

# **River Medway**

## **Access details for canoeists**

### **Updated December 2007**

#### **Introduction**

This document is a report detailing the navigational sections of the River Medway from a canoeing perspective. It is divided in to the following sections:

- General overview
- Distance guide
- Detail of locks / portages / weirs
- Common access points and parking places
- Seasonal water level information
- Hazards to look out for
- Contact details for local access officer and local canoe clubs

These details are only intended as an access guide to canoeing on the River Medway, and are based on personal experience and local knowledge. They assume normal river conditions and water levels, and that you are a competent paddler observing normal BCU guidelines for safe paddling. Paddlers should use their own judgement and common sense, take notice of any signs or restrictions in force on the day of their paddle, particularly with regard to car parking, and obey any instructions given by Environment Agency staff or other officials.

Whilst the information in this document is correct to the best of my knowledge, I cannot accept any responsibility for any incidents or inconvenience caused by any omissions or errors. That said, please let me know if you find anything that you don't agree with, or something else you think should be added.

#### **General Overview**

Canoeing is permitted on the River Medway along the navigable stretch of the river, which runs from the footbridge immediately below Leigh Sluice near Tonbridge, to the limit of non tidal waters at Allington Lock near Maidstone.

The water is all placid and suitable for all types of boat. Water quality is generally good and relatively clean.

There are nine locks along the river. Further details of these can be seen in the detail section of this report. All locks can be portaged in either direction using the landing stages provided.

There is no right of access to the Medway above the Leigh Sluice, and canoeing is not permitted. Please do not be tempted to paddle this section of the river, as it will jeopardise future agreements if paddlers cause trouble with the landowners and fishing clubs by carrying out 'bandit runs'.

Below Allington Sluice the river is tidal and canoeists therefore have full access. This part of the river is not covered by this document. If you are intending to paddle this section I would recommend that you consult your tide tables carefully, as access to and from the river is extremely muddy at anything other than high tide.

Access to the non tidal River Medway requires an Environment Agency licence, unless you are a BCU member, in which case it is covered by your BCU membership. It is technically possible (but very unusual) that you may be asked to show your BCU yellow boat sticker or EA river licence to an EA official.

If you are not a BCU member, a river licence can be obtained by writing to the Environment Agency at:

The Environment Agency  
Waterways Dept  
Orchard House  
Endeavour Park  
London Road  
Addington  
Kent

ME19 5SH

Contact name: Michelle Waterman 01732 223222

There is towpath access along the whole river. Some sections are overgrown and really only passable on foot, particularly the section between East and Sluice Weir locks.

There are no access disputes on the river. We generally have a good rapport with the local fishing clubs and other river users. Please report any incidents that take place to the Access Officer so that these can be followed up.

## **Distance Guide**

The full length of the non tidal navigable section is about 19 miles long. This is broken down as follows:

Leigh Sluice to Tonbridge Town Lock	1.5 miles
Town Lock To Eldridges Lock	1.25 miles
Eldridges Lock to Porters Lock	1.0 miles
Porters Lock to East Lock	1.25 miles
East Lock to Oak Weir Lock	0.75 miles
Oak Weir Lock to Sluice Weir Lock	1.25 miles
Sluice Weir Lock to Hampstead Lock (Yalding)	2.25 miles
Hampstead Lock to Teston Lock	3.0 miles
Teston Lock to East Farleigh Lock	2.0 miles
East Farleigh Lock to Allington Lock	4.5 miles

There is vehicle access to the river at the following points (see below for parking details):

Tonbridge Town Centre	1.5 miles from top of navigation
Cannon Lane, Tonbridge	1.75 miles " "
Hartlake Bridge, Golden Green	3.75 miles " "
Branbridges, East Peckham	7 miles " "
Yalding Weir	9.25 miles " "
Yalding Lock	9.75 miles " "
Wateringbury Bridge	11.25 miles " "
Teston Picnic Site / Lock	12.5 " "

East Farleigh Bridge Lock	14.5	"	"
Maidstone Town Centre	17 miles	"	"
Allington (Malta Inn)	19 miles	"	"

## **Detail of River, Locks, Portages and Weirs**

These details assume you are paddling in a downstream direction.

