a placid water trip turn out well.

WHAT IS A TOUR?

For Hampton Canoe Club, a tour is a paddling trip organised for club members on placid or nearly placid waters. A tour may last an hour or two or all day; it might be on a canal or a river; it might be a return trip or it might be one way. Specialists in semantics will note that a tour longer than one day can be called an expedition.

How does a tour differ from an Improvers' Session?

An Improvers Session is for newly-qualified One Star paddlers, aiming to give them a chance to build experience and stamina. Any One Star paddler can come to such a session, and the slower paddlers set the pace and the weaker paddlers determine the distance. Other paddlers can come along, expecting a very gentle time.

A tour goes where the trip leader intends to go, and as far as they intend to go. Paddlers asking to join the trip are implying that they have the skills and stamina to complete such a trip at a reasonable pace. On a tour, trip leaders only take along people they know, or are comfortable, can complete the trip.

In short, it's about attitude: Improvers Sessions are fluffy; Tours are a bit of a mission.

PLANNING A TRIP

As trip leader, you get to choose where the trip is going; the paddlers themselves express interest in the tour; and you fine tune the trip a couple of days before according to the weather, the flow and the ability of the paddlers. Probably you'd like to go somewhere nice that hasn't been visited too much recently. You will note and manage the presence, or absence, of facilities such as parking near the getin; toilets; and refreshments (café, pub or ice cream).

First step can be weeks or months in advance: decide roughly where you intend to go, ink the date into your diary and let the trip list manager know what you plan to do.

Second step is to ensure people know about your tour: an email to 'Hamptoneers' a week or two in advance should remind them of what they should have noted from

the Trip List. Remember to insist that everybody planning to come along let you know at least 48 hours before, and ask for their mobile numbers.

Third step takes place a day or two in advance of the trip: it involves balancing three factors:

The paddlers: at this stage you know who wants to come along. Some of them you know and are comfortable that they'll be OK; any others you should speak to and ascertain if you're comfortable they'll be OK. That particularly applies if somebody is proposing to bring along a guest. We're not assessing people for a year-long intercontinental tour, but if, for example, somebody is just out of hospital, or hasn't paddled for years, you can and should judge if they'll be OK.

Mostly everybody will be fine for most tours. One weaker paddler can sometimes be accommodated by putting them in a Rorqual with a strong paddler. You can and should decline to take along those you do doubt can complete the trip safely and happily, particularly if the tour is long or a bit difficult. Your decision on this is final: the Chairman and committee members will not over-rule you on this.

The weather: at this stage putting the precise location into websites such as Accuweather or Windguru will yield a reasonably reliable forecast for the time when you'll be afloat. Ice, lightning and very high winds are to be avoided. Strong winds have a variable effect, depending on where you are paddling, the number of trees or buildings nearby, etc. Rain, snow and breezes affect paddlers' comfort more than their ability to get to the end.

The flow, if you're on a river. The Environment Agency website for the Thames has a section called 'Likely outlook'.

Your job as trip leader is to consider these three factors and ask yourself if the paddlers will be reasonably safe and happy. If not, you can curtail the trip, decline some paddlers, relocate the trip or cancel it: it's your choice, and it's your responsibility. All you have to do is make up your mind and let people know of any changes. The chairman and other experienced trip leaders will be happy to provide advice if you seek it.

Occasionally you may be faced with relatively large numbers of weak or unknown paddlers. Offsetting this you may have some strong paddlers coming along. If you feel the overall group is weak, you might be able to approach other strong paddlers to join the trip; or you might decline to take along some weaker paddlers. Coaches generally limit themselves to a maximum of six novices on the water; you choose a number you're comfortable with, bearing in mind any stronger paddlers coming along.

At this stage, check that the proposed route is viable: planned closures do take place, particularly on the canals. Portages of over a mile are not unheard of.

EXAMPLES OF ROUTES

As trip leader, you get to choose where the trip is going. We are fortunate that practically all our trips are not subject to access restrictions. Popular trips are described on the website.

