

OURCs Coxing Handbook

Gordon Buxton, Adrian Smith, Rachel Quarrell

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This Handbook was written in 1993 by Gordon Buxton, Adrian Smith and Rachel Quarrell for the Oxford University Coxswains' Society (OUCS), and has been updated by Edd Edmondson for 2003.

1 Introduction

The structure of rowing in Oxford follows this pattern:

OURCs: Oxford University Rowing Clubs.

<http://www.ourcs.org.uk/>

The central body which oversees college rowing.

Director of Rowing

Steve Royle

OURCs Secretary

Jen Thomson, New

The contact between OURCs and the colleges.

jennifer.thomson@new.ox.ac.uk

Captain of Coxswains

Alex Macdonald, Lincoln

In charge of college coxing on behalf of OURCs.

alexander.macdonald@lincoln.ox.ac.uk

OURCs Internet Secretary

Stuart Jones, Univ

Handles the OURCs mailing list and website.

stuart.jones@univ.ox.ac.uk

OUBC: Oxford University Boat Club (M, Hwt)

<http://www.oubc.org.uk/>

OUBWC: Oxford University Women's Boat Club (W, Hwt)

<http://www.ouwbc.com/>

OULRC: Oxford University Lightweight RC (M, Lwt)

<http://www.oulrc.org/>

OOWLRC: Oxford University Women's Lightweight RC

<http://www.ouwlrc.org.uk/>

2 Where is my boathouse?

Main boathouse side (North/Town/Oxford side of river) - see map for numbers and locations:

1. St. Anne's, St. Hugh's, Wadham, Harris Manchester.
2. Pembroke, St. Edmund Hall
3. Corpus Christi, St. John's
4. Keble, Jesus
5. Exeter, Brasenose
6. Oriel, Lincoln, Queen's, Somerville women
7. Balliol, New
8. Worcester, Merton
9. LMH, Magdalen, Trinity, Somerville men
10. Christ Church, Regent's Park

Towpath side (South/County of river):

This is known as the County side of the river.

1. Univ Boathouse - University College, Wolfson, St. Peter's, Linacre
2. Long Bridges Boathouse (aka Timms) - Hertford, Templeton, St. Hilda's, Mansfield, St. Anthony's, St. Catherine's, St. Benet's Hall
3. City Boathouse (below Gut) - sometimes used when transporting boats
4. Falcon Boathouse, next door - Osler-Green.

3 Coxing

Roles of the Cox

1. SAFETY
2. Steering and commands
3. Encouragement, strategy and coaching

Responsibilities of the Cox

1. THE BOAT AND OTHER RIVER USERS
 2. Suitability of conditions and equipment
 3. General communication
 4. Lights, when necessary
-

4 Safety

Personal Safety

- a) You must be able to swim at least 100 metres in light clothing.
- b) You must always wear a lifejacket.
- c) Always dress suitably, wearing several layers to keep warm, particularly around the lower back and head. Have some waterproof clothing available.
- d) Do not wear wellingtons in the boat.
- e) Never fasten any weight to yourself, or yourself to the boat. This includes fastening yourself to a coxbox - use a headband or a hat that will slip off easily.

Red and White Turning Markers

These are marks telling where to turn at the Head of the River and Haystacks Corner. You may also spin at Long Bridges, just after the raft there. There is also an early-turning marker 50 metres downstream of Donnington Bridge. You must turn between here and Haystacks in poor conditions (any flag).

The markers are red and white poles, or in the case of the Head of the River a white plank at the top of a wooden box.

Crew Safety

Make sure before you go on the river that:

- You and your crew know how to get in and out of the boat safely.
- Your crew know how to stop a boat quickly and safely.
- Your crew know how to move a boat forwards, backwards and around.
- You know how to steer a boat.
- You know the river is in a safe condition.
- The boat is in a safe condition, (e.g. the bowball is securely in place and the heel restraints are in good condition).
- If you are a novice cox, you have a coach present BEFORE you go on the water.

When you are on the water **never do anything about which you are unsure**, even if the coach tells you to. **You** are in charge!