If you are with a larger boat using the locks, they will all take boats up to 80ft long and 18.5ft wide. You will need a standard square shape lock key to operate the lock gate sluices.

### Leigh Sluice to Tonbridge Town Lock

This section is generally sheltered, and starts with a long 1,700m straight and then divides in to two around Tonbridge sportsground just after a railway bridge. Either the left or right fork will bring you back to where the two sections join again in Tonbridge Town Centre, next to the Tonbridge Canoe Club clubhouse.

Town Lock is 300m below the main bridge at Tonbridge. It consists of a lock, automatic radial sluice and long step weir. Normal portage is over the wooden landing stages on upstream river right, then across the lock gates and back in on the downstream landing stage. There are low sections on both landing stages specifically for canoeists.

It is no longer possible to portage Town Lock via the step weir on river left due to the floating safety pontoons blocking the river.

There is no white water at Town Lock. The majority of the flow bypasses this lock completely via Bewley's Weir in the town centre and joins the river again downstream via the 'Muck stream'.

### Tonbridge Town Lock to Eldridges Lock

This section moves in to open farmland and there is little shelter from wind and /or weather. Once you have passed Cannon Bridge about 300m below the lock at Tonbridge, there is little other civilisation along the river for quite a few miles.

This section has varying water levels in the winter season. Please see section below.

Eldridges Lock consists of a lock and a set of manually operated paddle sluices and a small bypass weir.

Portage is on river left via fantastic new landing stages built by the Environment Agency in 2007. Both upstream and downstream landing stages have long easy sections for canoes, with wide steps and no obstructions.

There can be quite a strong current under the downstream landing stage if the river is flowing. This might push your boat away from you when you put it in the water. Caution is required.

#### Eldridges Lock to Porters Lock

This is a short, fairly unremarkable section, but is more sheltered than the previous one. There are no bridges, road access or habitation.

Porters Lock is reached via a 200m lock cut on the left hand side of the automatic radial sluice. Portage is on river left.

As with the previous lock, the EA rebuilt the both landing stages at this lock in 2007, to a design ideally suited to canoeists. Access in and out is therefore easy and there is plenty of room for several boats at the same time.

#### Porters Lock to East Lock

This section starts off very sheltered, but then opens out after the road access point at Hartlake Bridge. Above the bridge the river silts up badly, and you are best advised keeping to the middle of the channel.

In approaching East Lock you will see an automatic sluice and by pass weir on river left, and the lock straight ahead. The upstream landing stage here is usable, but the shorter portage is to get out on the concrete lock approach and get back in on the downstream wooden landing stage, which is long and easy at this lock.

#### East Lock to Oak Weir Lock

This is the shortest section on the river at only 0.75 miles. There is one bridge on this section at about the halfway point which is quite narrow and can generate some interesting boils and eddies in high flow. The river continues around some tight bends until it reaches Oak Weir Lock, which consists of an automatic radial sluice on the left, lock on the right, and bypass weir in the middle.

There is no real landing stage to use at the upstream point at Oak Weir Lock. The best place to get out is on the concrete lock approach on the left hand side of the lock, or on the metal gabion baskets on the right (watch the sharp edges on the metal baskets). The downstream landing stage is good, with a double sided section at the end for canoeists. However, the steps down to the landing stage are very steep (almost vertical) so be careful here.

#### Oak Weir Lock to Sluice Weir Lock

This is a longer section, and is fairly sheltered, although still remote. There is little sign of civilisation except for a couple of small bridges. This part of the river tends to silt up, so you are best advised to avoid the inside corners of the tight bends.

As you approach Sluice Weir lock you will see the lock on the left, radial sluice in the middle, and a bypass weir with a canoe pass and a fish pass on the right. This lock has the largest drop in water level on the river.

This canoe pass was built by the EA in the mid 1990's and is usable for plastic and general purpose boats. It is more of a 45 degree concrete slide than a shoot, but it saves portaging if you are going downstream. **\*\*\*NOTE – canoe pass closed in September 2007 awaiting repairs\*\*\***

Best portage route is to get out on the left hand concrete lock approach and get in from the wooden landing stage below the lock which is on the same side. This is another new landing stage built in 2007 and therefore provides easy access to the water.

