



BRITISHROWING

Honorary Rowing Safety Adviser Monthly Report

November 2023

Stephen Worley

TEAMWORK | OPEN TO ALL | COMMITMENT

Awards for Rowers who have helped to save lives

Royal Humane Society (RHS) awards were presented to rowers who had contributed to the saving of lives.

There was a presentation at the Hants and Dorset Amateur Rowing Association dinner where: -

- Jeff Watling was presented with a RHS Certificate of Commendation.
- Megan Hill and Stefan Saunders were both presented RHS Resuscitation Certificates.

There is more information [here](#).

Many other people contributed to this rescue and resuscitation and in recognition of his contribution, Jeff Wardell has been awarded a British Rowing Certificate of Commendation.

A Royal Humane Society award was presented to an 18-year-old rower from the Isle of Ely Rowing Club following the Ely Head Race.

- Dominic Jones was presented with a RHS Resuscitation Certificate

There is more information [here](#).

Tragic death of a rower in a weir accident

The October report contained preliminary information about the tragic death of a rower who was swept over a weir. The causes of this incident are being studied and a visit was made to the location. Discussions with the club will continue. These are focussed on actions that will tend to reduce the probability of an incident like this occurring.

This learning will be shared once the relevant information has been assembled and the recommendations have been discussed. In the meantime, please take care to ensure that your rowers stay well clear of weirs.

Please understand that this it is very rare in British Rowing for a rower to suffer an accidental death. Prior to the incident mentioned above, the most recent was in February 2015 when a coach fell from his launch into the Tideway in darkness. I have reported on several rowing fatalities in other countries but rowing in Britain is a very safe sport because we all take great care to make it safe.

Please also understand that all weirs are dangerous. In October 2021, four paddleboarders lost their lives in one incident in Haverfordwest (see the MAIB report [here](#), and in April 2023, two canoeists lost their lives at Kempston weir (there is more information [here](#). Please see the [Safety-Alert-Keep-clear-of-Weirs-Dec-2019.pdf \(britishrowing.org\)](#).

It has been suggested that if rowers wore lifejackets then this would protect them if there were to be swept over a weir. However, at Haverfordwest, three of the four people who died, and two of the five people who survived, were wearing Personal Floatation Devices (PFDs). The MAIB report contains the following: -

*“Too much positive buoyancy can hinder someone trying to escape from a submerged jump as it can keep them in the towback zone (Figure 12), potentially pressed against the face of the weir. Without the buoyancy they would submerge and possibly be flushed out of the weir, but it would have **been better to avoid the weir altogether.**”*

[This report contains safety guidance. Please read our safety message and disclaimer.](#)

The quality of chest compressions when doing CPR

There has been some discussion of chest compressions causing cracked ribs following the publication of the descriptions of resuscitations outlined above. Please remember that cracked or broken ribs may be associated with performing chest compressions. Feeling or hearing ribs cracking should not deter the rescuer from performing chest compressions to the best of their ability – the chest compressions are keeping the casualty alive; the cracked ribs can be managed following a successful resuscitation.

Incidents in November

Take extra care with inexperienced crews

There was an incident in which an 8 with an inexperienced cox and crew hit the bank on a corner because the crew failed to respond correctly to instructions from the cox. This resulted in the shoulder of one rower being hit by the oar handle causing the shoulder to be partially dislocated.

There was a similar incident with an inexperienced cox hitting the bank and a houseboat.

In yet another incident a beginner 4+ capsized when one rower caught a small crab and the remainder of the crew let go of their handles. They were rescued by a launch.

Please take extra care of inexperienced crews and ensure that coxes and crews are aware of the meaning of commands and understand that they should act together and without delay.

Take care of your AED

There were two reports where someone noticed that an Automated External Defibrillator (AEDs) had a battery that was past its expiry date. These batteries have been replaced. The batteries and pads in AEDs should be checked routinely and replaced when necessary. A Safety Alert on the AEDs has been issued and a copy will accompany this report. It is also available at [Safety-Alert-Automatic-External-Defibrillators.pdf \(britishrowing.org\)](#)

Care for your launch engine

There were several incidents where launch engines failed. In one case this resulted in a collision with an 8. In another incident the engine broke down, the launch drifted on the current and had to be towed back to the boathouse.

