

THE RIVER MEDWAY – A LEADING CENTRE OF BRITISH, EUROPEAN AND WORLD MARITIME HERITAGE



1. Introduction

The river Medway is already a leading centre of British, European and World maritime heritage. It's just that not too many local people realise it yet. The role of the river, in establishing the Medway Council's conurbation as a major international tourism area, is seriously undervalued by all of the agencies that control the river and its environs. The river shares, with the Chatham Historic Dockyard, the greatest and most diverse collection of historic ships in the United Kingdom. The speedy recognition and marketing of this relatively dormant resource will be to the benefit of Kent and the British national maritime heritage.

For a fortnight in June 2017, 200 Dutch tall ships, historic ships and yachts visited the Medway to commemorate the 350th anniversary of the Battle of Chatham. Their parades of sail and parties demonstrated how seriously underutilised the river usually is.

Proper investment by the many developers that are, and; will continue to be, building urban developments on the riverside sites, should recognise the significant additional value that the adjacent river gives them. **'Think not of what your river can do for you, think of what you can do for your river'**

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However, money is not the prime driver for the recognition of the river's value. **The principal requirement is for enthusiasm from all the agencies involved. There is an urgent need for these agencies to meet, as an interested and integrated forum, to share in, and; mutually benefit from, the river Medway attaining its rightful status**

The agencies include; The Medway Council; Peel Ports; The Chatham Historic Dockyard Trust (CHDT); Chatham Maritime Trust; Grain LNG; The Environment Agency; GPS Marine; Scott Line; The Medway and Swale Boating Association (MSBA); The Royal Engineers; Kent County Constabulary; and leading riverside residential developers etc. etc.

2. Medway Council – Tourism

The Dutch event last year, albeit a huge success, highlighted problems for tourist accommodation in the area. Hotel rooms, although increasing through development, still fall far short of the potential requirement. Camp sites for tents, touring caravans and motor homes are almost non-existent in the Medway area. Visitor moorings fall way short of the potential requirement, although ironically; there are eleven unused fully maintained moorings in Rats Bay, which just require a management solution. There is a company which, for a small percentage of the mooring fee, will manage the collection of fees through a smart phone, similar to many local authority car parks.

3. Medway Council – River Access Management

Rochester Pier, Sun Pier and the Rats Bay moorings are seriously underutilised, but there is little or no marketing. Maintenance, vandalism repairs and the problems associated with pirate vessels are a major financial drain without any return. With the progressive removal of National Government funding, management of these facilities will become increasingly problematic. **A solution would be to develop a Trust or CIC which employs a person to manage these accesses.**

Such a move could facilitate a limited single line marine pontoon / mooring development at Gun Wharf, if the previously proposed marina is not acceptable to the commercial navigation authority.

Strood Pier has been unusable for so long that a Google search for the original storm damage reveals nothing, but a photo of the Kingswear Castle paddle steamer berthed alongside. How things have deteriorated!

Strood Pier is a five minutes' walk from a 30 minute high speed train connection from London. The availability of this facility would be a prime mover in ensuring the charter and day trip opportunities for Thames Sailing Barges and other local historic and modern vessels, in a way that Rochester Pier cannot because of the difficulties in navigating the Rochester Bridges. Although Strood Pier is in the ownership of Peel Ports, its reinstatement is of paramount importance to the Medway river community and thus should be championed by both Peel Ports and the Medway Council. An early agenda item for the proposed river forum group?

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4. Medway Council – Riverside Development and River Access

It is essential that the proposed riverside developments, in Rochester, Strood, Chatham Interface, Chatham Waters, Chatham Victoria Pier etc. etc. maintain existing river accesses and include improvements. As we have already seen on St Mary' Island, keeping an existing slipway is of no use whatsoever, if; the ensuing development prevents the passage of trailed vessels to the slipway!

It is very obvious what benefits the river affords to the developers. What is much less obvious is what benefits the developers are going to give to the river. A development such as the Rochester Riverside, with such a substantial river frontage, would not have been allowed anywhere else in the world, unless major benefits to the leisure use on the river by residents and visitors had been included. To suggest that the existing dock / inlets have to be retained as natural salt marsh is quite ridiculous, in a political conurbation that has many thousands of acres of genuine natural salt marsh. All the unmanaged and neglected inlets will provide to the benefit of the residents is the threat of a rat infestation.

The recent Visit Kent European funded INTERREG 2 Seas Project exploring Medway as a Tourist venue, seriously criticised the total lack of adequate public access to the river, in its summing up workshop.

The recent outline planning application for development of the Acorn Wharf shipyard site, adjacent to the much larger Rochester Riverside development, is the first proposal to recognise the value of river adjacency and the local Maritime Heritage to the development. **The presence of well maintained historic vessels gentrifies a development.**

5. Peel Ports – River Harbour Authority

The Harbour Authority for the Tidal river Medway is the Peel Ports Group. Executive control is administered from Peel Ports Liverpool, as is that for all of the Group ports and harbours. However, although the Medway Vessel Traffic Service (VTS) moved to Liverpool on 1 May 2018, there is a continuing highly professional management team still based at Sheerness, who are again engaged in useful dialogue with the MSBA, concerning leisure boating on the river.

There are areas of concern including the Strood Pier situation referred to in 3 above.