Never put your crew, or any other river user in a situation where 'luck', 'split second timing' etc. are needed, e.g. racing for a gap between crews.

Never rely on another crew having seen you. Their cox may be as bad as (or worse than) you. If you are not sure, tell them to look "Ahead Eight!" or "Ahead Four!" etc.

5 Oxford Rules of the River

These are given in full on the OURCs webpage at <http://www.ourcs.org.uk/>. General points:

In general, river users must stick to the right of the river, i.e. the opposite side from UK roads.

Faster crews should normally overtake on the left, but only if it is clear and safe to do so. Never force another crew to stop just for the sake of your crew. You must never overtake in the Gut.

N.B. Motor vehicles have a speed restriction of 5 mph and you may find yourself having to pass them. Don't get too close to them or their wash.

If, for some reason, you need to cross the river, you must stop and check that the river is clear both ways before crossing. This applies particularly to those crews wishing to land upstream at OUBC, since you cannot see crews coming downstream easily. You must only cross from the Cherwell Cut.

You must boat and land upstream on the main boathouse bank, except in emergencies or during races when the river rules have been temporarily altered. You must boat downstream on the towpath side except during races when the river rules have been temporarily altered.

You must obey OURCs committee representatives at all times (unless you can see a hazard which they cannot or you are unable to obey - Tell them what the problem is, if there is one.)

When turning at Long Bridges, always turn immediately and with bows away from the bridges. Take care not to get stuck on the bank between the two bridges, but do not impede the entrance to the Gut.

Do not stop to coach or be coached on the following parts of the river:

- the Gut
- on the crown of any bend (eg Haystacks Corner) or where the river is narrow
- wherever doing so would cause a serious obstruction to other river traffic

6 Rowing Terms

There are a lot of things to remember when coxing. How to steer and where to be on the river are fairly simple tasks initially, when compared to the problem of remembering what the name of everything is. See the Glossary of section 10. Concentrate on the basics, and don't worry - you'll learn everything in time.

Coxing is like driving a car by voice control. You have to know the names of each part if you want it to work properly. Let's start with the basics. The

front of the boat is called the *bow*, which must always have a *rubber bow ball* attached. The back end of the boat (where you sit in most shells) is called the *stern*. In some boats, the cox lies down at the front (front-or bow-loaders), but is unlikely you will use one of these at Oxford.

Let's look now at how you talk to the rowers. You are not expected to know everyone's name and work out where they are sitting. Instead there is a *numbering system* starting from the bows, as seen in this diagram. The only quirk in the system is that the person closest to the bows is called 'bow', not '1', and the person closest to you is called 'stroke', not '8'. In a smaller boat the numbering starts the same way from bow, so the rowers in a four-place boat are called, in order, Bow, 2, 3 and Stroke.

You will notice from the diagram that all the rowers with blades on your left are called *stroke side*, and all the rowers blades on your right are called *bow side*. In most boats, the stroke-siders have even numbers and the bow-siders odd numbers.* In a bow-stroked/bow-rigged boat, the positions are still numbered sequentially, but for obvious reasons the oars themselves stay on the same side (see diagram) so the person in position 3 will be holding an oar with the number 4 on it.

You can talk to individual rowers by using their number, or by grouping them together in pairs, fours or sides. *Bow pair* is the pair of rowers closest to the bow (bow and 2), and *stern pair* is the pair nearest you. Similarly for *bow four* and *stern four*. You may also refer to *middle four* (3,4,5,6), *bow side* and *stroke side*.

* In a 'bow-rigged' boat stroke-side and bow-side remain the same, but the numbers/positions may be different. Talk to your coach if you cox a boat like this.