Please keep your engine well maintained and in good condition at please check it at the start of each outing. Please see the Safety Alerts on [Launch pre-use checks](#) and [Outboard Motor Safety Checks](#).

Dress well to keep warm

There was a report from a Head Race of junior rowers wearing insufficient clothing to keep them warm when they were waiting for the start of their division. The temperature was 6 to 7 °C with a stiff, gusting westerly wind. Please see the Safety Alert on [Not Getting Cold at Heads](#) and educate your rowers about the need to be dressed for the weather.

[This report contains safety guidance. Please read our safety message and disclaimer.](#)

Take care in wash

An 8 tried to row across the bow wave of a fast-moving motor boat and was swamped up to the saxboards. The crew was able to safely navigate to the shore where the boat was emptied so that the outing could be resumed. It can help to position the boat so that it is parallel to the wash wavefront. The wash will then be rocked sideways rather than having water enter the boat from both sides as the wave runs along its length. It also helps, when checking the boat before the outing, to ensure that all the hatch covers, etc, are correctly in place.

Take care when water levels are high

When river levels are high then the debris that has collected on the bank tends to float and move down the river. In one case it formed a floating “island” that was about 3 metres in diameter and sitting 15cm above the water level. It was hit at speed by 2x that became stranded and was swept into the riverbank by the current and became wedged between two trees. The force of the current caused damage to the bow.

In another incident, when river levels were high within the acceptable range, a 4+ was floating above the landing stage. When the crew entered the boat it sank slightly such that the hull sustained damage from the stage just below the water. Please encourage crews to be extra vigilant when water levels are high.

Take care in strong winds

An 8 with a beginner Senior crew was blown by a cross wind into the end of a jetty and a moored boat as the cox was trying to take them back to the club. The wind strength had increased during the outing, and it was gusty. Please encourage your crews to be aware of changing conditions and to act early before the conditions become unmanageable.

In another incident, an 8 with a novice crew who have been rowing for four months were trying to return to their club as the wind was strengthening. The crew were inexperienced and slow to respond to directions. The 8 collided with the landing stage. Please take the capability of crews, and the weather forecast, into account when deciding whether they should go afloat.

Take care to avoid infection

There was an incident in which resulted in a rower contracted cellulitis possibly caused by an infected blister. This required a 48 hour stay in hospital followed by a one-week course of intravenous antibiotics at home. Cellulitis is a deep infection of the skin caused by bacteria. It usually happens when an injury has caused a skin break.

Please take care to wash all exposed skin surfaces and to cover all cuts, blisters and skin abrasions. Please always do this but take particular care now that rivers are likely to have flooded and become more contaminated than normal. If you think that you may have been affected, then please seek medical help without delay. Cellulitis can be very serious and result in sepsis or septicaemia.

There is more information in section 8.4 of [RowSafe](#) and in the Safety Alert [Sepsis](#)

Take care if you move across the centre of the waterway

A 4x was involved in a head on collision with a 2x when the 4x had to move to the far side of the river in order to pass a large, partly submerged, tree. The water levels were higher than usual, and the water was swirling so they moved out a little too far. The 4x collided, head on, with a 2x rowing at pace. A rower in the 2x was struck on the back of the head and side of neck by a blade in the 4x.

In another incident a 4x rounded a corner and overtook another 4x when it collided with an 8 that had just overtaken a 1x. This caused one of the rowers in the 2x to suffer a broken rib that will take about 4 weeks to heal.

In a further incident a 4x was preparing to overtake a motor barge when it had a clash of oars with a rowing boat approaching from the opposite direction. This caused the approaching boat to veer off course and become entangled with bushes on the bank.

In yet another incident an 8+ collided with a junior girls' 2x as both crews were slightly too far over in the middle of the river and were late to look and act. This resulted in the splash guard of the 2x being broken.

In a further incident, when doing a practise race piece on the water, a 1x moved to the middle of the river to avoid a large tree that was obstructing the usual course. The rower did not see a 2x that was moving towards the middle of the river they collided. This resulted in the 1x capsizing.

There was a head on collision between two novice 8+s warming up to race. One boat moved away from the bank and the other began a race start also moving towards the centre where the boats collided. Both crews stopped rowing but only one held the boat up and one boat rode over the bow canvas of the other. This resulted in damage to the bow canvas and wave breaker of one boat and gashes in the underside of the other. One rower was injured suffering bruised ribs.

