



Visiting the Thames Tideway by boat

The River Thames Society celebrates all the river has to offer, and what better way to appreciate this than from the water, cruising in a private boat? Throughout the non-tidal river, many do just that, enjoying pottering along, stopping when convenient for a lunch break or overnight, visiting the many sights, enjoying drinks and meals ashore. No need for detailed advance planning, unless late arrival could prove unwise at a chosen honey-pot mooring site.

Sorry, but this approach is just not possible on the tidal Thames: there is no equivalent to the free bankside temporary moorings for cruising boats as found on the upper and middle reaches of the river. There are lots of sights, excellent shops and restaurants, and apparently lots of vacant bankside pontoons, but it is far from easy to stop off for a short visit. This even applies in the section that is only semi-tidal, ie above the Richmond half-tide barrier. Arranging a stop for any sort of boat rally on this part of the Thames is all but impossible – laying of special moorings can be done, of course, as with the Queen’s jubilee event, but this goes beyond what any boat club or cruising association could afford.

The explanation for the difficulty with visitor mooring is as follows.

Firstly with tide comes twice-daily rise and fall of the water level, albeit the full range is only found below Richmond. That means the water depth is variable over the 24 hours, with drying out at low tide by the bank, and strong flows in both directions each day. As a consequence, fixed infrastructure like pilings and pontoons is needed for mooring to be safe enough to leave a vessel unattended and to enable easy access to/from the bank. So far, provision of such infrastructure by private or public bodies has been very limited, with the main reasons given that this is expensive to install and maintain for only temporary and mainly seasonal visitors.

Secondly, in addition to the difficulties of bankside mooring on a tidal river, byelaws limit mooring to 1 hour for almost all the publicly-accessible bank in the upper reaches ie in Richmond and Hounslow, due to the fear of residential boat squatters.

Thirdly, much of the river bank is built-on, increasingly with expensive housing that squeezes out other uses. Whilst a view of the river adds to the value/price of these properties, the perceived wisdom seems to be that sight of any moored boats then detracts. So even when a riverside housing development includes pilings and a mooring pontoon, quite often these can be empty of boats, adorned instead with signs that say ‘Private. No Mooring’ and with security gates to match.

Finally, the lower Thames is a working river with river traffic that generates considerable wash, especially in the Pool and downstream. Many sites on the main river can get too uncomfortable for mooring small boats alongside, which risk being smashed around in spite of fendering.

A mainstay for cruising higher up the river, the riverside pub, does not come to the boater’s aid. There is only one pub with a mooring pontoon and easy landside access (The Anglers at Teddington), with overnight stays not permitted. Although in water at low tide, it is shallow by the Barmy Arms at Twickenham riverside, but stays for up to 24 hours are allowed here. Few riverside pubs downriver have facilities for visiting boats, and the river alongside may dry out at low water. There are further

pontoons and landing stages reserved for passenger or commercial vessels, and also those occupied by permanent residential vessels, but without regular space for visitors.

With some advance planning, it is possible to stay on the tidal river, although few facilities allow access to the bank without using a dinghy, and even then, there may be nowhere for the dinghy to be left safely. Since there are so few accessible bankside spaces, it is vital to book, and this may have to be well in advance at peak periods. Some mooring spaces are available only when not needed for the Clipper service. Visitor moorings are not just used by those for whom the tideway is the destination, but the greater numbers needing to break the passage to/from the sea and Teddington/Brentford.

This limited availability is not good enough. It puts the barrier too high for the casual visitor and especially those hoping to cruise and linger in company. On the semi-tidal stretch above Richmond half-tide Lock and Weir, there are lots of places where visiting boats could be made welcome with minimal expense, e.g. everywhere where there is a vertical bank if the bottom were cleared of debris, the depth at the normal maintained summer level clearly indicated, and rubbing strakes and mooring bollards provided. Some existing places, like Twickenham riverside, might benefit from dredging. Richmond landing stage could find space for visitors provided enough of the remainder is reserved for passenger vessels. Then rather than blunderbuss byelaws, an alternative way would need to be found to dissuade permanent residential squatters from occupying these sites. It would also be good to see some recently lost mooring opportunities reinstated, like Gallions Point marina, or pontoons back again at Woolwich Pier.

The PLA website indicates where there are visitors' moorings, supplied as a condition of granting a licence to owners and it is important that they are utilised to resist pressure to turn them into residential moorings, but mostly these are not enough for even a small boat club cruising in company. The docks off the Thames that will take visitors are usually accessed within a few hours of high water so that may not fit in easily with cruising plans if coming down from Teddington. For the passage from Teddington to the sea, Gravesend may be where the tide runs out and it can be a good place to stay for a few hours. Though not on the Thames, Queenborough is also another regular stopping boat for those timing a passage up/down the tidal river, with Queenborough Harbour Trust having pontoon moorings for smaller vessels and buoys for the larger ones, now its barge is no longer available.

Most places advertising visitors' moorings may only take one or two vessels at a time, dependent on how many of their permanent boats are away, and some are only suitable for smaller vessels anyway (eg Thurrock Yacht Club). On the other hand, only the larger and most robust vessel should consider Hermitage Community moorings, since the wash there can be pretty extreme. Those organising outings for their boat or cruising clubs will know what is possible for their types of vessel if the limited space is booked well in advance, with Chiswick Pier Trust, Greenwich Yacht Club and Erith Yacht Club in demand, and Gravesend and Queenborough Harbour Trust for those well down river. For an isolated cruiser or motor barge, there could well be space at one of the wharves with residential or permanent vessels (eg Imperial or Plantation Wharf), with the PLA and the planners sometimes having insisted on accessibility for visiting boats, coming at the sort of price familiar to those used to marinas in the Solent.

