



BRITISHROWING

Honorary Rowing Safety Adviser Monthly Report

March 2024

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TEAMWORK | OPEN TO ALL | COMMITMENT

Incidents in March

Rescue of a member of the public – one life probably saved

Two club coaches, each in separate launches, were supervising a training session for a group of experienced junior scullers. They became aware of an adult, not connected with the club, in deep flowing water holding on to a mooring buoy and in distress. The first coach approached with the casualty to starboard and cut the engine. The second coach remained close-by monitoring the attempted rescue and the sculling group.

The second coach made contact via radio with a third coach who was some distance away in the club's safety launch. The person in the water was very cold, almost submerged, quite passive, and their breathing was erratic. The first coach tried to lift the person onto the launch, but she was too heavy, weighed down by saturated clothing. The first coach almost managed to lift the person onboard but slipped and fell overboard to port. The first coach then swam around the stern and supported the casualty whilst keeping hold of the launch for flotation.

The riverbank at this point is steep and it is not possible to land there. The tide was ebbing, so the first coach decided to remain in the water as the launch was drifting towards shallow water and a beach. The second coach stayed close and guided the drifting launch. The third coach in the club safety launch arrived and assisted by helping to recover the casualty to the beach, put a thermal cloak on her and kept her talking.

The second coach had contacted the emergency services. The beach where they had landed was inaccessible to vehicles, so they decided to take the casualty upstream to a public slipway (about 1 km) in the safety launch. The ambulance was at the slipway and paramedics took care of the casualty. She was conscious and communicating when taken to the ambulance.

The sculling group returned to the club under supervision.

The first coach, who fell in, was quite cold and had a few minor aches and pains and has fully recovered.

Take care of your Cox

A J14 bow loaded 4x+ capsized slowly and the cox became trapped in the inverted boat. Another crew member noticed that the cox had not surfaced with the rest of the crew and told the rower at bow. This rower went under the water and, at the second attempt, succeeded in pulling the cox out of their seat. The crew was rescued by a launch. The cox and the rescuer became extremely distressed after the incident and were treated by the ambulance crew.

The coach initially suggested that the headrest in the cox's seat broke off when they were boating and thought the cox's clothing may have become tangled in the fitting. Someone else thought that the headrest was broken during the incident.

There is considerable uncertainty about how the cox was held in the boat but it is clear that in the event of a crew boat capsize, then, as soon as they are safely out of the boat the crew members should check, that the remainder of the crew, especially the cox, is also safely out of the boat.

Boat swamped and sank at a training camp

Four 8s and two launches, from a British rowing club, were on an outing at a training camp on a wide, tidal, river in Portugal. The river has several significant changes in direction. The host club had provided two boats with inherent buoyancy and closed hatch covers, and two boats with open compartments and no hatch covers.

The club was briefed and followed advice from their hosts. The weather forecast indicated that the winds would become slightly stronger, in fact they became considerably stronger. The 8s rowed about 5.5 km from the club then turned and started to return. On the way back the wind strengthened and on some stretches of the river the combination of strong wind and flow caused large waves. The 8s took on water and one of them was swamped so that it could not continue. This boat did not have inherent buoyancy.

The 8 sank and the crew were rescued by the launches and returned to the host club. The rescue capacity of the launches was limited to this needed several journeys. During this rescue, one of the launches suffered engine failure due to the amount of water that had entered the engine. The waves became larger, and this launch capsized at when 100 metres from the landing stage, its crew and passengers were rescued by a third launch from the host club. Fortunately, there were no injuries and only minor damage to the equipment of the host club.

