



Paddling on the River Great Ouse: Denver to King's Lynn

Applicable to kayaks, canoes and SUP

General safety

It is the responsibility of clubs, organisations, individuals and commercial providers to ensure all participants can cope with the expected conditions and that the boats being used are suitable and correctly equipped for tidal waters. Activities should be risk-assessed and undertaken safely with appropriate good environmental practice and consideration for other river users.

The Great Ouse below Denver Sluice / Salter's Lode (Downham Market area) is a tidal river and navigation is essentially based around the behaviour of the tide, which changes regularly. The tidal rise and fall can be as much as 6 metres and the flow can reach 7 knots – more around bridge buttresses etc – so attention must be paid to both the direction and the strength of the tide and stream.

Paddlers need to be especially aware of the tide direction with regard to working the slacks against the tide and how this affects navigation.

Planning a trip

It is the responsibility of all paddlers whether paddling solo, as a group member or a group leader to ensure that they have assessed all factors which may affect their trip.

Do not proceed with a trip if the outcome of these checks shows up a problem with your equipment, knowledge, experience or fitness.

Inexperienced paddlers should not be coerced (or allow themselves to be coerced) into going afloat if they are not comfortable with any aspect of the planned trip.

Group leaders, small groups and solo paddlers on the River should carry either a mobile phone (in a buoyant, waterproof case) or a personal VHF radio set to summon help in an emergency.

Note: along the river there are no designated haul out locations.

Timings

Commercial ships and associated pilot boats & tugs will generally only be encountered from about 2½ hours before high water at Kings Lynn to about 1 hour after High water, and generally north of the visitor pontoons in Kings Lynn. Thus, it is recommended that all paddling activities take place on the River upstream of Boal Quay (fishing boat quay) and / or outside of the operating times above.

Generally, neap tides are less busy than spring tides as well as much reduced tidal flows throughout the whole river.

Shipping information could usually be obtained from King's Lynn Conservancy Board several days in advance during office hours. Tel: 01553 773411.

Bridges:

There are a number of bridges between King's Lynn and the area around Downham Market, all with various clearance heights and construction. Other than on flood conditions paddle boats shouldn't be restricted by the height of tide, but any accompanying powered escort craft must ensure that their "air-draft" is less than the expected bridge underside height above the water. It is essential that only the tidal information published by KLCB (and on their website <http://www.kingslynnport.co.uk/shipping/tides/>) is used to calculate the clearances.

Other river users:

The tidal river to the South of King's Lynn is used a variety of leisure craft from small motor boats to large steel barges. These craft may well have to keep to the deeper parts of the river and thus could well be encountered on the "wrong" side. It is imperative that you do not become engrossed in your own enjoyment and fail to keep a look out. It is good practice to look up and around every 5 strokes. This also helps you avoid floating objects like rafts of weeds, branches or other floating debris.

Weather conditions

Weather conditions on the Gt Ouse can have a significant effect on the safety and handling of small boats. The river is often exposed and weather conditions can create big waves and very choppy water, especially when combined with washes from motor vessels. Conditions can become awkward and physically demanding in a matter of minutes.

Wind

SUPs and open boats are particularly vulnerable to the effect of the wind although all small boats must take the wind into account. Wind against tide is a serious factor to consider as it can create steep standing waves. Wind speeds can vary and noticeably increase through and around bridge arches as well as in areas with tall / large buildings, where there can also be sudden changes of wind direction.

The wind can have an extra chilling effect on the body which will lower the level at which cold is felt and can lead to exposure and even exhaustion, especially if wet.

Rain

Rain can very much affect the perceived temperature. You will feel much colder when wet especially if it is also windy.

Rain can also seriously reduce visibility, particularly the ability for large motor vessels to spot small boats

Temperature

High temperatures as well as cold ones should be considered when deciding on what kit to wear and the duration of your trip. Very hot weather can be as physically demanding as cold weather

Visibility

As well as rain causing visibility issues, the River is often subject to fog and no attempt should be made to go afloat if the visibility is less than 100m.

A good guide is that if you cannot see the opposite bank clearly then you should not go afloat. If you encounter reduced visibility during an outing you should find a safe haven. Fog is often a more serious hazard than darkness and, although large motor vessels may have radar, small paddled boats do not show up on radar.

Lightening

If you experience lightning in your vicinity you should get off the river as soon as possible. No one should go afloat unless 30 minutes have elapsed since the last visible lightning.