#### Sluice Weir Lock to Yalding (Hampstead) Lock

After Sluice Weir Lock the river continues around some tight bends before reaching civilisation at East Peckham, where it passes through a small industrial area and under a new dual carriageway bridge. About 0.5 miles

past this you will pass through the old Stoneham Lock which is no longer used.

About 0.5 miles further on you will start to see buildings and a boatyard as you approach Yalding. When you reach Yalding Weir you will see two radial sluices and a bypass weir directly in front of you. If you want to go down in to the weirpool, you will need to portage on river right in to the side stream. If you want to portage the lock, turn left past the front of The Anchor pub along the lock cut, pass under the very low lifting bridge, and carry on about another 400m to the lock. Portage the lock on the left and get in again below on the new and excellent L-shaped landing stage below. Again there is a section designed specifically for canoes, so access to the water is very easy.

#### Yalding Lock to Teston Lock

If you have portaged the lock, continue down the lock cut past the moored boats until you rejoin the main river. Go to \*.

If you have portaged the weir, you will find yourself in the weirpool which is a popular canoeist playspot when the river is flowing. The sluices here are automatic and irritatingly unpredictable. You may sit for hours waiting for them to open, with no joy, and then find that just as you are getting changed in to your dry clothes they open up really nicely! Normally the left hand sluice is the one which will open (looking at them from the weirpool). Both sluices have anti-scour sills in them and can produce some reasonable stoppers.

The stream that joins the river in the weirpool is the River Teise. It is paddleable for a mile or so, but there is technically no right of navigation, so please obey signs and don't upset the locals.

As you paddle from the weirpool under Twyford Bridge you pass Marlin Canoe Club (site for Yalding slaloms) on your left and carry on downstream. A little further down is a sidestream on the left which is the River Beult, which again is paddleable for a mile or so but we have no right of navigation. Otherwise carry on downstream to another boatyard at the junction of the river and the lock cut.

\* From the end of the lock cut the river now widens out and proceeds along an unremarkable stretch of river on to Wateringbury, where there is a bridge and railway station and a couple more boatyards with a lot of moored boats, particularly on the downstream side. Once you are past the moored boats, it is about another 0.75 miles to Teston Lock, which is visible from a distance due to the overhead gantry on the curtain sluice which sits in between the lock and a long sloping weir.

The best portage is on the left, out on the concrete lock approach (watch out, it can be shallow) and in again on the very large wooden landing stage.

If you are in a plastic type boat, you may prefer to shoot the sloping weir (check it out first). However, access to this is now difficult due to the new orange floating safety pontoons stretched across the top of the weir.

Teston picnic site is on the left of Teston Lock, the car park (with height barrier) and toilets being about 300m away across a field. This is a popular tourist spot in summer.

#### Teston Lock to East Farleigh Lock

This is a fairly long straight section through a relatively deep river valley. Immediately after Teston Lock is Teston Bridge, then after that about a mile to a new footbridge at Barming Bridge (this may be marked as a road bridge on your map, but it isn't any more).

The river continues on towards East Farleigh, passing some houses and more boatyards as you approach East Farleigh Bridge, which is just before the Lock on the left and the weirs on the right.

The sluices at Farleigh are old automatic curtain sluices and are not shootable. The best portage is to get out on river left and walk past the lock and about 75m down the towpath to get in on the T-shaped wooden landing stage. Be careful of Giant Hogweed here (see later hazard notes). It is possible to get in off the rocks immediately below the lock, but it can be choppy here if the weirs are open.

#### East Farleigh Lock to Allington Lock

At 4.5 miles, this is the longest stretch on the river. After a mile or so in countryside you will approach the outskirts of Maidstone and a boatyard at

Tovil Bridge. After that you are really paddling through the town all the way to Allington.

At Maidstone Town Centre there is a new high level footbridge and then two road bridges close together. Between these two bridges there are some public toilets right next to the river. Moving on downstream, pass under the high level railway bridge and Maidstone Canoe Club on your left, and you then have about 1.5 miles, mainly past moored boats, down to Allington Lock.

