

IWA Briefing Note

Winding Holes

This briefing note sets out The Inland Waterways Association's views on the provision and use of spaces on waterways in which to turn a boat (referred to generically as winding holes or swinging areas).

Winding holes were originally an important enabler of efficient commercial carrying. They were built at or near wharves where working boats would need to turn, and of a size appropriate to the largest boat that could reach the site. Since those days the requirements for turning have changed as leisure boating has taken over from carrying, while many winding holes have become unusable or usable only by shorter boats owing to silting, vegetation growth, permanently moored boats or access restrictions by landowners. IWA is concerned about both the standard of provision and the accuracy of information about winding facilities. In addition, when a boater wishes to make use of a turning facility there are practical factors and matters of etiquette to be considered.



Background

On narrow and broad canals turning spaces are known as 'winding holes' (as in fast-moving air, the verb 'to wind' describes turning the boat round). They are indentations in one or both banks of the canal, generally V-shaped, which allow a boat longer than the width of the canal to be turned. On navigable rivers and areas near the coast nautical terms are found, such as 'swinging area', 'turning space' or just 'wide'. In addition to officially designated spaces, there are also informal turning points where the canal widens, for instance at junctions or marina entrances.

The subject of winding holes is surprisingly complex. In response to a series of comments and questions from members, in 2014 IWA and the Historic Narrow boat Club (HNBC) jointly undertook a survey of winding facilities on CRT waterways. This established that in addition to problems in using many sites, neither CRT nor waterways guides such as Nicholson's had an accurate and comprehensive record of the location and status of winding holes. CRT is keen to update its asset register and has been working with IWA branches and members of HNBC and Canal Societies at a local level. Its next step is to carry out an online survey through summer 2016 to crowdsource data from all boaters – see [CRT's blog](#) for more details and the [latest data sheet](#). The intention is to gather information during the summer and update the records, and then update the CRT online map over winter 2016/17.

Current Situation

The current stock of winding facilities includes a variety of 'official' winding locations which should be recorded in CRT's asset list, unofficial locations such as canal junctions or widenings, 'permissive' locations such as marina entrances owned by third parties who allow turning, and 'private' locations whose owners do not allow turning. These locations may or may not be suitable for use by boats of the maximum length for the waterway in question.

Accurate information on official locations is vital for CRT in order to determine maintenance requirements. Boaters need accurate information on all types of available turning locations to enable planning of cruises, particularly on dead-end canals and in case of stoppages.

Etiquette for using winding holes

As with other aspects of boating, there is an etiquette in both planning and executing a turn. Knowing where the winding holes are and planning which one to use is the first step, subject to the caveats already expressed about the quality of information available. On arrival the objective is to turn in a way which causes as little inconvenience to others as possible, including other moving boats and moored boats. It may be necessary to signal your intentions to others (horn signals are defined in the CRT "Boaters Handbook" although rotating your hand in the air may be more widely understood). Consider whether it is sensible to allow any moving boats to pass, and signal clearly.

If you are following a boat approaching a winding hole, bear in mind that they may wish to turn and keep clear. Don't try to pass them while they are turning unless they signal clearly for you to do so.

As a general rule don't moor in such a way as to obstruct the use of a winding hole.

Practical advice on turning

When it comes to actually turning, the most helpful pieces of advice are to be pragmatic and to be prepared to change your plan. The aims should be to keep the propeller and rudder away from any shallow areas and debris, and to keep turbulence to a minimum and try to avoid stirring up the mud as far as possible. For these reasons the default approach is to put the bow of the boat into the winding hole and keep the stern on the towpath side.

However conditions may dictate varying this, particularly the wind and the flow on rivers and on canals such as the Llangollen. Both wind and current can be used to help turn the boat – and equally, both can cause difficulties if they are not taken into account. Taking a rope ashore on the towpath and using it to help the turn can reduce the need for engine power and hence turbulence. Also bear in mind the effects of 'propeller walk' (the tendency of the propeller to cause the boat to rotate as well as move forwards or backwards, which is much greater in reverse gear) and try to use it to help rather than hinder the manoeuvre.

IWA Position

IWA is running a long-standing campaign on winding holes with the aims of:

- Working with CRT and other relevant organisations to improve the standard of information about winding facilities
- Lobbying to improve the standard of signage, dredging and vegetation clearing at winding holes
- Determining where additional facilities could be established and what the optimum specification is to meet 21st century needs, in order to reduce unnecessary travel and consequent use of water and other resources, and to increase the options for cruising.

More detailed information can be found in IWA's Winding Holes Specification Document, one of a series of IWA Policy documents that can be found on IWA's website at www.waterways.org.uk/waterways/restoration/restoration_resources/technical/winding_holes.