The club identified the following opportunities for improvement. They would: -

- have benefitted from better consideration of the changeability of the weather,
- not use boats without inherent buoyancy even if this is customary at the local club
- inform the rowers about what safety equipment on the boat they expected
- Have bailed the rainwater that collected in the launches during lunchtime

In future they will: -

- Establish more explicit communication with host club before outings about safety concerns relating to the weather
- Impose a 1-1 ratio of launch to boat
- Only use boats with sealed buoyancy compartments
- Row shorter loops to reduce the distance back to the landing stages
- Introduce radios between launches for more coordination
- Reiterate the right of any crew member to call off an outing at any point if they feel unsafe in the present conditions
- Demand a full safety protocol from the local host club in writing before any outing

Take care on land too

A spectator erected a gazebo at a gig regatta on an inland lake. The gazebo became free from its fixing due to a freak gust of wind and struck a spectator struck on side of head. The casualty fell to the ground, was given first aid and placed in recovery position. The spectator suffered, a very brief period of unconsciousness, vomited once, and had blurred vision. Concussion was suspected. The spectator was covered with a blanket and kept as warm and dry as possible. An ambulance called and the spectator was taken to hospital.

Back to Basics

There were several incidents where simple safety rules seem to have been forgotten, as follows:

- A launch driver was photographed standing in a launch away from the bank, and not wearing a personal floatation device and not wearing a kill cord.
- A cox was seen afloat not wearing a lifejacket.
- An 8 hit the Black Bouy, the cox commented “Spend less time looking at stroke coach, ensure to look ahead more.”
- A launch was following a crew and collided with the blades of an 8 travelling in the opposite direction. The launch driver had not seen the 8 because the coach was standing in front of him.
- An experienced coach was reported driving a launch whilst not wearing a kill cord.
- A launch driver in a high-pressure situation reversed into the riggers of a following 8, causing one rower to be injured. The driver was not looking where they were going.

... however, some people get it right

A coach driving a launch had a low-speed collision with a log or similar that knocked the tiller handle from their grip. This caused the launch to jerk ejecting the coach into the water. The launch stopped immediately, as the kill cord worked as it should, and the lifejacket inflated. The coach swam swiftly back to the launch and continued with a shorter session, in good health.

Take care on fast moving rivers particularly if you are not familiar with them

An 8 turned too slowly and drifted downstream hitting a moored vessel side on and the very fast flowing stream held them there for around two or three minutes. They were rescued by a safety launch.

Take care near sluices and water control gates

The water level control gates next to the landing stage were closed when rowers departed, one was fully open when they returned. A rower in a 1x ventured too close and was drawn towards the gate becoming fully wedged against the open gate. Other rowers pulled the rower in the 1x from the boat. A few moments later the boat broke into numerous pieces.

Following the incident the rower was in shock, she was able to walk and communicate but was clearly very shaken. The rower was checked at A and E and was fine. The single sculling boat was damaged beyond repair.



Continue to take care to protect yourself from contaminated water

There were several further incidents in March when rowers became ill due to contact with contaminated water.

- a rower was splashed and swallowed some water, within 24 hours they experienced severe vomiting and diarrhoea which lasted 2 days. The rower had to take 2 days off work to recover. Their diet had not changed, and they were well hydrated.
- a rower from another region raced on the Tideway 23rd March came down with stomach bug causing diarrhoea and stomach cramps on the evening of 27th March.
- a rower suffered a very upset stomach and headache since being splashed with river water. The water had visible scum and foamy pollution, and the smell was at some points really nauseating.
- a rower reported that they had been sick since rowing in a head race. This resulted in several days off work as the rower was ill for some time.
- a rower reported that they were splashed during a race and during the row back and had woken up with severe nausea and a stomach bug.

There have been similar incidents in January and February, as follows: -

- A J15 rower contracted Cellulitis during water training. A Doctor prescribed antibiotics.
- A junior rower had multiple blisters on his hands through rowing. The blisters were covered but were not allowed to heal. He became unwell and had a creeping rash up his right arm. He was taken to Hospital by his parents. Antibiotics were administered and he was kept in overnight for observations and treatment.
- A J14 single capsized. The rower came in straight away, showered, was dry and warm and still smiling. Unfortunately, the rower has since developed a bacterial infection and is being treated with antibiotics and anti-sickness medication.
- Lots of pollution noted. The rower was splashed with river water to the face, lips, mouth, and eyes. The rower washed and showered, but suffered nausea, and diarrhoea for a few days, and abdominal pain.
- The day after water training the rower's hand became hot, red and swollen. The rower visited a minor injuries clinic and was treated as an emergency and given antibiotics. The rower was thought to be suffering from cellulitis due to river water infection via several open blisters on the hand.
- Splashing that entered a rower's mouth. The next day the rower woke up with severe nausea and stomach bug.