Just before Allington Lock you pass a couple of boatyards and Allington Castle on the left. There is also the Malta Inn on the right, which overlooks the river and is friendly to canoeists parking there provided you actually spend some money in the pub and don't expose yourself whilst getting changed in the car park! See later comments on parking.

Allington Lock itself consists of a lock on the left and two large curtain sluices on the right. Below this lock the river is tidal. There is a lock keeper at this lock and an EA office, so make sure you have a licence if you are paddling down on to the tideway.

### **Parking and access points**

There is vehicle access to the river at the following points:

#### Tonbridge Town Centre

The best place to park is in the pay and display car park (free on Sundays) next to Tonbridge Swimming Pool, which is signposted from the High Street. There is a 6ft 3inch height barrier on this car park, although there is a section outside the barrier which tends to fill up first.

A key to the height barrier can be obtained by organised parties with prior arrangement from Tonbridge & Malling Borough Council on 01732 876272.

There is a slipway at the river end of the carpark.

There are numerous other town centre car parks in Tonbridge which are all a short walk away from the river. Most of them have height barriers.

### Cannon Lane, Tonbridge

Cannon Lane is in an industrial area. There are no designated car parks, although at the weekend the place is fairly quiet and you can park pretty much where you like only a couple of hundred yards from the river. B&Q have a car park about 100yds from the river too. Get on and off the river under Cannon Lane Bridge itself.

### Hartlake Bridge, Golden Green

Hartlake Bridge is in the middle of nowhere and you will need a map to find it. There are three or four car spaces in a layby next to the bridge, but they tend to get filled up by anglers during the fishing season (mid June to mid March). The lanes are narrow and difficult to park in otherwise. Please do not park in the field gateway entrances.

Access to the river is off the towpath under the bridge, accessed by a footpath from the Northern side.

### Branbridges, East Peckham

At Branbridges there is a small industrial area, and it is normally possible to find somewhere to park at the weekends, although there is no official public car park. Access to the river is via the towpath.

### Yalding Weir & Yalding Lock

There is plenty of parking at Yalding where the road runs alongside the lock cut between the lock and the weir (a distance of about 600m). You can either get in next to the road (quite a high concrete bank) or walk down to the lock or weirpool and get in there.

There is a slipway adjacent to the downstream end of the lock, which is accessed via a gate which is kept locked by the EA. Please do not park in front of the gates as the slipway is used by boat owners to get their cruisers in and out of the river.

### Wateringbury Bridge

There is no official parking at Wateringbury bridge, but at weekends you can normally park in the railway station car park without any problem. During the week you will need to find a suitable place on the roads to park.

### Teston Picnic Site / Lock

There is a car park and public toilets at the picnic site (a small voluntary charge is requested to cover maintenance). It is a 300m walk across the mown field to the lock, where you can use the landing stages as mentioned above. Please do not make inconsiderate use of the toilets. We have had complaints before about canoeists using them as changing facilities.....

There is a height barrier on the entrance to the car park, which as I recall is set at about 6ft 6inches.

### East Farleigh Bridge & Lock

East Farleigh is another place where there is no official parking but you can use the railway station car park with no hassle (normally) at the weekends. Although this car park is next to the river, you can't get access directly. You need to walk out of the car park, straight across the road along a track, then turn left just before you get to the static caravan site. A public footpath gate then leads to the river at the upstream side of the lock.

### Maidstone Town Centre

Maidstone Town Centre is full of car parks, many without height barriers. You can find your own parking space here at the weekends. During the week it might not be so easy.

Parking at Maidstone Canoe Club is now restricted to those knowing the code to the car park barrier which has been installed by the adjacent fitness club. Be warned...you can get in the car park, but you won't be able to get back out unless you know the code!

### Allington (Malta Inn)

Again, there is no official parking at the Malta Inn. They have a large car park but that has to serve the large Berni Inn restaurant plus the Travelodge, and it gets very full, particularly on summer weekends.

The Malta Inn allows us to start one of our annual races from its premises on a goodwill basis. Please do not offend them by abusing their car parking facilities. A phone call to ask permission is courteous if you want to take / collect a group of paddlers there, and you will be expected to spend some money in the pub / restaurant, which shouldn't be too difficult!

