

Rules of the River.

As operators of craft on the river our actions are governed by certain regulations, the principal ones being **“The International Regulations for Preventing Collisions at Sea 1972 (Colregs)”**. For inland waterways the UK also has the Inland Waters Small Passenger Boat Code and these are further amended by the various local authorities that manage the waterway. However in Colregs Rule 9, a vessel proceeding along the course of a narrow channel or fairway, is obliged to keep ***“as near to the outer limit of the channel or fairway which lies on her starboard side as is safe and practicable.”*** (Keep to the right side bank) The same Rule obliges a vessel of less than 20 metres in length **or a sailing vessel** not to impede the passage of a vessel “which can safely navigate only within a narrow channel or fairway.”

On the tidal Thames, the Port of London Authority manages while above Teddington it is the Environmental Agency. The most obvious differences are in the navigation speed limits as below Teddington “Knots” are used whilst above Teddington the system uses Kilometres per hour. The speed limit on our reach is 8km or 4.319 knots. As on the road the speed limit may not be safe in all circumstances and pursuant to Rule 6 ***“Every vessel shall at all times proceed at a safe speed so that she can take proper and effective action to avoid collision and be stopped within a distance appropriate to the prevailing circumstances and conditions.”*** On the Thames all vessels are required to travel at a speed that does not make a wake or wash that causes, discomfort, distress or damage to banks, property or other boats. **Note: The term “Knots” means nautical miles per hour so the phrase Knots per Hour is not correct.*

On the water no craft has an absolute “right of way” and the use of this term is not correct. There are two correct terms, **“The Stand On Vessel”** and **“The Give Way Vessel”**. The latter term being plainer than the former thus the Stand on Vessel is the one with passage priority and is not expected to give way until evasive action becomes necessary to avoid collision. Even here, there is a requirement to take action early and decisively enough for the Give Way Vessel to see the action being taken. **No vessel has the right to continue to Stand On to a point where a collision appears to be unavoidable or is unavoidable.**

In open water Power gives way to Sail but even here sail has no absolute right to Stand On and cause a collision. As well, sail gives way to vessels Constrained by Draft (unable to navigate in shallow water) Fishing, Not Under Command (similar to unable to manoeuvre), Not Making Way (not anchored or attached the dock, drifting without power) and Unable to Manoeuvre (towing being most likely). In the river the most likely situations encountered would be a vessel Constrained by Draft, Not Making Way or Unable to Manoeuvre.

The Thames is a narrow channel and under Rule 9 (d) ***“A vessel shall not cross a narrow channel or fairway if such crossing impedes the passage of a vessel which can safely navigate only within such channel or fairway”*** so dashing to and fro across the river is tolerated but is not a right of passage. It is arguable that the only time a dinghy could become a Stand On vessel is when it is Under Way with its Starboard side close to the bank; in all other circumstances it is the Give Way vessel, which in so far as possible, must take early and substantial action to keep well clear.

All this means that no sailing dinghy has the right to continue to act as a Stand On vessel to a point where a collision is unavoidable or may appear to be so to the helmsman on a powered vessel. It should be understood that a dinghy heading across the river towards the bow of an approaching power vessel is likely to disappear from the sight of the vessel's helmsman well before a collision is imminent. However, the vessel's helmsman is unlikely to be able to determine this and may take unnecessary avoiding action.

All Power vessels have a varying degree of difficulty going astern and must be moving backwards through the water for the rudder to have any effect at all. Plainly a vessel travelling down stream in a current could be stationary relative to the water but still moving forward over the ground. In such circumstances the vessel would be without steerage. For this reason a powered vessel moving down stream in a narrow channel is the Stand On vessel and has priority over a vessel coming up stream.

The club Patrol Boats are powered vessels and regardless of the duty being exercised, are required to navigate at all times in accordance with the Colregs and the Environmental Agency regulations.

As dinghy sailors we can be a little unforgiving of the antics of other river users but for the most part their behaviour falls within the range of the predictable. For a power boat helmsman navigating the river, seeing racing dinghies flying across the stream in every direction regardless of the Colregs must be a daunting sight indeed.

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