I have been advised that personal hygiene after being splashed with river water is an important part of the preventative strategy. So, taking a shower, or at least washing hands and face will lower ingestion rates, plus washing down boats and oars will also lower the spread of infection.

This is in addition to skin, blister, cuts and graze care.

Observe proper hand hygiene (with or without blisters). Cover blisters, cuts and grazes and treat them so that they heal and do not become infected. If the blisters are red or weeping, do not row until they have healed. If you have blisters make sure that you wash the handle of any blade you have rowed with so as not to pass on infection.

My colleagues in British Rowing have developed a Sustainability Strategy (here [Sustainability - British Rowing](#)). This includes “Guidance on Rowing when the Water is Poor” ([Guidance-for-Rowing-When-Water-Quality-is-Poor-March-2024.pdf \(britishrowing.org\)](#)). This was produced in consultation the Rivers Trust and Riveraction. A copy is included with this report.

In my personal view, the recent poor water quality has resulted from the high rainfall so far this year that has caused, or allowed, untreated sewage to be discharged into rivers. This problem may lessen when the level of rainfall reduces but weather patterns are changing, and we could have high levels of rainfall in future years. According to Met Office projections ([UK and Global extreme events – Heavy rainfall and floods - Met Office](#)) “Climate projections indicate that on average, winters will continue to become wetter and summers drier, though natural variability will mean we will continue to see individual years that don’t follow this trend.”

Consider tide times when water flows are high

An 8 became fast against staging and piling by the river flow about 100 metres upstream of a weir about one hour before high tide. The inexperienced crew were unable to apply enough pressure to pull the boat away. All rowers were evacuated safely onto the staging.

Please consider the timing of outings in relation to the tidal conditions. At high tide, the water level will be at its highest and the flow over the weir, and the flow velocity at the approach to the weir, will be at its greatest.

When the tide is on the ebb (going out) then the flow speed will be high since the fluvial flow (rainwater) will be in the same direction as the tidal flow.

When the tide is on the flood (coming in) then the fluvial flow will be in the opposite direction to that of the tidal flow and the overall flow rate will be relatively low. It may be safer to choose to row when the tide is coming in if the fluvial flow is significant.

Take care of your kit

Several riggers were stolen from a trailer that was stored on private property, out of view of the main roads. The Police have been notified.

Three of the club’s boats are now unrowable until new riggers can be produced, and an insurance claim made to pay for them. Small items of equipment will be kept inside members houses until a permanent solution can be found.

Please take good care of your kit.

Take care on your bike too

A coach prepared had loaded his bike with the equipment needed and as the coach mounted the bike it slipped away from him and he fell to the ground and slid into the lake. The coach was not fully immersed so checked the bike and carried on with the outing.

The club will remind coaches to be extra careful when cycling along the towpath with a loaded bike and in different conditions. It has been slippery following recent flooding. Having spare dry kit can also help.

Take extra care with inexperienced crews

There have been several incidents where inexperienced crews have not responded correctly and appropriately to instructions from coaches and coxes.

For example, in one incident, a 4+ was slowly drifting in the stream toward a bridge. The novice crew was not listening to the cox and did not respond to instruction. The boat hit the bridge.

Please ensure that inexperienced crews understand the need for an immediate response to instruction and coach them to understand the instructions that they are given. It may also help to ensure that instructions are given early and clearly.

Think about your boat ties

A 4x was being taken for minor repair on the club's trailer. Whilst on the motorway, one of the boat ties broke and the bow of the boat hit the tarmac. The vehicle stopped and was able to re-fix the boat to the trailer within two minutes. On examination at the repairers, it was found that the keel had been broken and the hull split open in two places. The boats had been checked for security on leaving the club. The buckle on the boat tie had failed in transit. The estimated cost of repair £1300.

