

A SHORT RIVER USERS GUIDE TO PUNTS AND RACING PUNTING

This shortened version has been produced by Peter Williams of the Thames Punting Club to accompany the finalized RUG bye law report. The full version with more photos, maps and text is on the TPC website

The Basics

Punting relies on pushing on a pole that is in contact with the bottom of the river. Punters can only operate where the bottom is shallow, firm and ideally gravelly. As such a punter needs to avoid the deep water away from the bank. It is also the reason that punters may be seen on the “wrong” side of the river and “hugging” the bank.

Types of Punt

Punts are flat bottomed boats, capable of travelling in either direction. They include:

- Leisure punt – 3’ (0.9m) beam or greater
- Two foot racing punt – 2’ (0.7m) beam
- Best & best racing punt – roughly 1’ (0.4m) beam.

The narrower the punt the less stable it is. A best and best can be up to 30’ (9.8m) in length and a 2 foot is typically 32’.



Awareness of Punts and the Impact of Wake and Wash

The punter will be **standing up and facing forward** so is likely to be able to see other craft approaching but may be able to do little about it as a punt does not react as quickly as other boats. The punter may call on you to slow down and/or change course. This is especially important if the punt is crossing the river because the depth of the water may mean the pole cannot reach the river bottom.

Leisure punts (the larger and slowest variety) have a freeboard of up to 8" (200mm) and even they are susceptible to being flooded by the wash created by a power boat.

Racing punts are narrower than leisure punts and have less freeboard (about 3-6" or 75-150mm), so even more care needs to be taken when passing.

As a punt is close to the bank, it gets hit by wash twice - first on the way into the bank and then when it bounces back off the bank. **You have a duty of care to avoid this wash effect, even if you are at or below the speed limit.**

Leisure punting was widespread all along the Thames up until the 1970s. There are now relatively few places where punts can be hired (Oxford is the obvious example, especially around Cherwell Boathouse and Magdalen Bridge).

Punt racing is a sport that has been around since the 1860s. There are five clubs active on the Thames. Going upstream 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 Runnymede
- Wargrave Boat Club at Wargrave.

In addition, there is the annual championship racing at Maidenhead: the spiritual home of racing punting over the famous "Maidenhead Mile" from downstream of the railway bridge.

Punt racing is typically part of a regatta, where the river will be buoyed for river traffic and signage will be in place. The punt course uses the shallow water on one side of the river and is demarcated by posts called "ryepecks" (or "pecks" for short) at each end of the course and around which the punts are turned. Please stay well away and reduce speed to minimise wash when passing.

River users are advised to keep their distance from racing punts. The punts are heavy (around 125 kilograms for a 0.7m punt); they have a lot of forward momentum; and they require skill to steer and stop. Punters can lose control of the punt (in part as a consequence of the unknown river bottom) and may veer off course.

Racing may be on the same bank as the club, but at both Dittons and Skiff Clubs it is on the other side of the river. The punters thus have to cross the river to get to the punting course.

Mention should also be made of punting in canoes at regattas. This is an extreme skill, standing in a canoe which is very unstable. If seen, proceed with extreme caution, as any wash will drastically disturb the competitors.

While training may begin in late April/early May, the punt racing season is from June to late September. Clubs typically train at least one or two late afternoons/evenings of the week and race at weekends. However, you may encounter punts at any time of the year near the clubs listed above. In the full guide the location of the racing courses is given in some detail.

You and Punting - how we can work together

On the Thames you are most likely to come across punts in Oxford and close by the racing clubs (as well as at the Championships in Maidenhead in early August). However, you may encounter one elsewhere. There are some commercial hirers, eg, at Newbridge, and there are punts in private ownership which could be anywhere on the Upper Thames.

It is highly likely that the punt will use the same bank and bottom on both the downstream and upstream journey and thus 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, another cause of excessive wash are rowing coaching launches **however they must still take due care and attention regarding other river users.**

Punters will rarely cause disturbance to other river users but are susceptible to suffering from others who do not understand punting and punts.

Finally, it is worth noting that power boats coming in to moor up or leave areas where there is an established punting ledge can damage the gravel riverbed. By applying too much power, propellers can dig out the bottom - in effect creating a hole in the riverbed under the propeller and a mound of gravel immediately behind it. This effectively destroys the punting course until rectified.