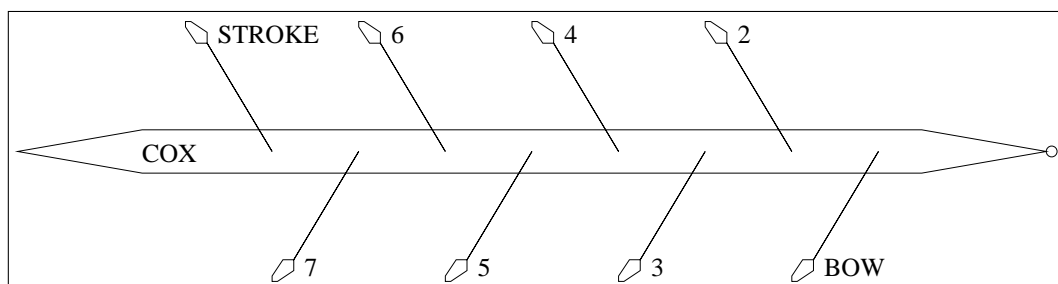


Figure 1: Names of people in the boat

7 Manoeuvring the boat

Your boat can be moved around when stationary by using individual rowers or groups of rowers. If you want to move forward or backward slowly, then use 'bow pair', 'stern pair', 'bow four' or 'stern four'.

Being able to **stop the boat** is also of the utmost importance. "Hold her up!" or "Hold it" is the command to use, or in emergencies, "HOLD IT HARD!" shouted at top volume. The rowers will stop rowing and square their blades in the water to slow the boat down rapidly. If you are rowing along at full speed before saying this, it will take you 1-3 lengths to come to a halt, so look ahead!

When the boat has stopped, you can no longer steer with the rudder, but you may need to move the boat around. To do this, rowers can either 'row on' or 'back down'.

Rowing on: This is taking a normal stroke in the water with one or more people. When you get someone to do this, the bows of their boat move away from their blade. For example, (see Figure 1), if you get the bow-man in the boat pictured to row on for one stroke, the bows will swing to the left. If you use the 2-man, the bows will swing to the right. It is very important to notice that the boat will also move forward a little way, so don't row on if you are going to hit anything!

Backing down: To do this, the rower should sit with his or her blade-handle close to the chest, the blade turned around the wrong way from normal and in the water. Pushing the handle away towards the toes causes the reverse of a normal stroke. If you 'back down' with your stroke-man or 7-man, it has a similar effect to 'rowing on' with bow or 2 respectively. This will also move the boat slightly

backwards. If you get tangled in a tree or another boat, back down with your stern pair or stern four (or perhaps people on just one side of the boat) to get out of trouble, rather than continuing to row on.

You must have your wits about you and **be decisive**. Call the name of the person you want to use, and tell them what to do: it's simple when you have learnt the numbers. For instance, commands you might use are "Bow, take a stroke!" or "7, back it down!". If they don't do it straight away, say it again and be forceful - remember you are in charge.

If you want the boat to turn but not move forward or backward, then get diagonally opposite rowers to move together. For example, asking bow to row on and stroke to back down will pivot the boat about its centre. You can get a bigger effect and a quicker turn by using more rowers, for example bow and 3 rowing on, stroke and 6 backing down.

Turning the boat around completely then becomes an extension of these methods. You can get the whole of bow side to row on and the whole of stroke side to back down. You can do it the other way round, but this method is more usual in Oxford, since boats tend to stick to the right side of the river and therefore need to turn their bows to the left to spin round. For novice boats, you will find that each side has to take it in turns with the other side - this is because they have to wait for the other side's rowers to move out of the way before they can take another stroke. Better crews may be able to 'chop-spin' or use short strokes simultaneously, but don't try this with a novice crew.

Over the page, examples of commands for stopping the boat, turning it and then rowing off again with bow four are shown. Figure 1 shows how the boat moves with turning commands.

“Next stroke, easy oars”

The rowers stop rowing

“Stroke side, hold it up”

The stroke side rowers square their blades in the water. This slows the boat down on stroke side but not bow side, and it starts to swing left and decelerate. This command isn't essential, but it gets the boat half-way round without any extra effort.

“Spinning the boat, stroke side backing, bow side rowing on. Starting stroke side. Ready? Go”

The rowers will turn the boat around (spinning) as described before, and will keep going until you stop by saying “Easy oars” again. You could start with bow side, depending on your position on the river. You could also back down on bow side and row on with stroke side, in which case you would spin in the opposite direction.