At the simple end of what's feasible are short trips on canals (which can be icier than a river):

the **Wey Navigation** between Town Lock and Walsham Flood Gates is often a quiet piece of water, and is nearby. Getins include Black Boy Bridge just outside Weybridge (20 mins from Bell Hill, no facilities) and New Haw (25 mins, pub across the road).

the **Basingstoke Canal** is equally quiet. Good getins are at Mytchett, the canal centre, usually with toilets and café (30 mins) or Barley Mow bridge (40 mins, pub nearby).

the **Grand Union Canal** is accessible at Perivale, 35 mins from Bell Hill. A 14 mile return trip to Little Venice is the most popular destination, but shorter trips in either direction are feasible. Park in the car park of Ealing Canoe Club; facilities by negotiation.

the **Kennet and Avon Canal** starts at Reading and goes through Newbury, Hungerford, Pewsey and Devizes on its way to Bath and Bristol. The nearest getin is at Reading by Marsport, about 45 mins away. Near Reading the K&A can be flowing like the river Kennet, but further west it's much more like a canal.

Potentially more interesting are trips on rivers, usually the **Thames**. When no warning boards are displayed, the Thames is easy to paddle. With yellow boards, many paddlers with some skill and experience will find conditions are safe and interesting. With red boards, careful judgement is needed: some red boards indicate conditions little worse than yellow boards while other red boards warn of dire conditions. Formally speaking, yellow boards indicate the Environment Agency advises no paddling, and red boards advise all boats to moor up.

The Thames is accessible along its full length down to Teddington, for paddlers, rowers and motor boats of all sizes. You know well the waters from Shepperton to Teddington. Outside of that, popular trips include starting at Runnymede or the Bells of Ouseley (25 mins away at Old Windsor) back to the club; and St Patrick's Stream and Hannerton backwater near Reading and Henley.

Below Teddington the Thames increasingly becomes an estuary and tidal planning is essential. The Port of London Authority run courses for trip leaders thinking of going below Westminster: please don't lead a trip there until you have done the course.

Other rivers offering potential are the **Medway** (70 mins to Yalding) and the tidal **Hamble** from Swanwick (also 70 mins away). The **Arun** is subject to access restrictions and is tidal and worthwhile.

Rivers are well suited to one way trips, of course: down to the club from Runnymede or Old Windsor, as mentioned above, or on down to Isleworth, to the slipway by the London Apprentice (about 20 mins to drive back).

Trip leaders might like to arrange an occasional long trip. One way from Godalming back to the club along the Wey is, if you go the long way around Desborough Island, an all-day affair of about 26 miles. Or coming back to the club from the top of the Basingstoke Canal at Greywell is about 33 miles.

The journey times listed here are from Google maps and are not guaranteed!

WHAT DOES A TRIP LEADER ACTUALLY HAVE TO DO?

Just plan and lead. Planning's covered above. Leading's more nebulous and includes:

Being well organised about where the trip is going, what Plan B might be, who's coming, checking they're of a suitable standard and knowing their mobile numbers.

Being adequately equipped, with some supplies for the group, including some duct tape, hand sanitiser, plasters, extra clothing, etc. Bring your mobile, pre-registered for sending emergency texts to 112, as on our website.

Setting a reasonable example of good behaviour, such as

- # being appropriately cautious in avoiding being too cold or too hot
- # being hygienic and avoiding Weil's disease
- # dealing respectfully with paddlers and strangers
- # respecting the rules of the navigation.

Keeping the group appropriately together. In difficult conditions, the group should remain together (within shouting distance). In benign conditions, very loose group control can be adequate. Insisting on a group briefing before people get on the water can help to establish your position as trip leader, and enables you to set the standard of group closeness you want, and to warn of any known dangers. A handy trick is to get faster paddlers to use bungies to slow themselves down. Large groups might best be split formally, according to ability, with a leader for each group.

Managing crises. You don't have to do the rescues yourself but you should organise what needs organising, and keep the rest of the group safe. Remember – in cold water, the priority is to get the paddler out of the water quickly; many competent adults will display insouciance on this point, standing waist deep to empty the boat, for example. Ten minutes later they can be really cold and asking to drop out of the trip.

Counting: count all the paddlers onto the water, count them frequently during the trip and count them all off it.

Map-reading: know where you are in sufficient detail that you can judge the need for any change to the plan (e.g. paddlers are tiring faster than they're getting through the miles). Also you should be able, if need be, to give a helpfully accurate location to the emergency services.

Being hospitable and welcoming; hopefully leading the trip is well within your ability, and you can spend time being sociable and welcoming, setting up a pleasant atmosphere in which paddlers can safely enjoy themselves and the water.

And, hopefully never needing to access the database of members' details for the details of their next of kin.

Some solutions to some common problems are annexed.

