



History of the Devizes to Westminster International Canoe Race

The aim of the race is to race from Devizes to Westminster by kayak or canoe in the fastest possible time along the course route, to further the interest in long distance canoe racing and to encourage the design of canoes and equipment that are light, serviceable and easily transported over rough ground, yet suited to estuary conditions.

The early days

Like many challenges, the idea of a Devizes to Westminster Canoe Race originated at the Greyhound Public House at Pewsey when, owing to a threatened rail and bus strike in 1920, alternative means of transport were the subject of conversation at the bar.

A group of friends bet £5 (approximately £250 in today's money) that they could travel by the River Avon from Pewsey to the sea at Mundeford, near Christchurch, in less than three days. Using a 26ft double sculling skiff and overcoming all sorts of hazards, the intrepid boatmen won their bet with 12 hours to spare. The journey was not tried again for another 27 years. A 1947 crew composed of three RAF personnel and a farmer were inspired to repeat the exploit by a conversation with a member of the original crew in the same pub, and won their £5 by reaching Christchurch in 51 hours.

The Devizes to Westminster Canoe Race arose as an off-shoot of the Pewsey to Christchurch competition when a Pewsey resident offered a prize to any crew which would better the 51 hour time of 1947. The Scoutmaster of the 1st Devizes Scouts wanted to take up the challenge but did not qualify because the scouts' canoes did not meet the requirements of the competition. Once again we return to the back parlour of the Greyhound at Pewsey where one member of the 1947 crew, Roy Cooke, was planning a boat trip from Devizes to Westminster in 100 hours. Although this project fell through, the idea was taken up by the frustrated Devizes Rover Scouts.

Some worthy citizens of Devizes decided that the scouts' initiative should be encouraged and raised a sum of money to be donated if the scouts could

reach the sea by the new route via the Kennet & Avon canal to Reading and thence down the river Thames to Westminster, in under 100 hours. Thus it was that at Easter in 1948 the first two crews from the Devizes Rovers, paddling heavy, home built double kayaks, completed the course with 10 hours to spare. At Whitsun that year two crews of the Chippenham sea cadet unit covered the same course in just under 77 hours. Further attempts in the summer were foiled by reeds in the canal and so it became established that Easter would be the best time for the journey.

The course record time of 15 hours and 34 minutes was set by Tim Cornish and Brian Greenham in 1979. Despite considerable changes in equipment, improved training techniques and the restoration of much of the canal over the past years, few competitors have come close to the 1979 record, making it one of the longest standing records of any annual sporting event.

Canoeists aged over 18 may start at any time between 0700 and 2000 on Easter Saturday, timing their departure so as to arrive at Teddington at high tide if they are to take advantage of the ebb on the final 17 miles of tidal water from Teddington to Westminster.

For young canoeists aged 15-19, a junior class allows them to tackle the race in four daily stages of 34, 36, 38 and 17 miles. The crews camp at Newbury, Marlow and Ham before completing the course on the ebb tide on Easter Monday morning. There is always fierce competition between the nominated teams and at the end of each day's racing the results will be available so the crews know where they are lying. There is also a singles class for solo adults who also race the course in stages.

The starting point for the race is Couch Lane Bridge, Devizes on the Kennet & Avon canal. The course follows 54 miles of the canal and occasional stretches of the River Kennet to Reading where it joins and follows the River Thames for a further 71 miles. The canal includes the 502 yard long Bruce tunnel at Savernake and in all there are 77 portages. On the Thames, a lot of which must normally be negotiated in darkness, much depends on flow levels. In a good year, crews can gain significant advantage from the current. In any case, they must reach Teddington in time for the ebb tide, which can add as much as 5 knots to the boat's speed. The finishing point is just downstream from Westminster bridge—not the actual bridge—where many an exhausted canoeist has had to be lifted from their boat.