“Two, take a stroke”

A slight adjustment to the angle of the boat so that you are pointing in the right direction before rowing off. You might not have to do this, or might have to do it in the opposite direction, but always make sure you are lined up correctly down the river before moving off.

“Bow four, come forward to row. Are you ready? Go”

Bow four rowers will get ready to row, and then start rowing on your command “Go”. You may need to tell them what style or pressure to row before you say “Are you ready?”

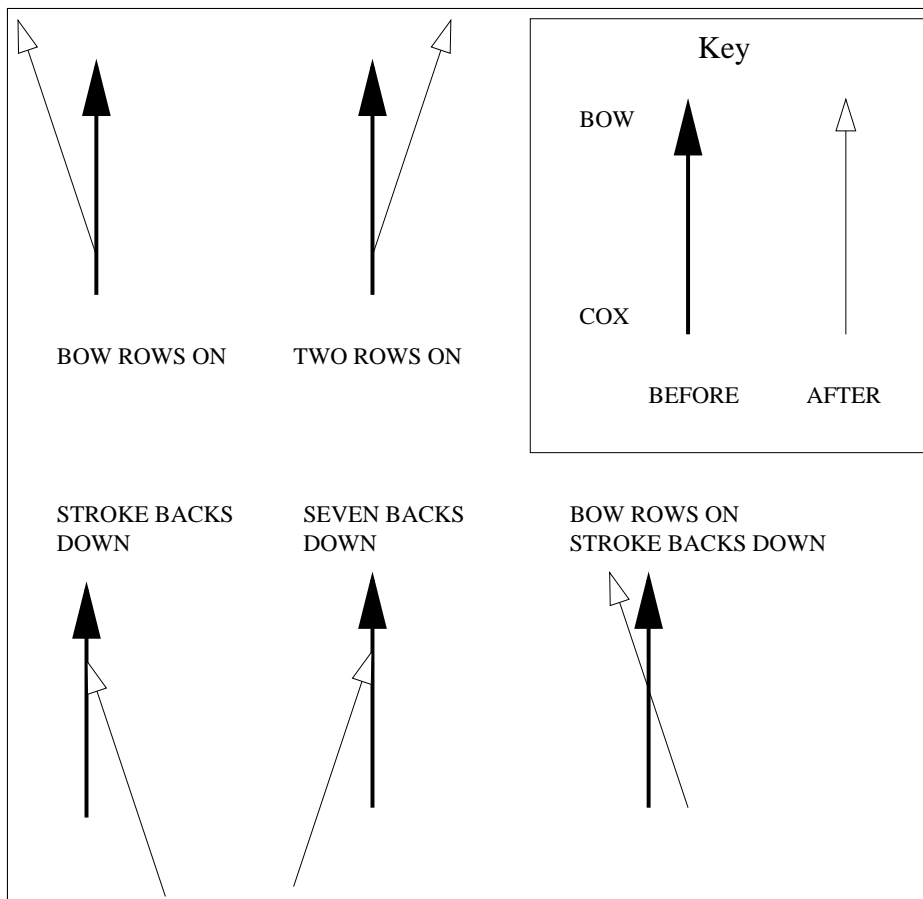


Figure 2: How taking strokes affects the boat

8 Steering

The cox is provided with a looped string attached to the rudder, with a handle of some kind on each side of the boat. One handle is held in each hand, and in nearly all college boats, which are stern-coxed, you steer by moving your hand forward on the side that you want to go towards. If you want to steer to the right, you move your right hand forwards, etc. It's a good idea to make sure you know where the handles are when the rudder is straight - sometimes they aren't quite in line!

Most coxes steer too much. There are usually two reasons for this:

- a) they do not look far enough ahead and so have to steer suddenly to avoid obstacles and other crews, or to turn corners.
- b) they steer too far in one direction (because the boat turns slowly) and then have to steer back again. This often results a snaking line down the river.