Take care around sailing boats

There was a collision between a 4- and a sailing dinghy. There were several sailing dinghies in the vicinity and one changed course abruptly as it was being overtaken by the 4-. The 4- stopped but was unable to prevent the collision. Please be aware that sailors assume that rowing boats are “vessels under power” and are required to give way to them. Please take care to give them extra room and be prepared for them to change course.

Take care to keep a good lookout, always

There was an incident on a rowing lake in which a 4x collided with a 2-, about three feet from the bow ball, taking that section clean off, causing the 2- to start sinking; the crew, and both parts of the boat, were recovered by launches. The 2- had reached the red buoys at the end of the course and had turned towards the return lanes along with other crews. The 4x was moving at speed towards the red buoys without looking for stationary crews ahead of them and not heeding the warning shouts from the 2-.

Take care with launch trim

There was a very fortunate near miss in which a launch was planing at speed with its bows elevated. When the driver reduced speed (and the bows lowered) he saw that there was a previously unseen 4x directly ahead. He managed to avoid a collision. Please take care with weight distribution in a launch, particularly if it is a tiller steered boat operated by one person. It may help to fix weights in the bow and strap the fuel tank into the front of the boat. If there are several people in the launch, then use them as “mobile ballast” to obtain the appropriate weight distribution. Please also take care with engine trim, there is more information [here](#) and [here](#). If it is unsafe to travel at speed because of the elevation of the bow, then do not do so.

How many people should there be in a launch?

I was asked about the advised limit of the number of people in a coaching launch.

The response was that the simple answer to this question is "it all depends".

It depends what the launch is expected to do. If it is purely for coaching then, most of the time, the coach can do this alone providing they take great care to maintain a good lookout in all directions. It helps to have a second person so that one, usually the driver, can keep a good look out while the other focuses on the crew that they are coaching.

If the coach is likely to want to take photos or video then there should be at least two people, one to drive and one to use the camera. It is not possible to drive a launch safely when using a camera.

If the launch is providing safety cover, then it would be best to have a driver and another person so that there is one person to drive the launch and at least one more to assist anyone who needs it.

When thinking about the number of people in the launch we must be careful not to compromise its rescue capacity. We cannot fill the launch with driver, coaches and crew to the extent that there is no room for anyone they may be called upon to rescue. For this reason, it depends on the size (carrying capacity) of the launch.

If the launch is accompanying small boats (1x, 2x or 2-) then the launch crew should be prepared to have to assist rowers and should have the spare capacity to carry one or two more people. At times of year when the water is not too cold, assistance could include towing an inverted boat to a place of safety with the crew sitting astride its hull.

In some areas there are often several launches in the vicinity. Rowing launch drivers are very good at going to the assistance of anyone who needs it, even if they are not from the same club and even if they are not rowers.

Check your bow balls

There was a link in the World Rowing Umpires Newsletter to information about a collision between 4x and 1x. The bow ball of the 4x was cracked and broken; it split as the bow hit the leg of the rower in the 1x causing a serious penetrating injury. It is understood that the rower was lucky and will recover. There are photos of the injury [here](#) but please be warned, they are very graphic. Please check your bow balls and replace any that are not in good condition.



Coxing and Steering course

There have been several requests for access to this course on Row How. This course is currently being updated and it is hoped that it will be available soon.

A short video on “Safe coxing” is also being planned, it is hoped that this will be available early in 2024.

How thick should heel restraint cord be?

I was asked what diameter cord I would recommend people to buy for heel restraints. The response was that I have never been asked "how wide is a piece of string" before. The simple answer is 3 mm or more because any thinner than that and it would be difficult to tie and untie knots. We do not have a rule or guidance on this. We do have a Safety Alert at [Safety-Alert-Heel-Restraints.pdf \(britishrowing.org\)](#).

Most of the problems with heel restraints are not related to the strength of the cord. They are caused by failures of the attachment at either end of the cord, by the cord not being correctly tied or by it being too long. Cord and rope are much stronger than most people give them credit for.

