

**A River Users Guide to Punts and Racing Punting
on the Thames**

by

**Peter Williams
Thames Punting Club**

November 2021

Version 1



Purpose

This guide to punting has been produced by Peter Williams and colleagues at the Thames Punting Club at the request of the River Users Group. In recent RUG work on unpowered bye laws it was evident that with punts now rarer on the river than in the 1970s it would help other river users to gain a better understanding of their special requirements. A shorter version can be seen on their site.

Punting and Racing Punting

Punting is one of the most ancient ways of propelling a boat, pushing on a pole that is in contact with the bottom of the river. To do this, punters operate in parts of the river where the river is shallow, and the river bottom firm and gravelly. Where it is deep, muddy, rocky, too loose or too hard, headway is lost along with control of the punt.

Uniquely amongst river users punters are normally reliant upon their pole being in contact with the riverbed. As a consequence they can only really use the shallower water where they can find “bottom”. Like a train that must run on a track so a punter needs to “hug” the bank so the punt pole is in contact with the river bed.

Punts are in many ways the simplest of craft and have been part of the River Thames scene for well over 200 years. With your help we can work to ensure they continue for the next 200.

Types of punts

Punts are flat bottomed boats, capable of travelling in either direction. They vary in width but are typically 32/30 foot long:

- Leisure punt – 3' beam or greater
- Racing punt – 2' beam or less
- Best & Best punt – Typically just over 1' beam

The narrower the punt the quicker it goes but the less stable it is! The photo below shows two types of racing punts – the 2 foot wide wooden punt and a fibreglass 14inch wide Best boat.



Awareness of Punts and the impact of wake and wash

Progress in a punt can be relatively slow, but unlike some other unpowered craft, eg, a rowing boat, the punter is standing up and crucially **facing forward**. Therefore punters are likely to be able to see other craft approaching on a similar course, but as explained above, may be able to do little about it. They may call on you to slow down and/or change course. This is especially important if they are crossing the river, when they are most vulnerable because the depth of the water is such the pole cant reach the river bottom.

Punts (even the largest and slowest variety) only have a freeboard of up to 8" (200mm), so are susceptible to being flooded by any wake or wash (the waves behind a craft) created by a motor boat which is higher than that. Unlike a paddleboard, the boat will not ride up and down on the wash, but will, instead, fill with water. The narrower and quicker racing punts have even less freeboard (between 3" and 6" or 75-150mm – see opening photo above), so even more care needs to be taken when passing and with full recognition of the wake following behind your craft and the wash it creates.

Don't forget that the punt is close to the bank and gets hit by wash twice -first on the way into the bank and then when it bounces back off the bank and out again. If a punter starts to wobble there is often only one outcome – they get wet! **Don't forget you have a duty of care to avoid this even if you are at or below the speed limit!**

Where you might find punts on the Thames

While leisure punting was widespread up until the 1970s all along the Thames, there are now relatively few places where punts can be hired (Oxford is the obvious example and where punts are commonplace not least around the two punt stations – Cherwell Boathouse and Magdalen Bridge) so elsewhere the leisure punts you see are more likely to be in private ownership.

Punt racing is a sport that has been around since the 1860s and there are five clubs active on the Thames – going upstream on the non tidal Thames we have Skiff Club at Teddington, Dittons Skiff and Punt Club at Thames Ditton, Thames Valley Skiff Club at Walton, Wraysbury Skiff and Punting Club at Wraysbury and Wargrave Boat Club at Wargrave. Plus the Bray reach at Maidenhead (from the Railway bridge and roughly half a mile upstream) is the site of the Thames Punting Championships held in August.

Mention can be made of punting in canoes – often an event at regattas. This is an extreme skill, standing in a round bottomed boat, offering no stability. If seen, proceed with extreme caution, as any wash makes steering difficult and leads to wobbles and falling in.

In summary, punters will rarely disturb other river users, but are susceptible to suffering from those who dont understand punting.

The punt racing season is from June to late September and all the clubs typically train at least one late afternoon/night of the week and race at weekends. However near any of the clubs you can expect to find punts at any time of the year.

Punt Racing and Regattas

Punt racing is typically part of a wider regatta which will include skiffs. Races consist of 2/4 lengths of a course which uses the shallow water on one side of the river and is demarcated by posts (or more properly termed “ryepecks” or “pecks” for short) at each end of the course around which the punts turn and a buoyed central line to separate the two lanes in which the punts are raced. Punts will thus be raced up and down this course. Please stay well away and reduce speed to minimise wash when passing. Below going round the pecks at Chertsey Regatta.



River users are advised to keep their distance from racing punts – they are travelling at up to 5/6 knots, the boats are heavy so they have a lot of forward momentum. Mistakes do happen and punters can lose control with the punt suddenly veering off course.

Racing typically takes place where there is a good gravel river bed. Such gravel beds may arise naturally or have been laid. Terms such as the punting ledge or shelf are often used. Although at some clubs this shelf is on the same bank as the club, in two cases - Dittons and Skiff clubs it is on the opposite bank of the river meaning that punters have to cross over the freeway to get to the punting course.

The details & maps in the Appendix give the location of the courses.

You and punting - how we can work together

On the Thames you are most likely to come across punts in Oxford (various locations) and close by the racing clubs listed above.

However you should not assume you will never come across one elsewhere -there are some commercial hirers, eg, at Newbridge and of course there are punts in private ownership which might appear anywhere on the Upper Thames.