In another incident a trailer was loaded with boats, and prior to departure the driver thoroughly checked the trailer loading and ensured that all boats were securely fastened. In transit, a 4-fell from the top rack of the trailer due to the failure of the strap buckle. The boat then collided with a road sign and was severely damaged. Another boat was also damaged by the fall of the first boat.

The value of the boat, and the cost of repair, is much greater than the cost of good straps. It is false economy to save money on straps. There is further advice on load securing here [Securing loads on HGVs and goods vehicles - 2. Load securing: the basics - Guidance - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/securing-loads-on-hgv-and-goods-vehicles-2).

Take care of your rowers

A rower was found unconscious after finishing a water session, they reported having a severe headache and feeling faint before heading upstairs. Coaches advised the rower to get a drink of water but did not escort her. She was then found unconscious on the stairs it is not known how long the rower was unconscious for. A First Aider made an assessment and the rower was eventually escorted home. The club Coaches were reminded of club health and safety rules which state that people reporting feeling faint must not be left alone.

I am advised that other than the initial care, dealing with an unconscious person in these circumstances is beyond the scope of a First Aider. The symptoms and the collapse to unconsciousness indicate that this rower needed a medical assessment and should have been seen by a health professional or taken to hospital.

Including rowers who cannot swim

There was an enquiry from a club that offers Learn to Row coaching and has a rower who cannot swim. They thought that British Rowing advised that all rowers must be able to swim, and they are encouraging this rower to learn to swim. They were concerned that their new rowers are normally provided with an opportunity to do a river based capsized drill but feel that this does not make sense for a non-swimmer. However, their local swimming baths, where some drills are also completed, are unlikely to be happy to accept someone wearing a life jacket for swim test or capsized drill. The response was to explain that British Rowing advice is no longer that people who row should be able to swim. This was changed a couple of years ago. The current version of [RowSafe](#) contains the following in Section 3.6 of.

3.6. Competence in the Water

It is important that rowers who find themselves in the water do not panic and are able to respond so that they can keep themselves safe. In effect, this means that they should be able to swim or float. Floating, rather than swimming, is recommended by the RNLI, RLSS and NWSF because it tends to conserve heat and energy when in cold water.

All participants in rowing should be competent and confident in the water. Each club is expected to use its Risk Assessment to determine the capability that it requires its members to have.

It should be recognised that the ability to swim in a pool does not guarantee the ability to swim in cold, exposed waters. This is explained further in the online learning module on Cold Water and Hypothermia and the Safety Alert - Cold Water Kills.

Everyone taking part in rowing should be able to:

- *Float unaided for at least five minutes*

And ideally

- *Swim at least 50 metres in light clothing (rowing kit).*
- *Tread water for at least two minutes.*
- *Swim under water for at least five metres. "*

Those rowers who can only float or swim when wearing a buoyancy aid should also wear such an aid, or a lifejacket if coxing, whenever they are afloat."

The simple approach to the capsized test is first to ensure that the rower is confident in the water when wearing a buoyancy aid. Please do not use an inflatable lifejacket as it is difficult to climb on top of an inverted boat once the lifejacket has inflated. Do this in the swimming pool where it is easier to see them and to assist them if necessary. I do not think that the swimming pool would have a problem with someone wearing a (foam filled) buoyancy aid. There is information on how to teach a child to Float [here](#).

It is not advisable to ask a person with limited swimming ability to attempt the capsized drill in a river as it is difficult to support them. It would be necessary to have a person in the water with them as you would in the pool.

Please be aware that we have had many illnesses recently as a result of rivers being polluted, in many cases by sewage. This has been a consequence of the high rainfall. This has also resulted in high flow rates in rivers. There is more information on water quality [here](#).

Please study the Capsized Drill training [here](#). There is a course for people who coach the capsized drill.

Capsize training for the older rower

There was an enquiry about capsize and swim testing for some of a club's less physically able members. This mostly concerns the club's elderly rowers.

The club requires competence on two elements, swimming and capsize recovery. The club requires that rowers can get free from the boat, get clear of the boat, and raise their torso from the water onto the boat. If they cannot do this then the club requires them to always have a rescue launch in attendance when rowing. The older rowers are struggling with the capsize element and the club does not want to discriminate against them.