Boats appear to steer very slowly. Always remember that where your bows are pointing is where you will be in about three strokes time, even though by the time you get there your bows may be pointing in a new direction. You must steer, therefore, by thinking about two or three lengths ahead of your current positions.

Sometimes you will be in a position where the boat cannot turn quickly enough. In this case you can get the rowers on the outside of the corner to pull harder by saying "Stroke side, harden up, GO!" (or "Bow Side, harden up, GO!" or similar. This makes the boat turn quicker. Remember to go back to normal when the boat is straight again by saying "Even pressure, next stroke, GO!".

When it is very windy, you should steer to angle the boat into the wind slightly, so that you don't get blown out of control across the river.

When approaching a slower moving crew, make sure that you steer in plenty of time to be able to get round them without panic. You should try to overtake on the left if possible, but get back close to the right-hand bank as soon as possible. It is more important for you to learn how to steer properly than it is for you to try and coach or encourage the crew, until you are confident.

9 Commands

This list is arranged so that the place in the stroke when each item is said can be seen.

Always give a "Go!" so that the rowers are certain when you want them to obey you.

Try always to give about half a stroke between the "Go!" and the time you want the change.

CATCH	FINISH	CATCH
Light pressure	GO	
Quarter pressure	GO	
Half pressure	GO	
Three quarter pressure	GO	
Full pressure	GO	
Ten firm (ten hard strokes)	GO	
Wind down (after a burst)	GO	
Push for ten	GO	
Outside hands on/off	GO	
Inside hands down loom	GO	
	Square blades	GO
	Feathered blades	GO
	Normal squaring	GO
	Delayed feathering	GO
Next stroke	Hands only	GO
Next stroke	Body rock	GO
	Quarter slide	GO
	Half slide	GO
	Three quarter slide	GO
Full Slide	Next stroke	GO
Half pressure	Half slide	GO
Full pressure	Feathered blades	GO
Eeeaaasy	there!	Drop

When going into single strokes etc., give an "Easy there" command, then "Single strokes to hands away", or "Double stroke to quarter slide" etc, followed by "Go!"

When stopping a piece of quarter or half pressure, you can go straight into light pressure. When stopping a piece of fast, hard firm or three quarter pressure, wind down first, then call for light pressure.

10 Glossary

This is as comprehensive as possible while still maintaining the basic level. In order of related information:

Blade	Another name for an oar.	Spinning	Turning the boat around.
Spoon	Painted part of the blade which goes in the water.	Backing	Doing a reverse stroke to go backwards
Loom	Long stem of the blade.	Scratch on	This is when 3 rows with 2's blade or 2 with bow's blade. Paddling with another rower's blade very close to the boat: moves the boat sideways very quickly.
Handle	Wooden bit of the blade which you hold on to.	Inside hand	The one nearest the gate (it does the squaring and feathering).
Macons	Spoon shaped blades, popular for most of this century.	Outside hand	The one away from the gate, which does the pulling and striking down.
Hatchets	Blades with cleaver-shaped spoons, introduced in 1992, used by top crews.	Half slide	Taking the catch halfway to frontstops instead of at full slide. Also $\frac{1}{4}$, $\frac{3}{4}$.
Squared	Blade perpendicular to the water.	Body rock	What you do with legs flat before you go up the slide during the recovery.
Feathered	Blade parallel to the water.	Light pressure	Not pulling very hard.
Pin	Vertical metal bit onto which the swivel is mounted.	Full pressure	Pulling as hard as possible. Also 'Firm pressure'.
Swivel	Plastic bit of rigger which holds the blade and swivels to let the blade pivot.	Half pressure	In between (theoretically). Also quarter-pressure or three-quarter.
Gate	Metal bit at the top of the swivel which holds the blade in place.	Rating	The number of strokes taken in a minute. Measured by a 'Rate meter'.
Rigger	Metal stays fixed to the side of the boat that carry the blade. Riggers let the boat itself be very narrow while having a wide leverage on the blade.	Ratio	The ratio of time pulling the stroke against time sliding on the recovery.
Button	The plastic ring on the blade which pushes on the inside of the swivel/gate.	Stroke side	The left hand side of the boat when sitting in the cox's seat. All those rowers.
Catch	The part of the stroke where the blade is put into the water.	Bow side	The right hand side of the boat from the cox's seat, and those rowers.
Finish	The part of the stroke where the blade is taken out of the water.	Stroke (1)	The person sitting nearest the cox, who sets the rhythm and rate.
Draw	The part of the stroke where the spoon is pulled through the water.	Stroke (2)	The repeating cycle of movements made by the rower and blade.
Drive	The phase of the stroke during the draw when the legs are driving downward.	Take a catch	Do a light part-stroke to straighten the boat out.
Strike down	When the rower pushes the handle down to lever the blade out of the water.	Sit the boat	Blade feathered/flat on the water, holding the boat steady.
Recovery	The part of the stroke where the rower moves up the slide for the next catch.	Row on	Start paddling until told to stop.
Frontstops	Where you take the catch on a full slide stroke.	Easy	Stop rowing, as in 'Easy all' or 'Easy oars', 'Easy there'. Blade off water.
Backstops	Where you take the finish, legs flat, sitting back.	Drop	Drop the blade back onto the water after easying.
Slide	Each rower sits on a seat which moves on small wheels. These wheels run up and down the slide-runners. The slide is adjustable and there is one pair of runners for each rower.	Hold it	Blades squared in the water to slow or brake the boat.
		Hold it hard!	Shouted at top volume to avoid a crash: emergency stop.
		Bow rigged	A boat with the stroke person on bow side.
		Tandem	A line-up where two consecutive rowers are on the same side.
		Catching a crab	When a blade gets stuck in the water and the handle knocks the rower flat.

11 An Outing

1. Land based warm-up and stretch (crew). Either a run or exercises. Prevents injuries.
2. The crew get the boat out and put it on the water, facing in the correct direction.
3. Get the blades out and the crew into the boat.
4. The cox checks the river is clear and then gets in, always the last to get in.
5. Check again that the river is clear and push off the raft.
6. Water-based warm-up.
7. THE OUTING.
8. Check the river is clear, return to boathouse, stop and land.
9. Cox gets out.
10. Crew get out and put blades away while cox looks after the boat.
11. Crew gets the boat out of the water and puts it away in the boathouse.
12. Land based warm-down and stretch (crew).

Launching the boat

In general you should launch with the bows of the boat facing upstream. However, at Oxford, crews boating from OUBC and Long Bridges should boat downstream (ie all crews boat to the right) in order to avoid crossing the line of river traffic.

Coming out of the boathouse

To get the boat out of the boathouse, spread the crew along the boat, each opposite their own rigger. The general command for this is “Hands on”. Then say “Lift” or “Bring it out” - here you must watch the rudder and fin at the stern to make sure they aren’t damaged by knocking against something. Remind the crew to “Watch the riggers” as you “Walk it out” of the boathouse at “shoulders” or “waists” height. Stand at the doorway while the last few rowers leave so you can see both ends of the boat are clear. You have to be the eyes for the crew while they are carrying the boat. When there is enough space to swing the boat, give a call such as “Clear, bows to the right” or “Stern left” etc. The crew turn the boat parallel to the river and then walk down onto the raft at a slight angle, so that only a couple of people are stepping off the bank at one time.

Putting the boat on the water

Turn the boat over. The best way except with very light boats is to roll it over at waists, telling the crew which way, eg “River side riggers going up”. Then one by one, move the people on the water side, eg “Bow side holding, stroke side going under from stroke”. When everyone is on the bank side, “Feel for the edge with the foot” and then “Down, strike out”: keep an eye on the fin/rudder so that they don’t scrape on the raft. If you have a light boat and a strong crew, you can “toss the boat”. This involves everyone lifting the boat to head height “Up to heads, go” and then swinging it down together. When the boat is in the water, hold it by a rigger so that it doesn’t float away while the crew go and get their blades. [You should be careful about leaning blades up against boathouses, since they can be knocked over by the wind.]