Personal clothing and equipment

YOU MUST WEAR AT ALL TIMES A SUITABLE BUOYANCY AID (correctly sized and fitted) OR AN INFLATABLE LIFEJACKET (correctly fitted with a crotch strap and serviced with gas bottle correctly installed)

- You must ensure that you are wearing suitable clothing for the (forecast) conditions. A combination of water/wind proof outer items and lightweight man-made fibre sports clothing with thermal quick-drying properties are most suitable.
 - Wind, rain and cold temperatures will require additional layers or possibly wetsuits
 - Perhaps even dry suits in the winter months
- Peaked hats and sunglasses are recommended in sunny weather
- Suitable water sports shoes / boots are very important as you may need to walk on an uneven riverbed or bank with the risk of sharp objects. Going barefoot is not recommended on the River.

It is strongly recommended that paddlers wear bright-coloured or hi-vis clothing to improve their visibility to other vessels. This is particularly important in low light conditions or darkness.

Other items that paddlers may want to consider wearing or carrying, depending on the conditions:

- Whistle (ideally attached to your buoyancy aid)
- Spare / emergency clothing (and / or foil vests)
- Mobile phone (in a buoyant, waterproof case)
- Spare clothes (in a dry bag)
- Pump
- Paddle leash / Spare paddle(s)
- Gloves or Pogies
- Drinking water & snacks
- Sun cream

If paddling after dark your boat must be appropriately lit and you should wear appropriate clothing. **If choosing to paddle alone, ensure you are suitably equipped.**

Boat choice – is your boat suitable for the conditions?

Considerations

Freeboard: is the amount of hull above the waterline

All small man-powered boats have minimal freeboard in comparison to motor vessels and this very much affects their ability to cope with rough water. Sufficient freeboard is a vital consideration on the tidal river as wash and draw-off from motor vessels can be difficult to handle if the wash is coming from the side or unexpectedly from behind. Certain weather conditions can also cause very rough water.

Decking: is the boat 'open' or 'closed'?

The integral decks on a closed boat allow water to pass over the boat without taking any on board (swamping) - especially if spray decks are fitted. Open boats are more susceptible to swamping.

Buoyancy: affects a boat's ability to remain afloat even if swamped.

Most modern paddled boats have inherent or built-in buoyancy but some, especially open canoes and dragon boats, may require buoyancy to be retro-fitted.

Conclusions

Open boats (canoes or dragon boats) and very narrow racing-style boats are not well suited to rough water or big waves, neither are SUPs, due to their almost non-existent freeboard.

Recommendations

Conditions are often demanding on the river and only the more experienced paddlers should venture onto the tidal river using a suitable kayak or canoe. It is strongly recommended that dragon boats, SUPs and particularly inflatable boats remain within the non-tidal stretches of the Gt Ouse and its tributaries where water conditions are less demanding.

Note: the inland waters and tidal rivers above KLCB jurisdiction are under the jurisdiction of the Environment Agency, Middle Level Commissioners etc (contact details below)

Notifications

It is advisable to contact the King's Lynn Conservancy Board well in advance of any planned trip, and it is essential if you are planning for a group trip.

Our aim is to ensure the Safety of All river users and to promote the safe enjoyment of the Tidal Great Ouse and the Wash.

To fulfil this aim we endeavour to publicise all events that involve use of the river outside of normal commercial shipping and fishing vessels so that all River users can make a more informed decision as to their proposed activities. If the event is deemed to warrant a formal Notice to Mariners a charge is then made (<http://www.kingslynnport.co.uk/shipping/dues-charges/>).

We will give safety advice and may on occasion suggest that due to other activities, weather, safety considerations, experience etc that your planned trip is **not suitable** for that time, or that additional risk reduction measures need to be put in place before the trip can safely go ahead.

Our website, www.kingslynnport.co.uk has a large amount of information including chart extracts, a small craft guide for the area seaward of King's Lynn, links and contact information.

King's Lynn Conservancy Board is the Statutory Port, Harbour and Pilotage Authority for King's Lynn and the Eastern part of the Wash as well as the tidal Great Ouse inland as far as just past Stowbridge.