The only facilities the PLA provide are midstream buoys, without any facilities for getting ashore, including no approved spaces for tying up personal dinghies. So these buoys may not be really practicable for those with private cruising vessels wanting to enjoy the local sites/sights ashore for a few hours or days.

All this should make it clear that anyone taking their boat onto the tidal Thames needs to have a clear passage plan, with careful calculation around the tides, and any mooring place agreed in advance. Advice is to check yourself that any information in an almanac is still valid and that the bottom is clear before attempting to dry out. For the first time on tidal waters, and especially for the bigger and less manoeuvrable vessel, maybe have as crew someone with relevant experience as informal local 'pilot': the DBA (Barge Association) may be able to facilitate this for their members. For those with narrowboats intending cruising below Brentford, St Pancras Cruising Club is known for offering wise advice and arranging cruises in company.

If caught out by an emergency such as mechanical breakdown, in addition to the moorings covered here, there are other possible places to hang on or tie up, eg buoys and other facilities used by commercial vessels and indeed any vacant spot including anchoring, provided navigation for others is unaffected. But then seek advice from the PLA over how best to proceed – London VTS is on channel 14 between Teddington and Crayfordness, and channel 68 from there to Sea Reach no 4. Commercial traffic continues throughout the 24 hours, especially on the lower river, and a tug and tow could turn up at any time to claim that 'vacant' buoy.

Although the experienced learn how best to use the tidal river for pleasure cruising, the tidal Thames is generally unwelcoming to visitors, and this needs to change. In part this is recognised by the PLA – see the extract from their Vision for the future on the perceived shortage of moorings for visitors. The Boroughs of Richmond and Greenwich in particular need to provide the sorts of facilities that would be safe and easy for occasional visitors to use. The RTS is ready to help them understand how to maximise the mooring opportunities and then market their availability. Afterall, the tidal Thames and its immediate environs has much to offer those who visit by boat.

Peter Finch, Hilary Pereira

Chairs of Central Tideway & Estuary and Upper Tideway branches

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References:

- Port of London Authority Cruising on the tidal Thames. On <https://boatingonthethames.co.uk/cruising-tidal-thames-boating-on-the-thames-port-of-london-authority>.
- Byelaws against mooring in Richmond (Hounslow's are very similar) https://www.richmond.gov.uk/media/6807/byelaws_related_to_mooring.pdf

Moorings on the tidal Thames taking visitors

With step-ashore access

- Near Teddington, the EA moorings above the lock are an easy alternative (EA registration required for the boat).
- Advertised as having bookable visitor moorings, but supply limited
 - Chiswick Pier –short stay as well as 24hr
 - Plantation Wharf and Wandsworth Riverside (can get shallow)
 - Imperial Wharf
 - Butler’s Wharf pier
 - Hermitage mooring (can get very rough)
 - Some at Greenwich Yacht Club
 - Inside Gravesend Pier (tidal flow means joining and leaving can be challenging)
- After locking in to a dock (timing in/out around high tide can be critical, and costs high)
 - Brentford Dock marina
 - Chelsea Harbour
 - St Katharine Docks
 - Limehouse
 - West India Dock
 - South Dock
 - Embankment marina Gravesend
- Others with occasional availability:
 - Teddington Harbour
 - Hammerton’s at Marble Hill
 - Boatyards at Swan and Eel Pie islands, Richmond Bridge
 - Outside Chiswick Quay marina
 - Putney by the draw dock
 - Kew Marine, Dove, Putney, Chelsea and Cadogan Piers,
 - Tower Bridge moorings
 - Smallgains marina, Canvey island (in drying creek)
- Riparian owners with pontoons or other secure moorings prefer to keep them private even if they have no boats themselves, but arrangements may be possible between friends, including mooring alongside a more permanent boat.

Mid-stream buoys, any access ashore to be by dinghy

- Midstream PLA buoys at: Marble Hill above Glovers Ait, Brentford, Kew, Battersea Church, Nine Elms, Barking barge road, Thamesmead tier, Broadness barge road, Gravesend, Erith: for all of these there is then the question of where to leave the dinghy, if hoping to go ashore. Some buoys are most suitable for the larger vessel.
- Chas Newens Putney, Hurlingham Yacht Club, Greenwich Yacht Club, Thurrock Yacht Club, Erith Yacht Club, Gravesend sailing club, Benfleet creek with Benfleet Yacht Club and other clubs near Leigh-on-Sea. Dinghy mooring and maybe a club boat might be available too.

Also possible if the tide is right,

- Alongside various old wharves or traditional moorings, expecting to dry out at low water
- Drying out at the London Apprentice, Isleworth and for smaller boats, drying out on other draw docks, with notice and permission from the PLA, but the expectation is these facilities are for maintenance only
- Anchoring away from the main channel, preferably in an approved anchorage

Port of London Authority Thames Vision 2035

3. Realise new visitor moorings and publicise the availability of all visitor moorings effectively. We will examine the potential for further visitor moorings on the tidal Thames. The Opportunity Map of the tidal Thames (interactive format on our website) shows the alongside visitor moorings, up to 40 of them, at Town Pier, Gallions Point Marina, South Dock Marina, Hermitage Wharf, Imperial Wharf, Oyster Pier, Plantation Wharf Pier, Dove Pier, Chiswick Pier and Brentford Dock. There are also some visitor moorings at Limehouse and St Katherine Docks. Many of the visitor moorings are infrequently used, in spite of a lot of consultation responses stating that there are too few visitor moorings. We will look at improving availability of this information, particularly digitally, so that it is easier to find, book and use the visitor moorings. We will also look at the scope for improving existing slipways and building new ones to enable easy access to the river.