To get the crew into the boat (bows right): You need bow side to fix their blades into their riggers before anyone gets in. Then they can hold the boat level and steady while stroke side climb in (making sure they don’t stand on the thin skin at the bottom of the boat): “Bow side holding, stroke side in”. Stroke side must first of all put their blades into their riggers and do the gates up securely, before taking off shoes and kit, doing up feet, etc. They should then tuck their blade handles under their arms to hold the boat steady while “Bow side in”. As the rest of the rowers climb into the boat, it will sink in the water a small way: make sure that the weight of the boat is not resting on the fragile bow side riggers “Push it off the riggers”.

Put lights on the boat if necessary, and close the boathouse. Get the crew to “Number off from bow when ready” if they shout their numbers in order. This tells you the crew is ready to row and reminds each person of their seat number that day. Check that the river is clear (especially over your left shoulder) and then hop in, telling the crew to “Push off bow side”.

Outings in eights or fours will normally start with half the boat or less rowing. This makes your boat very slow, so keep well into the bank out of the way of faster crews behind.

Coming in off the water (Landing)

This is essentially the reverse of launching. On the boathouse bank, and in most cases for the Long Bridges and OUBC rafts, you land in the same direction as the river traffic. For the OUBC raft you may also cross the river and land in the opposite direction, but only do this if the river is entirely clear or you will cause a traffic jam. If you do want to land upstream to OUBC, you must stop at the mouth of the Christ Church cut, close to the right bank, and wait until it is clear to cross.

For all landings, look around to make sure that it is safe to stop without impeding anyone else. Move to the right and stop early if you need to. Be aware of whether the wind and stream are going to push you into the raft or away. Easy the boat about one raft length early, aim the bows into the raft at a small angle (about 10-20 degrees) and glide in or paddle in with the stern pair or four. When close enough, warn “Bow (bank) side, mind your blades” and if needed, paddle on a bit more with a river side person. When overlapping sufficiently with the raft, get the closest person to you on the river side to hold it up, which will swing the stern towards the raft. You get out first.

If you get into trouble, be ready to back the boat down and try again, or go onto another clear raft further ahead. The most common problem is coming to a stop too far away from the raft. One very good way to solve this is (for a normal rig) to ask your stroke-man to back down with his/her blade as close to the boat as possible, and get 3 to scratch on with 2’s blade (see Glossary). These two actions together will move the boat sideways to bow side. While you are learning to land, don’t be embarrassed to ask people on the bank to pull you in. Landing is fairly difficult, so don’t expect to get it right straight away.

Getting the boat off the water

(Description for bow side landing, e.g. boathouses)

To get the boat off the water, first “Bow side out and hold the boat”, then “Stroke side out” with their blades. The crew puts their blades away while you hold the boat on the raft. Then “Hands on - lifting to waists - go”, making sure that the crew lift with their legs and don’t hurt their backs. “Stroke side going under, from stroke” one by one, leaving half the crew each side of the boat. Then “Roll the boat, river side riggers going over” and walk it up into the boathouse at waists or shoulders. You watch that it goes straight into the boathouse, reminding the crew to “Mind the riggers”. Put the boat back on its rack, making sure that it isn’t resting on riggers or any weak spots.

Put lights away if used and relax.

The crew should stretch or warm down: your job is finished.

12 Conclusion

Be sensible! Rowing can be dangerous, but only if you abuse the rules.

Be polite! We share the river with other clubs, cruisers, punts, and fishermen. All have rights.

Don’t take risks -
SAFETY IS YOUR FIRST PRIORITY.

Ask your boat club or OURCs for advice if needed.
But above all,

ENJOY YOURSELF: It’s a great sport!

Thanks to: Rachel Quarrell, Steve Royle, Sharon Heath (for endless cups of coffee), Ed Mitchell (for the printer), Alix Mathers (for the bit about rudder strings), Pete Buston (for his insults about the (original) diagrams and doing the washing up), and to Edd Edmondson for doing the revision for this handbook’s second decade.

