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An Open Letter to all leisure sailors in The Solent

7<sup>th</sup> April 2009

To whom it may concern

### **Close Quarters Situations with Large Vessels**

Whilst the majority of sailors in the Solent area are knowledgeable and focussed upon safety I believe it is appropriate to communicate with you all in this manner to highlight a couple of issues of particular interest. By reminding some and informing others I am hopeful that we can maintain and improve the excellent safety record we share and add to the enjoyment of all those taking advantage of the wide-ranging facilities offered in this busy area.

Our incident statistics clearly indicate the growing number, year-on-year, of close quarters situations between recreational vessels, predominantly (but not exclusively) under sail, and large commercial vessels transiting the Central Solent and Southampton Water. The incidences suggest an apparent lack of knowledge of the Port of Southampton's regulations, relevant in particular to 'The Precautionary Area' and 'Moving Prohibited Zones' but, more worryingly, they indicate an actual lack of appreciation of the potential consequences of being involved in a close quarters situation with a large commercial vessel.

Many of the large commercial vessels transiting to and from Southampton are tidally constrained. They are confined to the charted navigational channel between the Nab area and the Port and can neither deviate from their track nor respond quickly to avoid a small vessel. In many cases - for container ships and tankers in particular - the bridge is situated aft and therefore the visibility cut-off for the Master and Pilot may be as much as 1000 metres dead ahead. Thus, even if the Master and Pilot can see vessels attempting to cross close ahead, there is virtually nothing they can do to take avoiding action, should the crossing vessel get into difficulty.

Additionally, the speed of these large vessels is often greater than may be appreciated, particularly when making the approach to the long turn from the Central Solent into the Thorn Channel, and again into Southampton Water. In order to safely complete these turn's vessels need a defined speed and whilst it may appear that there is sufficient time to cross ahead there may be less time than you think.

Consequently, it does not make sense - where you can safely navigate outside the buoyed navigational channel – to remain in the channel as a large vessel approaches or to attempt to cross ahead of a large vessel as it approaches a key part of its transit into or out of Southampton. If you do need to cross, the safer option is always to wait and cross astern.

The Port's Byelaws (Southampton Harbour Byelaws 2003), and in particular Byelaw 10 'Navigation in fairways' and Byelaw 11 'Moving Prohibited Zone', make the requirements clear. As a "small vessel" (defined in The Byelaws as "...any vessel of less than 20 metres in length or a sailing vessel and for the purposes of this definition "sailing vessel" means a vessel designed to carry sail, whether as the sole or as a primary or supplementary means of propulsion....") you should avoid the navigational channel (fairway) and not enter a Moving Prohibited Zone. The meaning of these Byelaws is more generally explained in several current ABP Southampton Notices to Mariners, in particular No 2 of 2008 'Safety in Small Vessels' and No 3 of 2008 'Port of Southampton – Precautionary Area (Thorn Channel)'.

The Byelaws and Notices to Mariners mentioned above, and "The yachtsman's guide to Southampton Water and its approaches" can all be downloaded from the ABP Southampton website [www.southamptonvts.co.uk](http://www.southamptonvts.co.uk). I would urge you to reacquaint yourselves with these documents I would be grateful if you could pass them on to your Club Secretary or to your friends taking up sailing etc – please spread the word.

One last point, almost every large vessel entering, and leaving, Southampton Water is escorted through the Precautionary Area by a Harbour Master's Patrol Launch, with an all round blue light at the masthead. On many occasions in the past the Patrol Launch has been able to intervene to assist a small vessel in difficulty, or to intercept an attempt to cross close ahead, and I am in no doubt that lives have been saved. However the presence, or otherwise, of the Patrol Launch should not be used as a guide to what manoeuvres can and cannot be attempted and the responsibility for an individuals safety, and that of his crew, lies with that individual.

I hope all who read this letter take the opportunity to refresh their knowledge and inform others of the available guidance and in doing so I am sure you will contribute to an enjoyable and safe sailing season this year and in the future.

Yours faithfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'PHH', with a large, sweeping underline stroke.

Captain Philip Holliday  
Harbour Master Southampton

**“...Guys, just remind me – who’s supposed to stand on??...”**