The response was to explain that I too have seen some more senior rowers discover that they cannot swim as well as they thought that they could, or as well as they used to be able to do. I cannot swim as well as I could either and once upon a time, I was a lifeguard at the swimming baths. The limitation is in endurance rather than technique or confidence. There was an explanation of the Competence in the Water guidance in Section 3.6 of RowSafe.

The club's risk assessment should be used to determine what it requires its members to be able to do, in this case taking into account the presence of the weir. If they need to be able to propel themselves through the water then having a lifejacket may not help much. The simplest thing to do is keep them well away from the weir. If there is a guard wire on the weir then this may not be such an issue.

Some people have difficulty climbing up onto the side of a boat, they often find themselves pulling the boat over towards them. It may be easier to climb over the bow (if the boat is inverted - climbing over the stern can cause a painful interaction with the fin). The simple technique is to push the bow down and between the legs then lean forward and pull the boat towards your body. You simply slide over the inverted boat until you are somewhere near the middle.

It is not discriminating against the elderly to keep them alive. You are simply recognising reality and taking action to provide extra targeted support where it is needed. Providing them with extra time in the pool is an excellent idea, with any luck they will come to enjoy it.

The suggestion that Health information should be included in BROE

The need for competitions to be informed about the pre-existing health conditions of rowers is explained in Section 9.8 of RowSafe. The statement there is that: -

“Club Officers are expected to

- Inform any Competition that they enter if a rower has a pre-existing medical condition that may impact their safety or that of others.”*

It has been suggested that BROE should be used to collect and hold info on this information.

It is thought that this may cause problems with compliance with the General Data Protection Regulations and could introduce issues of medical confidentiality. We could not require anyone to provide this information in this way.

Rescuing Adaptive Rowers at Competitions

Events for rowers who need adaptations are being increasingly integrated into “normal” rowing competitions. This is a wonderful development. There has been some concern about Competitions having boats available that can be used to rescue rowers who use adaptations, should they need it. Many of these rowers are as capable of self-rescue as any able-bodied rower but some may sometimes need help.

The advice that I have received includes the following: -

"Safety – a bit of extra thought and preparation!"

- The purpose of any Competition is to provide safe, fair and competitive racing with safety the ultimate priority.
- Organisers often make mistaken assumptions about the physical capabilities of adaptive rowers. “Adaptive” can, but does not necessarily, mean a “wheelchair user”. Innovative solutions to safety and other issues will have been identified by the athletes and their clubs.
- Many adaptive athletes do not require any safety measures above those defined in a mainstream event safety plan,
- It must be assumed that the safety plan may have to be amended to allow for the special needs of some adaptive entries. It is essential that every competitor with such requirements has a clear Recovery Plan following capsize and or injury.
- Clubs entering will have risk assessed and have pre-defined protocols for each athlete with special recovery requirements. These will form a useful basis to produce the individual event recovery plan.
- The suitability of safety boat provision and the experience/training of those manning them needs to be assessed and deemed fully capable of implementing any special recovery plan.
- All officials and safety personnel must be made aware when a person with a non-standard recovery protocol is on the water (and off). Keeping the number of adaptive rowers on the water at the same time low is advised.
- Early discussion between the Competition Rowing Safety Adviser and competitor and coach prior to the event is essential. A formal safety meeting may be needed.
- Competitions should be aware that safety or other considerations (e.g. steering a VI sculler) may require one or more launches to follow a race.
- The best persons to seek advice from are adaptive clubs and those clubs that have run successful adaptive Competitions.
- Experience has shown planning is everything and usually is not that complicated or onerous.
- It is important to share all relevant safety details with those entered. The athlete and club can then risk assess and determine that the arrangements meet the basic safety needs of that individual."

The two basic processes in rescue are: -

1. Establish the rower in a head above water position and
2. Extract the rower from the water

Once 1 is achieved. 2 can be done with appropriate care.