The group's recent name change of this port to London Medway completely flies in the face of the theme of this paper. The intention is to promote the river Medway and the developing city of Medway as a significant residential, commercial and tourist centre in its own right. We are 35 miles from London and both the towns and the river have significant features that London and the Thames cannot offer.

The irresponsible actions of, hopefully, a minority of PWC's (jetskis) owners, launching from the Commodore's Hard public river access slipway at the Strand, require urgent action from the multi agencies; Medway Council, Peel Ports and the Kent County Constabulary, to prevent an imminent serious accident; potentially involving young children.

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The notices posted at Commodore Hard imply that PWCs are not allowed here, but give no information as to where they can be launched on the river Medway. A possible solution would be to allow PWCs to launch at the Gillingham Pier slipway, with the instruction that they must proceed directly across to the Hoo Island bank and navigate, at slow speed! downriver until they are out of the 6 knot speed limit beyond Folly. A further recommendation is that they be encouraged to join the Kent Boat and Ski club at Cuxton or the Allhallows Yacht Club, both specialising and offering training in powercraft.

6. Peel Group – Chatham Waters & Basins 2 & 3 Development

In August this year the Scottish Islands Cruiseship -Hebridean Princessø will berth in Chatham Cockyard Basin 3, as part of her -Treasures of Normandy and the Channel Islesø cruise. Unlike her last visit to Chatham, when the passengers were bussed off to Canterbury, the emphasis will be on a tour of the Chatham Historic Dockyard. It is proposed that the Hebridean Princess will visit Chatham on a three year cycle. There is no doubt that her passengers, and; the passengers of similar specialist small luxury cruise ships, are very much the sort of people who would appreciate, not only the historic dockyard, but also the rest of the amazing maritime and multi period heritage that Medway has to offer.

Similarly, the area could easily become a popular South East UK destination for privately owned and chartered super yachts and for Tall Ships events. No. 2 and No. 3 Basins provide a deep water facility that is becoming difficult to find on the River Thames.

With the current road and high speed rail infrastructure and the forthcoming additional Thames road crossing, the development of the Chatham Basins for the advantageous use of significant visiting power and sailing ships will provide their passengersø access to both local Medway, Canterbury and London tourism locations.

7. The Chatham Historic Dockyard Trust (CHDT)

The CHDT have successfully developed the Chatham Historic Dockyard into what must be one of the best maritime tourist venues in the UK. They worked with the Medway Council and the MSBA to achieve the tremendous success that was last yearø Battle of Chatham and Medway in Flames Dutch event. Having this yearø river festival based at the dockyard introduced many of the local population of Medway to their first visit and; hopefully, the initiative of inviting all those registered to purchase half price annual passports, will expand local support. However, the dockyard is essentially a land based facility, and; the presence of CHDT representatives on the proposed river forum will be mutually beneficial.

8. The Medway and Swale Boating Association (MSBA)

The MSBA includes in its membership over thirty clubs and other organisations with some 4,000 members who regularly use the waters of the Medway and Swale for recreational purposes. We use our best endeavours to encourage greater participation in all types of recreational waterborne activities on the Medway and Swale.

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We see ourselves as the voice of leisure boating on the Medway and Swale, representing the common interests of all who use our waters for leisure purposes and arguing for the maintenance and enhancement of facilities and opportunities for water sports of all kinds. The MSBA website has become the main communication media for finding out what is happening on the rivers. The MSBA would be competent and very keen to represent the River leisure community on the proposed river forum.

Leisure boating is changing, some clubs are losing members, some holding their own. Younger people want facilities to pay as you go in sport. This is becoming common in other sports. The MSBA conference, in March 2019, will address these changes and encourage kindred clubs on the river to work together for their mutual benefit and to market our amazing river to Kent, London, (only 35 miles away) and to Europe.

9. Maritime Heritage – Heritage Harbour

The Maritime Heritage Trust (MHT) is well represented in Medway, with many of the Trust and private owners of historic vessels being members. The National Historic Ships (NHS) has established a Shipshape hub at the Chatham Historic Dockyard, to bring together ship maintenance trades, facilities and boat building expertise.

Earlier this year the European Maritime Heritage (EMH) held their triennial congress in Portsmouth, to coincide with the MHT AGM. Their members' enthusiasm for the potential development of the Medway as an Heritage Harbour was most encouraging. The concept of Heritage Harbours has been successfully developed in Holland and to some extent in France. Old harbours and ports, which have lost much of their earlier commercial shipping, are developed in a manner where their older buildings and water frontage is developed in ways which are sympathetic to their great past, but; encourage residential and tourist interest.

The Medway is the nearest centre of UK maritime heritage to Europe, as can be seen from the frequent waterborne and landborne visitors from Holland, Belgium, France and Germany. The realisation of the importance of maritime heritage and the support given to those who volunteer to bring historic ships back to life, predates the EEC and the EU and will continue to serve the fellowship of the like-minded, across the UK and Europe long after BREXIT.

10. The River Medway Forum – An Early Agenda

Establish membership

Establish aims and objectives

Riverside urban development and the enhancement of river access and tourist viewpoints

The marketing and management of common river moorings and river accesses

The rebuild of Strood Pier

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The safety of river users

The development of Chatham Dockyard Basin 2 for use by visiting vessels

The establishment of a river Medway maritime heritage footpath route in conjunction with the Natural England UK coastal path maps.

Medway as an Heritage Harbour



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July 2018**