

"Time and tide waits for no man"

Shakespeare expresses well the need to keep moving forward and this is certainly true of training. The Company's tradition role on the Thames has been to provide manage a training scheme for Watermen and Lightermen both young and experienced.

The Company's Apprenticeship scheme is open to young people aged between 16 and 19 years old. Each apprentice is encouraged to have the help of a Master who ensures the apprentice attends the appropriate courses and receives practical experience of boat handling over the whole length of the tidal Thames. For many apprentices their Master will be a member of their family or someone else they hold but there is no restriction on who can be a Master. Indeed with a few conditions the Master can in name be the apprentice's employing Company. The main condition is that employing Company must allocate a Waterman and Lighterman from within the Company to oversee the apprenticeship. For those aged above 19 the Company offers traineeships which in many ways are similar to an apprenticeship.

An apprenticeship starts at a Court of Bindings. This is a traditional City of London ceremony enjoyed by the apprentice's family and friends. Before the Court of the Company, all Court Members work on or have a close connection with the River Thames, apprentices sign an agreement to be bound to the Company and a Master for a period of 5 years during which they complete their training.

In their first year apprentices complete an Induction Course covering survival in water, fire-fighting, first aid and receive their VHF Radio Certificate. All apprentices need to find work or a work placement in order to gain the necessary practical experience aboard a vessel enabling them to demonstrate they can accomplish tasks set out in the Maritime and Coastguard Agency (MCA) Task Record Book. This Record Book also acts as a log book to record time afloat under which Captain and on which vessel. These records are essential for proving that sufficient work experience has been undertaken to qualify for a licence. It is the Government's MCA that regulates training and the issuing of commercial Boatmaster licences to work on Thames vessels.

After a reasonable time and when apprentices have sufficient basic knowledge apprentices come back to college for the two week Marine 1 Course. The Company currently uses North West Kent College's National Sea Training Centre at Gravesend

With further practical experience working on the River Thames amounting to at least 24 months and having reached the age of 18, apprentices can return to college for the five week Marine 2 Course which finishes with a written examination for a BML Tier 1 Level 2 Licence. This roughly equates with the old Watermen and Lightermen Port of London Authority Provisional Licence allowing apprentices to act as the Master of a vessel carrying up to 12 passengers.

There is at this stage a choice which allows apprentices to decide whether they would like to start their career in passenger vessels or towing cargo in barges. This decision leads to the Endorsements that might be acquired either for passenger operations, towing and pulling and/or general cargo. In addition there is the Thames Watermen's Local Knowledge Endorsement, an oral examination conducted by the MCA.

There are a number of specialist Endorsements including (for those aged 21), a Large Passenger Vessel Endorsement to be Master of a vessel carrying 250 passengers.

Apprentices completing their training are invited to be examined for local knowledge of the River Thames from Lower Hope to Teddington, the successful completion of which leads to a recommendation for the Freedom of the Company.

Trainees being aged over 19, are equally invited to start their traineeship at a Court of Bindings. Whilst having a mentor or Master is most useful it is not essential for trainees. Trainees follow the same programme of training as apprentices but because of their age if they already have work experience on Inland Waterways they can qualify after 2 years.

Once qualified as a Waterman and Lighterman, continuing personal development is encouraged by a Continuing Professional Development programme. This consists of adding additional Endorsements to increase the range of skills and attending updating seminars and conferences.

Please contact Sandra Watts at Watermen's Hall for more information or to book a course.

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