Advice from the RNLI includes the following: -

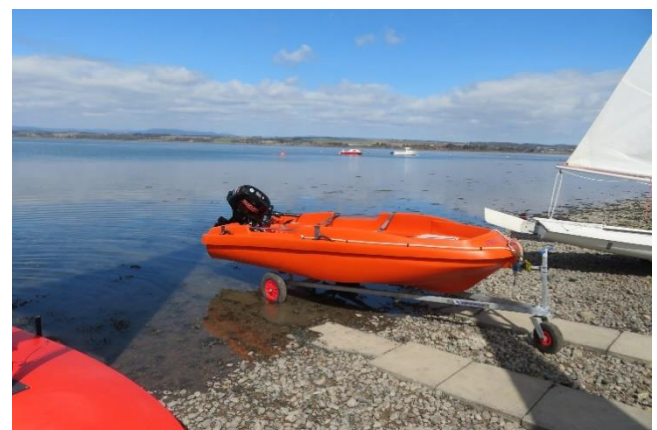
- Safety Boat, what is the most effective hull form to enable assistance?
- The number of people on the safety boat, and their training. The Helm should not be considered as part of the vessel's Crew, so if two people are required to lend assistance then these should be in addition to the Helm, otherwise the vessel is not in control. This will impact on the size of the safety boat needed.
- Assess the difference in response to both a conscious and unconscious rower. Having quick release Velcro might be demonstrated to be effective for a conscious person, but not unconscious. Can it be released by a rescue Crew when the vessel is inverted? (At least one member of the safety boat crew should be trained and equipped to use a safety knife to cut the straps, they may be required to enter the water to do so.)
- How many rowers can a safety boat effectively supervise, and within what distance? What happened if two rowers invert simultaneously?
- Will using a Lifejacket or PFD help or hinder? Are certain types more effective?
- It is possible to right an inverted vessel by standing on the opposite side (rigger) and use body weight to turn the boat over.

I also feel that the stability of the Safety Boat is critical, as is the ease with which a casualty can be lifted into the boat. For this reason, I feel that the preferred option is to use a boat with a drop front. Drop fronts are often used to support disabled dinghy sailors and look like the one shown opposite. I have used something like this to rescue an able bodied but unconscious rower from a 4x+. This was relatively easy.

(This is a large and "beefy" version, it does not need to be this big.)

It may be possible to use a Rigiflex "Jaffa" as these have relatively low freeboard, rounded sides and are relatively stable. One is shown opposite.

I do not think that it would be safe to use a catamaran launch or a "tin fish" for this application because of their lack of stability. A catamaran launch may have high initial stability and easy access to the casualty, but their ultimate stability is limited. If two crew members stand on one side of the launch and lift the casualty, then it is likely to capsize.



RIBS could also be suitable providing they are not too large. It would be difficult to lift a casualty into a large RIB.

Whatever boat type is used, it is important that they have sufficient crew, with appropriate skills and equipment to effect a rescue. This will include being equipped to cut straps, if necessary, and knowing how to do so. This may mean that they will need people competent and equipped to enter the water to provide support.

Belt Mounted inflatable life rings

I was asked about the efficacy of the Spinlock Alto belt mounted inflatable life ring as it appeared to have appropriate certifications. I investigated the use of this form of belt mounted aid some time ago. My advice then was that this was not suitable for rowers and that there were other belt mounted devices that would provide better protection, these look like small lifejackets when inflated. I have neither read nor heard anything since that would cause me to change that opinion. I think that this device provides very little buoyancy and does so in a way that would require the rower to work hard to stay on top of it. It does not keep the wearer's nose and mouth above the water in the same way that other belt mounted devices will do.

Emergency Rescue points on the Upper Thames

There is a link to useful information and maps on the government website here [River Thames: emergency rendezvous points - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/river-thames-emergency-rendezvous-points). This should be of interest to clubs between Teddington and Lechlade.

Work With British Canoeing and the CPGA

Information about reported incidents involving kayaks and canoes has again been shared with my counterpart at British Canoeing. Information about incidents involving Pilot Gigs has again been shared with the CPGA Safety Adviser.