As noted earlier, it is highly likely that the punt will use the same bank and bottom on both the downstream and upstream journey and thus may appear to be going the wrong way. This may mean that you will need to briefly move away from the bank to allow the punt to pass on the inside or to slow down if you are in a powered craft to allow the wash you are creating to subside. Aside from river cruisers and speedboats the biggest causes of wash are rowing coaching launches but even they **must still take due care and attention regarding other river users.**

Finally it is worth noting the motor boats coming in to moor up or leave areas where there is an established punting ledge can often damage the gravel bed used by punters. By applying too much power propellers can dig out the bottom -in effect creating a hole in the river bed under their propeller and a mound of gravel immediately behind it. This effectively destroys the punting course for a few seasons until the river flow fills in the hole and erodes the mound. Please do bear this in mind.

Acknowledgements:

Thanks to the RUG bye law group previously chaired by Steve Collins for suggesting this guide be written. Thanks also to Matthew Gordon, Sally Stanley, Paul Barfoot, Ben Thompson and Sandy Nairne for help with the drafting. None are responsible for any errors.

Appendix: Racing Clubs and their punting courses

The Skiff Club (TSC): The Skiff Club punting shelf is opposite the entrance to Trowlock Island and on the Surrey side. It runs from the downriver end of Stevens Eyot down to opposite the downriver end of Trowlock Island. Punting training evening is Tuesday evening along with other times including outings upriver for picnics! TSC punters (like those from Dittons) have to cross the river to get to the punting ledge.



Dittons Skiff and Punting Club (DSPC): DSPC punters must cross from the clubhouse in Queens Road on the Surrey bank to their laid punting course nearly opposite the club on the Middlesex bank. The course runs from just upstream of the ferry landing stage for the Albany pub, downstream to a point towards the upstream end of Thames Ditton Island. Regatta racing takes place over the course which is roughly 200 yards upstream of a point opposite the DSPC club house.

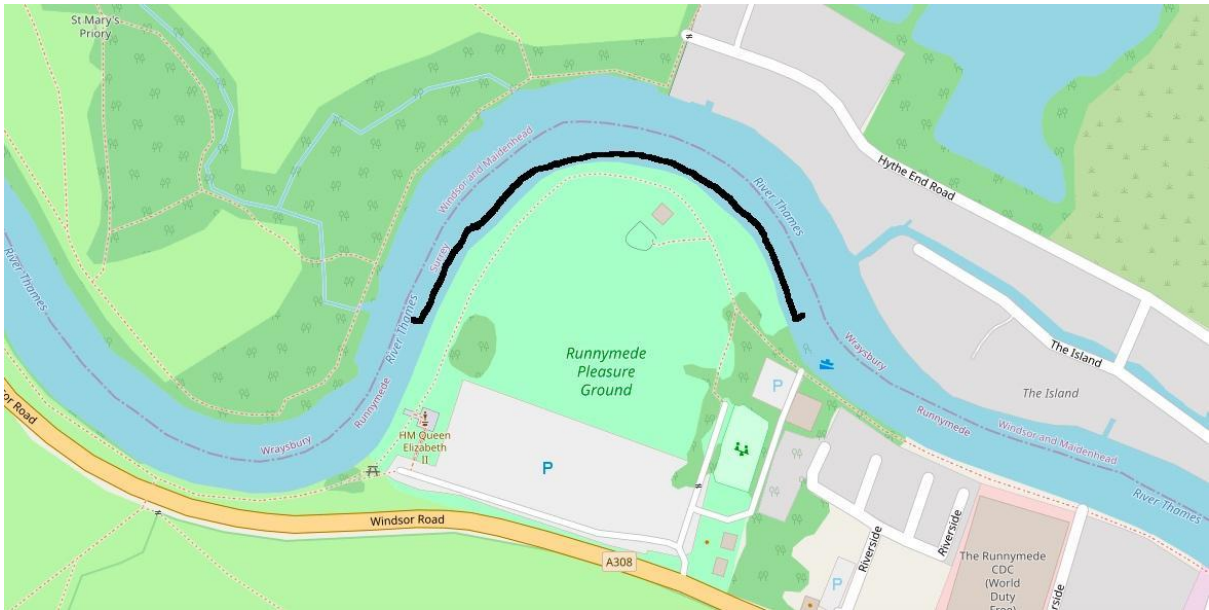


Thames Valley Skiff Club (TVSC): The full TVSC racing course on the Surrey bank extends from just below the Angler's pub (where the moorings stop) to just upstream of Gridley Miskin's wharf and before Walton Rowing Club. The racing course actually used varies depending upon the regatta in question so other river users need to be alert to that. For training purposes the Club punts over a wider area, extending upstream to include the Desborough Channel, where racing has previously been held and down to Sunbury Lock.



Wraysbury Skiff and Punting Club (WSPC): The punting course is on the Surrey side just upstream of the WSPC clubhouse. It is from the Red Life Ring post at the start, up to the start of the camp shedding where the bank steps out prior to the French Brothers landing stage. The top peck is before the camp's shedding, but includes the "run over" for stopping

and turning. For reference on the bank, the kiosk and childrens' paddling pool are along the course. There are no other landmarks or physical items to describe, other than trees.



Wargrave Boat Club (WBC): On the Wargrave reach (Marsh to Shiplake locks) WBC members usually only venture as far downstream as the Hennerton Backwater - this joins the main river on the first bend above Marsh, just below the islands and runs up to Val Wyatt's boathouse. Most activity is normally on the Berkshire bank but use is also made of the Oxfordshire bank. The intensity of use increases above Val Wyatts (and the St George and Dragon) up to the railway bridge below Shiplake Lock (where the Loddon joins). Less frequently WBC also venture upstream, Borough Marsh and St Patrick's are both side streams above Shiplake that feed into the Loddon, bypassing Shiplake Lock.