Access to the river is via a low concrete landing stage on the left of the pub building as you face towards the river. This is also shared by a river trip boat which pays for the privilege, so you might have to give him priority.

## **Seasonal Water Level Information**

In summer the Medway generally has very little flow, and the weirs are all safe. In autumn / winter / spring, flow levels vary dramatically depending on recent rainfall in the last 72 hours, phone the Access Officer (01732 361759) to check if you are unsure. I can normally tell you what the flow is currently like, but please remember I am not a weather forecaster, so I can't tell you what it will be like next week / month etc.

The section between Tonbridge Town Lock and Eldridges Lock is drained by the EA in winter to assist with flood prevention, as Eldridges Lock is the only one on the river without an automatic sluice. This section is usually still paddleable in plastic boats when lowered, but you will need to take care, as it can be very shallow. When the level is low they pin open the lock gates at Eldridges Lock, which if the level below the lock is also low, creates an inverted V-shaped stopper which is quite grippy. Take care here. There is nowhere to get out without scaling the steep muddy banks when the level is low, so it is a very unpleasant portage.

I wish I could give dates when the level in the Eldridges section will be lowered, but it is dependent on flow levels. Once we have had a decent bit of rain in November / December, it will normally stay down all winter until about March. However, if you are running a major trip or event, the EA are quite cooperative about filling the river up again for a week or two provided the flood risk is low.

All of the upper sections of the river between Leigh Sluice and Yalding are subject to level lowering in spring (normally February & March) for routine maintenance / inspection. The EA do let us know the dates for each section. Phone the access officer for details.

When the levels are low in each of these sections the automatic radial sluices are pinned open and are **extremely dangerous**. They have anti-scour teeth in the sluice channel which makes a very large and violent recirculating stopper, which it is virtually impossible to swim out of.

Canoeists have died on the Medway attempting to shoot these weirs in these conditions. Do not attempt it under any circumstances.

## **Other Hazards**

Do not attempt to shoot the central sluice at the Leigh Flood Barrier. It also has anti scour teeth creating a powerful stopper.

The banks of the Medway are quite badly infected with Giant Hogweed, an invasive plant species which causes a light sensitive blistering of the skin if you touch the spiny stems or sap. This is particularly noticeable in the sections below Yalding, and is very bad downstream of Teston, to the point where you will have to be careful where you get out of the river after a capsize. Giant Hogweed is a very large plant with broad leaves and large white flower heads. It is easily identifiable. I would suggest you familiarise yourself with this plant if you are paddling this section.

Weil's disease - there have been occasional cases in the past. Normal BCU warnings and guidelines apply.

Pinned Open Radial Sluices - see warning message above in previous section.

Anglers - The river is still subject to a close season, and the fishing season therefore runs from 15th June to the 15th March. Fishing is not permitted from boats, locks, lock landing stages or bridges, although that is often not very well enforced. Please give anglers a wide berth wherever possible and avoid getting in to confrontational situations which do neither sport any credit.

## **Contacts**

**Access Officer:**

Clive Neale  
9 Handel Walk  
Tonbridge  
Kent  
TN10 4DG  
Tel: 01732 361759

**Canoe Clubs** - these are the contacts for the clubs mentioned above:

**Tonbridge Canoe Club:** Clive Neale as above

A large club with racing, touring and recreational groups of paddlers.  
Clubhouse facilities at Tonbridge opposite the swimming pool.

**Marlin Canoe Club:** Vince Lamph  
Flat 4  
36 Manor Road  
Beckenham  
Kent  
BR3 5LE  
Tel: 020 8650 0197 or 01622 817579

A slalom club, based in Beckenham but with a small clubhouse at  
Yalding Weir from which they run several slaloms each year.

**Yalding Paddlers:**  
A group of playboat paddlers who meet to paddle at Yalding Weir.

**Maidstone Canoe Club:** Mr Paul Newman  
20 The Rise  
Hempstead  
Gillingham  
ME7 3SS  
Tel: 01634 232874

A mixed club with some racers, sea tourers and plastic boat paddlers,  
with clubhouse facilities near Maidstone Town Centre.

\* \* \* \* \*