See also:

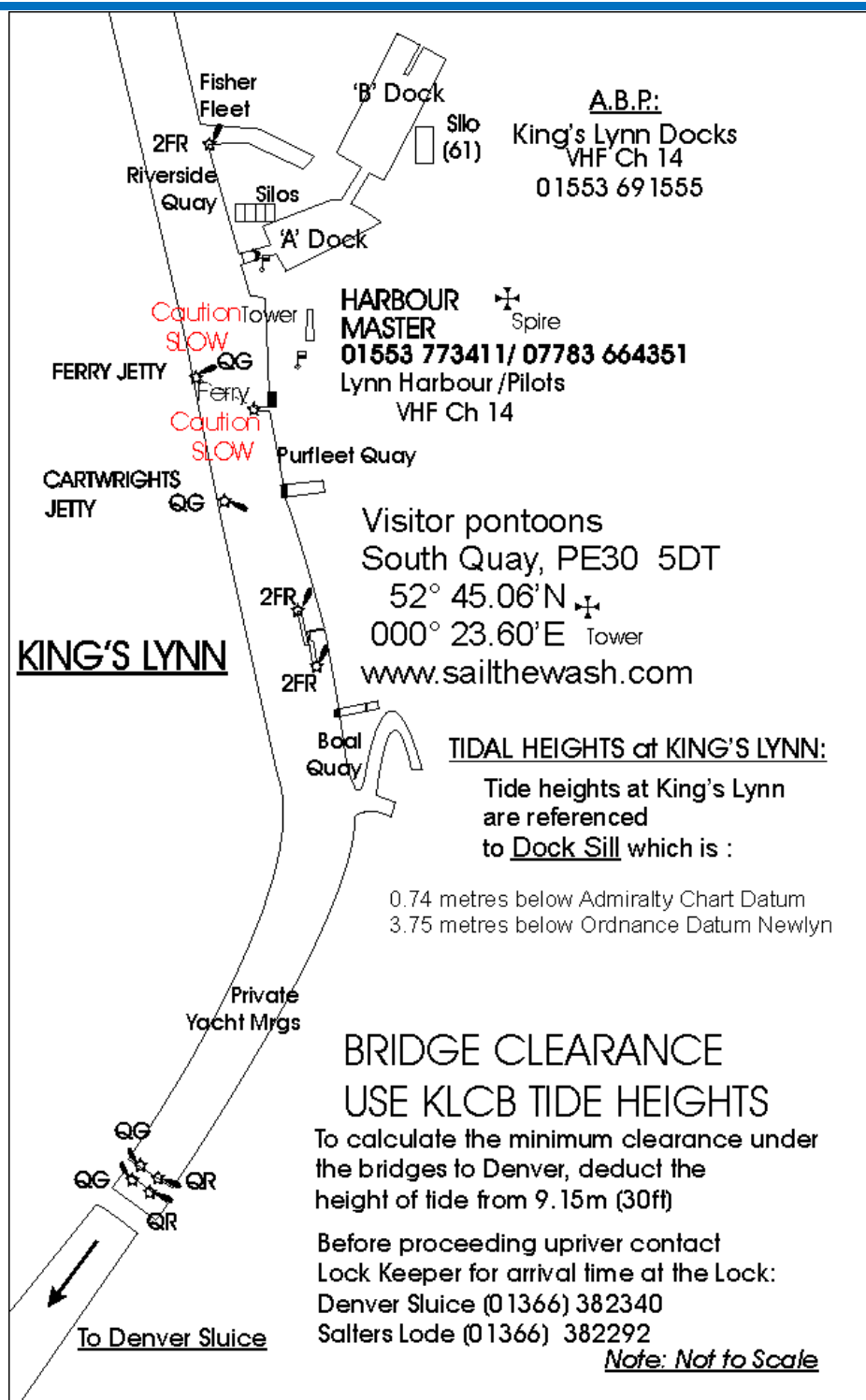
www.sailthewash.com for information for visitors and sailing further afield.

<http://www.goba.org.uk> for all recreational users of the Gt Ouse

<https://middlelevel.gov.uk/> for information on navigation etc in the Fens

<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/anglian-waterways-bridges-locks-and-facilities-for-boaters>

for Environment Agency general information



Other Useful Sources of information:

British Canoeing publication: "You, your canoe and the marine environment"

- British Canoeing website: <https://www.britishcanoeing.org.uk/go-canoeing/access-and-environment/environment-good-practice>
- Go Paddling website: <https://gopaddling.info/>
- Paddles Up website: <https://paddlesuptraining.com/about-paddles-up-training/>
- RNLI website: <https://rnli.org/safety/choose-your-activity/kayaking-and-canoeing>
- Swim England website: <https://www.swimming.org/openwater/how-to-start/>