LEGAL ASPECTS

The paddlers on your trip are all competent (you've queried any you have doubts about). They have volunteered to participate in a sport that does have some hazards – albeit we paddle very much at the safe end of the paddling risk spectrum – and they assume those risks.

Even so, there is a chance of a mishap and people getting sued. The club is affiliated to the BCU and so has insurance that covers you. Naturally you contribute to the safety of the trip by not proposing activities that are way beyond the paddlers' capabilities (though you'd still be insured). Taking paddlers a little out of their comfort zone occasionally is fine, it'll help them develop. But proposing what they consider to be unduly hazardous or arduous isn't going to work for them, and so won't work for you as leader.

AND, FINALLY

The tourers are grateful to you for your efforts, and the committee really is, too. We do appreciate you taking the time to organise and lead a trip. You're a generous volunteer, and we want you to have a reasonable time too. If you find things are too much, let Andrew, Barnet or Emily know and they'll do what they can to ease the situation.

Notes prepared by AW on 24 Feb 14

TRIP LEADERS' CHECKLIST

Weeks before

- decide where you'd like to lead the trip
- let the trip list manager know about the trip

2 weeks before

- remind Hamptoneers by email of the proposed trip

2 days before

- review the list of paddlers to ensure you know their abilities
(and their mobile numbers)
- Check the detailed weather forecast
- If going on a river, check the forecast flow
- Adjust mix of strong/weak paddlers as necessary
- Check for any planned navigational interruptions to your plans

Before going afloat

- Check your own boat, kit, etc.
- Monitor paddlers' progress with getting afloat
- Brief the paddlers on your plans,
including if you do or don't require them to stick together
- Count the paddlers
- Seek a volunteer to draft an article for Westward or Facebook

In your boat

- Mobile, pre-registered with 112 for emergency text messages
- Duct tape
- Plasters and hand sanitiser
- Extra dry clothes
- Map/guide book

On the trip

- Count the paddlers
- Monitor the well-being of the paddlers
- Adjust your plans if needed

At the end

- Count the paddlers
- Check the well-being of the paddlers

SOME SOLUTIONS TO SOME COMMON PROBLEMS

A: **It's very windy** (e.g. 25 mph, gusting 45 mph)

You could do some or all of:

Assess the forecast carefully: double check with an alternative forecaster; then check out the wind direction compared to the route planned. For example, Molesey to Shepperton is mostly east – west, so is somewhat sheltered from northerlies and southerlies; but a WSW or WNW wind may well bend and run along the river.

Discourage people from taking unusually tippy boats;

Put the weakest paddler into a **Rorqual** with a strong paddler;

Have everybody be extra careful about **tying boats onto cars** and drive more slowly than usual;

Request and require people **only to move boats with two people**, and hold them onto the car until they're tied on;

Remind them how to **brace**;

Take an **extra set of dry kit** in your boat in case there's a lot of unplanned swimming;

As a group leader, **set a private limit of, say, three swims**, at which point the trip is aborted and turns for home or a safe haven;

Reroute to a safer place: Deep Cut from Mytchett is often very sheltered;

Require the group to **stay together**;

If possible, find a **bail out point** where people could land, walk back to the cars and collect the boats later;

Remind people to **keep well clear of obstacles** in case there's a gust as they approach.

If you're not confident the paddlers can do the trip safely, cancel it.

B: **It's very cold** (e.g. temperatures near zero, plus wind chill)

You could do some of:

Check that everybody is **adequately-dressed**, to include spray decks, hats and pogies or gloves;

Bring spare pogies, gloves and spraydecks;

If somebody goes swimming, insist they get **out of the water immediately** and refuse their offer to help rescue the boat;

Discourage people from taking unusually tippy boats;

Require the group to **stay together**;

Bring a **space blanket** or group shelter;

Shorten the trip.

C: **It's very, very cold** (i.e. ice is expected on canals and in lock cuts)

You can't do much about this: paddling through hard ice isn't good for boats. Your only option is to relocate to moving water, i.e. a river.

Weather conditions can change, so don't cancel until the day before.

D: **It's very hot or sunny**

You should encourage the use of **sun screen and sunhats**, and know the symptoms of, and how to treat, **hyperthermia**.

You could also:

Encourage the **drinking of water**

Provide **adequate breaks**

Check **paddlers' well-being** during the trip

Encourage **splashing games**

Avoid paddling in the hottest part of the day.