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By email – tony.stammers@canalrivertrust.org.uk

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Dear Tony

Paddle Pawl Stops

At IWA's Navigation Committee meeting held on 6th June we discussed the subject of paddle pawls and I agreed to write to you to express our concern over the continued suggestion that paddle pawl stops would be fitted on all paddle gear.

We note that CRT have since issued a press release and consultation on this issue of paddle pawl design, so please find below our views on the issue. I am copying this email to Jonathan Pritchett as suggested by the press release.

Over the last six months or so this issue has been raised locally by several IWA branches, with concern over the safety hazards that would be created by paddle pawl stops preventing pawls being able to be completely moved away from the paddle gear whilst the paddle is being wound down.

Whilst IWA recognises the problems that can be caused when a boater starts to wind up a paddle without the pawl in place, it considers that not being able to completely remove the pawl from the paddle gear creates a far more dangerous situation. Moreover, the number of accidents can be reduced by educating boaters about the safest way to operate paddle gear.

Not being able to fully remove the paddle pawl means that one hand is needed to hold it up in order to lower the paddle. Whilst on some paddle gear on many canals this is not a problem, it becomes a problem in certain situations when both hands will be required to wind down the paddle, such as when the person lowering the paddle is a child or someone not strong enough to hold the weight of the paddle with one hand, when the paddle gear is particularly stiff, and when lowering the paddle against a difference in water levels because someone has fallen in or a boat has got stuck and the water levels need to be reversed urgently.

Having to hold the pawl with one hand also adds another hazard, which is the proximity of the hand, arm and clothing to the moving paddle gear and rack with the potential for injury if anything gets caught.

IWA recommends that, instead of fitting stops to these paddle pawls so that they cannot be removed, a system is used that enables it to be clearer whether or not the pawl is in place, such as can be found on the BCN style paddle gear.

IWA considers that the primary cause of windlasses spinning out of control is boaters using the larger of the two holes on a windlass on standard spindles, which will not fit snugly on to the spindle. There needs to be more training and awareness surrounding the use of windlasses and the fact that the larger of the two holes on a windlass should only be used on hydraulic paddle gear on locks, bridges and similar equipment, as well as on the Ham Baker paddle gear on the northern Grand Union. Boaters should also be reminded to always make sure the windlass is pushed firmly on to the spindle before they start winding the paddle up or down, and to keep it pushed on to the spindle all the time they are using it.

IWA recommends better training for those new to boating, such as first time hirers, with emphasis on the need to replace the paddle pawl after a paddle has been wound down.

Another important issue regarding safety of using windlasses is that boaters should all be reminded that it is dangerous to leave a windlass on a spindle once the paddle has been wound up. A windlass should never be left on a spindle when a paddle is up as it can fly off and cause injury by hitting someone.

IWA also continues to be concerned about the impact of such changes on the need to retain the historic aspects of paddle gear across the network such as on the BCN, Northwich area etc. which we consider an essential feature of the context of the individual waterways, and have long campaigned to keep.

To conclude, IWA considers that more needs to be done to educate boaters about replacing pawl catches in position after winding a paddle down, using the right windlass hole and not leaving windlasses on spindles once the paddle gear is wound up. Educating boaters about these three things would reduce the number of accidents. IWA remains extremely concerned that the installation of stops to prevent pawls being completely moved away from the paddle gear creates new hazards that could result in worse accidents occurring, and may be done in a way which dilutes the essential heritage each waterway retains.

We would welcome the opportunity to discuss this urgent issue with you further and in more detail.

Yours sincerely

Gren Messham
Chairman, Navigation Committee

cc Jonathan Pritchett, Canal & River Trust, by email -
jonathan.pritchett@canalrivertrust.org.uk