

YACHTS AND SHIPS - COLLISION AVOIDANCE

These notes were written by Peter Bateson, and it is hoped they will be helpful. They have been discussed with others knowledgeable in these matters. However it must be clearly understood that this advice in no way supersedes the legal rights and responsibilities of all seafarers, and no responsibility whether legal, moral or otherwise is accepted for any errors or omissions is accepted by him or by RSYC.

RSYC races in Southampton Water and the Solent on some 55 days or so each year; and our cruisers pass up and down all the time. We need a satisfactory working relationship with the harbour authorities, ships and ferries, fishing vessels and other pleasure boats with whom we share the waters.

Boat skippers should be familiar with the Collision Regulations and the ABP bylaws. Useful guidance is also given in the "blue" section of the annual Solent Book published by SCRA and in the leaflet "The Yachtsman's Guide to Southampton Water and its Approaches" available from ABP and from the Ocean Village Clubhouse.

HOW MUCH ROOM DO SHIPS NEED?

Ferries

The Red Jet ferries travel fast, but are very manoeuvrable, and are not physically constrained to remain within the main channel, although they are required to do so above Fawley by ABP unless there is good reason for them to be outside. In practice, they are extremely co-operative at dodging round boats when this is necessary or desirable. So be sensible and do not make sudden alterations of course ahead of them; but they do not need the same treatment as big ships.

The Red Funnel car ferries are larger, still fairly manoeuvrable, and similarly not physically constrained to remain within the main channel. However they are required to keep to the channel by ABP unless there is good reason for them to be outside. In practice, they may alter course when they can but are usually unwilling to alter speed. Treat them with courtesy and caution; they have a job to do whilst we are out for pleasure - usually!

Larger ships

Ships will usually go past the Docks and Fawley at around 5-7 knots, at which speed they may barely have steerage way. Between Dockhead and Fawley, both inbound and outbound, they often accelerate to 10-15 knots - so a ship that was coming slowly may now be coming fast, covering a mile in 4 minutes or one of his own lengths in 40 seconds. To seaward of Fawley, they may be doing more than 15 knots, including in the Thorn Channel and at the West Bramble turn where the speed is vital for control on the turns.

Larger ships will be unable to alter course when constrained by the channel; and changes of speed can take a quarter of a mile or more to make a useful difference. If forced to put her engines astern due to perceived risk of collision, a ship may well lose directional control. The bow of most ships will swing to starboard in this situation.

Visibility from the bridge of many ships is severely limited. On the larger container ships, boats may disappear from view half a mile or more ahead; and when close to, are invisible from the centre of the bridge out to 50m or more beyond the ship's side. The pilot and captain will normally be in the centre of the bridge, not at the side. As a rule of thumb, therefore, assume that the pilot or captain will lose sight of you when you are three or more ships-lengths away. So if crossing ahead of a ship, you need to have cleared at least 50m out to his side whilst he is still three of his lengths away - minimum. So don't even think of starting to cross in front of him if he's closer than four or five of

his lengths away, depending on his and your speed - that's 1200 to 1500 metres for a large container ship, two-thirds to three-quarters of a mile.

In the Thorn channel and around the West Bramble turn, yachts are excluded from the moving zone 1000 metres in front of, and 100m to each side of, any ship of over 150m. You can suffer a large fine for breaking this - and indeed for a breach of the rules anywhere else.

If the pilot/captain can't see you, a serious risk of collision is deemed to exist. He doesn't know if your genoa sheet just broke, the spinnaker collapsed, someone fell overboard, you spotted a nice hat floating in the water and decided to go and fetch it, you reached the layline and are about to tack for your next race mark, you spilt a boiling hot cup of tea over yourself - he just knows you've disappeared. So he has to take action assuming the worst.

REMEMBER:

In "narrow channels", sailing boats and power craft under 20m must not impede ships that can only proceed in the channel. For merchant ships, the whole of the Solent and Southampton Water are narrow channels.

Make your alteration of course early enough so there is no doubt you're avoiding a close-quarters situation. Make your alteration obvious to the ship - a few degrees change of course won't be seen.

Pass at a safe distance. Merely avoiding hitting the ship is not enough. A boat length of 10m may be enough between two 10m boats; it is grossly inadequate where one of the vessels is a ship.

Never be closer to a ship than say 50m from its side and three of its lengths ahead. Of course that's only a rule of thumb, greater clearance may be needed. If the ship gives 5 short blasts, she is worried. Get clear.

If you can't see the centre of the bridge clearly - the pilot/captain has already lost sight of you. If you could lose sight of the centre of the bridge whilst crossing - don't cross.