

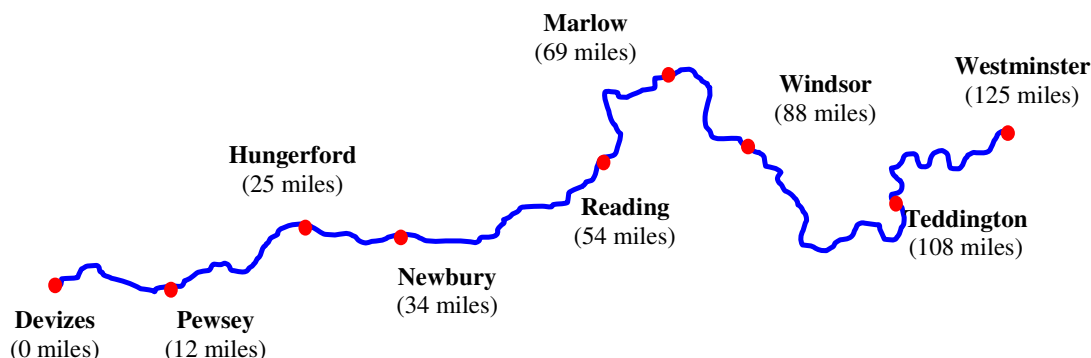


1948-2009 - Celebrating 60 Years of Personal Endeavour

Devizes Westminster International Canoe Marathon

The Devizes to Westminster International Canoe Marathon is one of the great endurance events and a typically British creation that takes place every Easter.

The race is simple. Travel from Devizes in Wiltshire down the Kennet & Avon Canal, joining the River Thames at Reading. Follow the Thames downstream where, at Teddington, the river becomes tidal for the final stretch down to Westminster, in the heart of London.



It is 125 miles in total, or roughly 90,000 paddle strokes. Competitors do it straight through or over four days. Either is one of the most rewarding and respected challenges in the UK.

DW2009 has a growing number of entrants with over 600 paddlers setting out to complete the course. Some will be competing, looking to push close to the course record set thirty years ago this year. The record holders – Brian Greenham and Tim Cornish – are reuniting to commemorate the anniversary. Their challenges in 1979 – Ollie Harding and Ian White – will also be paddling in a rerun of that race. Harding and White held the record for several minutes before Greenham and Cornish cross the line. Others will be looking to finish, completing a personal challenge of training and dedication unmatched in amateur sport.

The interest in the event goes far beyond the UK, bringing competitors from across the world to the quiet Wiltshire town of Devizes. This year, entrants are travelling from Sweden, Australia, the United States, Denmark, Belgium, Ireland, South Africa and, of course, from throughout the UK.

For more information about Devizes Westminster International Canoe Marathon you can visit www.dwrace.org.uk

For interview, photographs or more information contact Peter Hutchison on peter.hutchison@ukonline.co.uk or 07736 424200.

History of the Race

The Object

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 Course

The starting point for the race is Couch Lane Bridge, Devizes on the Kennet and 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 is far from being plain paddling. It includes the 502 yards long Bruce Tunnel at Savernake and 56 locks, all of which have to be portaged. On the Thames, much of which must normally be negotiated in darkness, some assistance is gained from the current but most of the 20 locks must be portaged. Crews which successfully catch the tide may have as much as 5 knots assistance at the height of the ebb tide, while those that miss the tide find it virtually impossible to make any headway against the flood stream. Hazards to be encountered include obstructions along the canal banks, steep and slippery banks, strong winds, weirs on the Thames, angry swans, sub-zero temperatures at night, the heat of the sun by day, and finally the danger of being swamped and capsized by passing pleasure craft on the tidal stretches of the Thames. The finishing point is just downstream from Westminster Bridge, where many an exhausted canoeist has had to be lifted from their boat.

The Early Days

The idea of the 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. Arising from this discussion a group of friends bet £5.00 that they could travel by the River Avon from Pewsey to the sea at Mudeford, 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 twelve hours to spare. Although very well publicised in the local press at the time, so far as is known, the journey was not attempted again for 27 years. A 1947 crew composed of three RAF men and a local farmer were inspired to repeat the exploit by a conversation with a member of the original crew in the same Greyhound Public House, and won their £5.00 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 hours 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 particular project fell through, the idea was taken up by the frustrated Devizes Rover Scouts. Some worthy citizens of Devizes decided that their Scouts' initiative should be encouraged and raised a sum of money to be donated if the Rovers could reach the sea by the new route via the Kennet and Avon Canal to Reading and thence down the river Thames to Westminster, in under 100 hours. Thus it was, that at Easter, 1948 the first two crews from the Devizes Rovers, paddling heavy home-built double kayaks, completed the course with ten hours to spare. At Whitsun, 1948, two crews of the Chippenham Sea Cadet Unit covered the same course in just under 77 hours. Further attempts by other crews in the summer were foiled by the thick growth of reeds in the canal and so it became established that Easter was the best time for the journey.

The popularity of the race in 2009 is as strong as ever with the largest number of entries for many years. Many people look back to the 1970s as the hey-day of DW. The current record for the non-stop race was set in 1979 with a blistering time of 15 hours and 34 minutes set by Brian Greenham and Tim Cornish. As today's elite marathon and endurance paddlers do their very best to get close to this time, the Greenham/Cornish pairing are reuniting to commemorate the thirtieth anniversary of their record.

The Classes

Senior doubles class (non-stop)

Seniors 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. Serious competitors must plan to paddle virtually non-stop except when portaging the 76 canal and river locks.

Junior Class (four-stage)

The Junior class is open to double crews between the ages of 15 and 19 and was inaugurated in 1953. This section was introduced so that younger competitors could compete without the possible danger to health involved in continuous paddling for a whole day and night. Junior crews cover the course in four legs 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 that the crews know where they are lying.

Senior singles class (four-stage)

This class contested for the first time in 1985, is open to crews over 18 and follows the Junior format in four racing stages over the Easter weekend. The senior crews start as directed in Devizes between 0930 and 1030 on Good Friday, and between 0900 and 1000 at Newbury and Marlow. The K1s start 30 mins before the top of the tide whilst the Junior K2s start as the tide turns. This makes for a great spectacle at Westminster as you end up with two big finishes as opposed to one.

Endeavour Class (four-stage)

This event is held over 4 days and is more of a challenge than a race, aimed at teaching people the course and how to prepare properly before they head out and take the challenge of the Senior doubles event. It has the spice and variety of the straight through event without the danger of exhaustion, the big weirs and swirly waters of the Thames by night or the need to prepare as intently. What a fantastic way to spend Easter. Real self-discovery!

Veteran/Junior Class (four-stage)

Traditionally Juniors can only race over 4 days and is much the same as the Endeavour class but intended for parents to bond in an amazingly intent way with their offspring. Like all classes in this great race life-time friendships are made solid in this event.

Taking Part

Full details on how to take part are on the Devizes Westminster International Canoe Marathon website – www.dwrace.org.uk.

In summary, some key points of advice are as follows:

- Allow six to nine months' preparation for the Devizes to Westminster Race.
- Join a canoe or kayaking club – although some clubs don't encourage participation in the DW because it's so hard.
- A racing kayak costs between £200 (second-hand) and £1,500.
- Choose the right partner – it's very intense, you will get to know your partner intimately.
- Consider attending a specialist race seminar (more details at www.dwrace.org.uk).

DW 2010

Next year's race is 2-5 April 2010.

For interview, photographs or more information contact Peter Hutchison on peter.hutchison@ukonline.co.uk or 07736 424200.

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