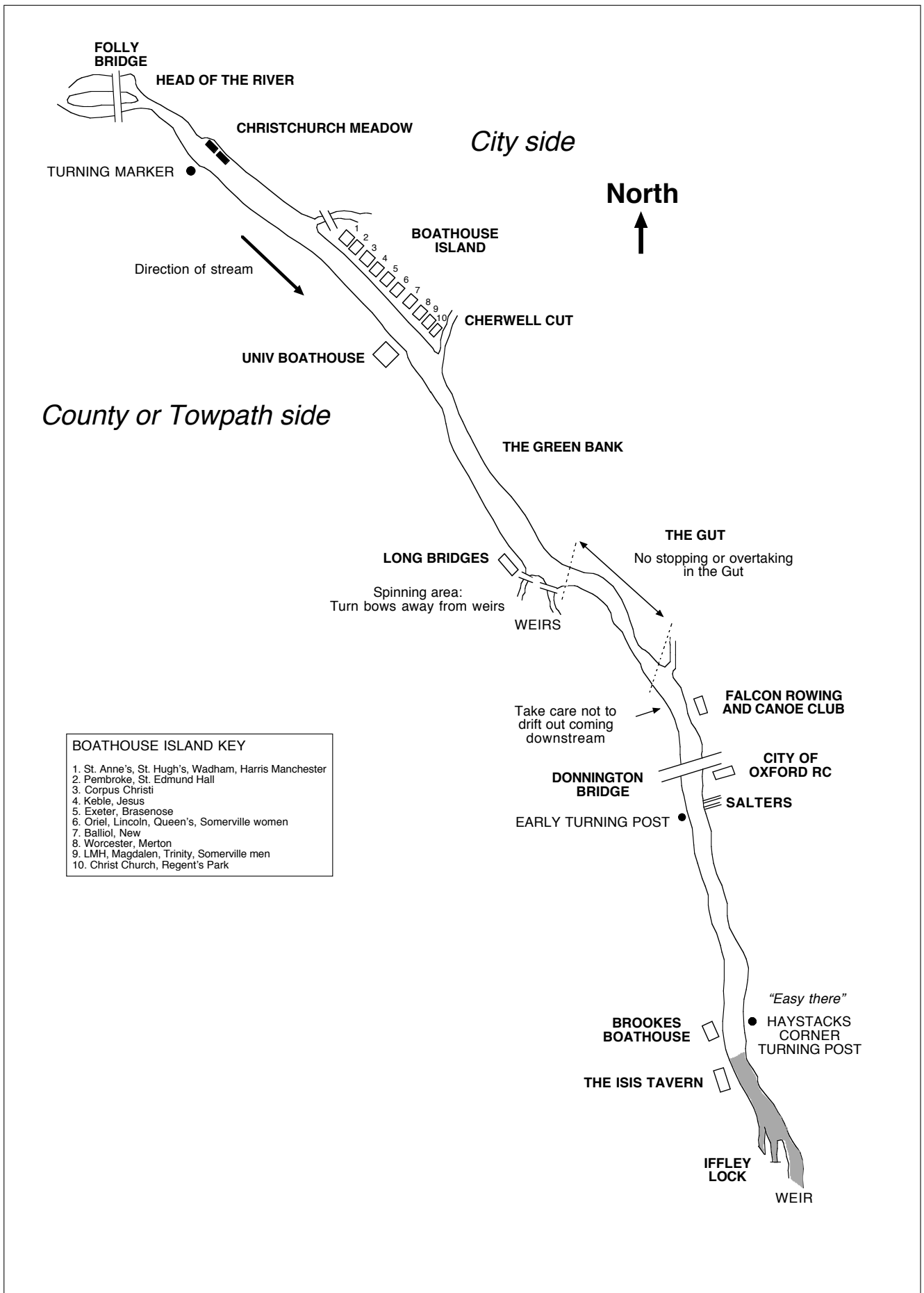


Figure 3: Map of the Isis