Support for the CPGA

The Cornish Pilot Gig Association Rowing Safety Adviser asked for permission for their clubs to continue to be directed to RowSafe. The response was that RowSafe is in the public domain, and anyone can see it. The best way to find it is to go to the RowSafe page of the website [RowSafe - British Rowing](#) and click on the link to download it. That way the current version will always be available even after it is updated each April.

Several Incident Reports describing interactions between rowing boats and gigs were also shared with the CPGA Safety Adviser.

There was a request from a gig coach about coaching ratios for Juniors. Safety advice was provided, this being that where there are adults and children in the same boat then there should be an even number of each so that the sides could be balanced. The number of adults being determined by the capability of the juniors and the conditions that they face. The coach was also referred to section 4.4 of the [CPGA Safeguarding Policy](#) as this deals with Coaching Ratios.

Can I take my lifejacket on an aeroplane?

There has been some discussion about whether it is possible to take an inflatable lifejacket on a commercial flight. This is an issue particularly for coxes and umpires travelling to competitions and training camps outside the UK. It is reported that umpires cannot rely on lifejackets being provided by the competition organisers.

British Airways information is available [here](#)

“Self-inflating safety devices

British Airways give automatic 'operator approval' for each passenger to carry two self-inflating safety devices such as a life jacket or vest, or a motorcycle jacket, or an equestrian jacket subject to the following conditions:

- *Limited to compressed gas (IATA Division 2.2 non-flammable, non-toxic gas) for inflation purposes.*
- *You can only take two self-inflating devices per person containing up to two small cartridges per device.*
- *You are permitted up to two small spare cartridges packed with the device.*
- *You must pack it in a way that ensures it cannot be accidentally activated.*
- *This item should travel in your checked baggage as some airports do not allow them in the cabin.*
- *For your convenience you must pack a copy of this page with the device to identify that you have our 'operator approval' to carry the self-inflating safety device.*
- *You do NOT need to contact the airline or inform staff at the airport that you are carrying these items.*

Please note: Additional restrictions apply if you're travelling from the US. Even if an item is permitted, it may be subject to additional screening or not allowed through the checkpoint if it triggers an alarm during the screening process, appears to have been tampered with, or poses other security concerns. The final decision rests with TSA on whether to allow any items on the plane.”

There is also information from Crewsaver, [here](#).

In simple terms you are allowed to take a lifejacket, preferably in checked luggage. You should always check with the airline you're flying with. (with thanks to Antony Reynolds).

Space Blankets or Bivvy Bags?

There was a request for information about the effectiveness of foil space blankets. A search revealed that foil space blankets may provide some benefit in protecting people from wind, they do not provide much thermal insulation. It is much better to use a thicker plastic Bivvy Bag such as those shown [here](#) and [here](#).

Juniors should always be accompanied by a responsible adult

It was suggested that at one club it would be safe for the more capable juniors to row unsupervised. The statement that “*Juniors should always be accompanied by a responsible adult*” is taken from the Safety Alert [Is it safe to go afloat alone](#). The validity of this statement was questioned because the club’s risk assessment indicated that it may be safe for the more capable Juniors.

The response was that this statement is still valid; it is a matter of safeguarding rather than safety; the statement was included in the Safety Alert at the request of the Lead Safeguarding Officer at the time. I do not normally give safeguarding advice but did, in this case, because the guidance is so clear. The need for Juniors to be accompanied by responsible adults is still valid, not just when they are afloat but at all times when they are involved in rowing activities. The responsible adult does not have to be a coach.

Please remember that in law, people are children until they attain their 18th birthday when they become adults.

What do you do if someone collapses when afloat

There was a request for information on the action to take if someone collapses in a boat. It was explained that this topic is covered in the Safety Alert at [Safety-Alert-What-to-do-if-a-rower-collapses-in-a-boat.pdf \(britishrowing.org\)](#). It was also pointed out that is not possible to do effective CPR in a fine rowing boat although it has been done in a gig. It would be difficult too in a small launch.

The basic idea is to call for help, get the casualty to the bank and start CPR as soon as possible. Then send someone for an AED. It helps to be prepared by carrying information about the location of AEDs in the area. Some of these may be public access AEDs and some may be in other boathouses, etc. Information may also be needed to direct the ambulance to the casualty.

It should not be a priority to row back any significant distance to the boathouse to access the club's AED.