

‘Conflicts in Inshore Waters’

Captain Sven G. Gylden *writes*

In volume 47 of this *Journal*,¹ Commander P. S. Booth, Deputy Queen’s Harbour Master of Portsmouth, addressed a problem that is very acute all over the world. Mr Tim Bartlett² and Mr Dag Pike³ took up the challenge in the conventional yachtsman’s manner.

Both gentlemen are convinced that the yachting fraternity is completely flawless in its behaviour and completely innocent as regards the conflict situation. This can be compared with my own experiences from the Solent. It is a rare situation when ships I have been aboard have not met with some irregular behaviour from yachts and other small craft. The most common has been using the wrong side of the channel, thus creating a ‘green to green’ meeting situation, even if there has been water enough to proceed with their mast down outside the channel. Once I saw a pleasure craft anchored for fishing in the middle of the deep draught channel off Cowes. Last year a Whitbread race contender distinguished herself coming into Southampton, etc.

Under point 1 Mr Bartlett is irritated that Commander Booth considers it inconceivable to let a small vessel constitute a risk to a commercial vessel. Generally, commercial vessels are substantially larger than their pleasure counterparts and I believe Commander Booth refers to Rule 9b, which speaks of power-driven ships of less than 20 metres length and sailing vessels.

In point 2 Mr Bartlett reacts to the term ‘commercial vessel.’ Again I would like to refer to Rule 9b and others mentioning the length criterium of 20 metres. For the purpose of avoiding conflict, this criterion should suffice.

In point 3 Mr Bartlett states that a master’s subjective opinions are inadequate evidence that the yachtsmen are ignorant of the rules. Nevertheless, a shipmaster has to spend a considerable time at sea in various capacities, then a number of years at school plus a considerable time in deck officer positions before even having a chance of getting a command. Most of the ships relevant to this discussion will also have a pilot onboard and to become a pilot, additional training is necessary on top of that required to be a master. There will also be at least one watch-officer present, so the master will not be alone when he forms his ‘subjective’ opinion. The yachtsman’s situation on the other hand is that anyone, however incompetent, with sufficient funding at hand, can put himself in control of a yacht and venture out into the channels used by heavy traffic. The results of this form the basis for this discussion of conflicts!

The phenomenon is not unique for the Solent. A few years ago when I was in command of a small (300 grt, 145 feet in length overall) steamer heading up the Swedish west coast in narrow inshore channels, I overtook a number of sailing and powered yachts spread all over the channel. On this particular occasion I counted eight consecutive yachts that *turned to port* when I blew the whistle for them. We were all proceeding along the channel, so their lookout aft was not what could be expected of them considering their positions in a very busy channel. When going up the coast here in my own yacht, a 35-foot sailing offshore cruiser, I deliberately avoid going inshore but normally stay well out to sea. I have had too many near misses of collisions on account of my ‘fellow’ yachtsman’s interpretation of the current International Regulations for Preventing Collisions at Sea. The difference to what Captain A. N. Cockcroft⁴ writes is striking.

Point 4 deals with the analogy of airmen who have the advantage of the third

dimension. Nevertheless they are not allowed into controlled airspace without adhering to the rules applying to all traffic. It is not such a bad idea at all to keep yachts separate from heavy traffic in the sea channels as well – or at least to follow the regulations that apply.

Point 5 states that authorities are not always seen in the most favourable of lights by the recreational sailor. I have the feeling that this is true and that it works both ways. Considering the amount of work and time involved in building up rules of navigation, such as the COLREGS, just to find that they are largely ignored by a large group of people, will not build up any confidence.

Mr Bartlett presents some constructive suggestions. His proposal of discouraging passing 'green to green' is probably the key issue to this whole discussion and is fully supported in the COLREGS (Rule 9a). If Mr Bartlett can find a way to convey this message to the yachting fraternity, very much will be gained. I have tried for a number of years to do this, but unfortunately with very poor results. If combined with the directives of Rule 8a, we would not have to discuss any conflicts.

Among his other suggestion he wants bigger day signals. To what avail? If the yachtsman in question is ignoring the rest of the COLREGS, he will probably ignore these as well. On the matter of design and construction, Mr Bartlett will probably soon hear about the workgroup in IMO, chaired by Dr Nils H. Norrbin, dealing with minimum standards for ships' manoeuvrability. The question of shallow water effects, squat and interaction is presently under discussion in the Nautical Institute's journal *Seaways*, but not particularly with respect to conflicts with yachts. During my 34 years of piloting in and out of Gothenburg, the Baltic and the North Sea, I have seen enough of conflicts with yachtsmen; usually they have been sober – but not always.

REFERENCES

- ¹ Booth, P. S. (1994). Conflicts in inshore waters. *This Journal*, 47, 208.
- ² Bartlett, T. (1995). 'Conflicts in inshore waters'. *This Journal*, 48, 154.
- ³ Pike, D. (1995). 'Conflicts in inshore waters'. *This Journal*, 48, 153.
- ⁴ Cockcroft, A. N. and Lameijer, J. N. F. (1976). *A Guide to the Collision Avoidance Rules*. Stanford Maritime, London.

KEY WORDS

1. Port and harbour operations.
2. Small boat navigation.
3. Safety.
4. Collision avoidance.