

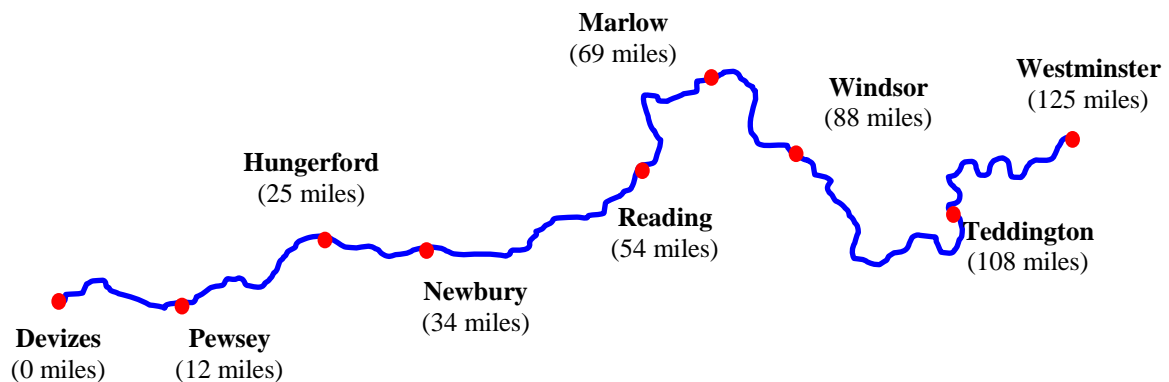


1948-2014 - Celebrating 66 Years of Personal Endeavour

Devizes Westminster International Canoe Marathon

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

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



It is 125 miles in total, with 77 portages around locks, with around 90,000 paddle strokes (give or take a few thousand). Competitors complete the marathon straight through or over four days. Whichever option a crew selects, it is one of the most rewarding and respected challenges in the UK.

DW2014 will be a popular event with over 635 paddlers setting out to test their training, preparation and fitness against the course. Some will be competing, looking to push close to the course record of 15 hours 34 minutes set 34 years ago in 1979. Others will be looking to finish, completing a personal challenge of training and dedication unmatched in amateur sport.

Rainfall over the winter, according to the Met Office, has been the highest in England and Wales since records began. For crews this has meant tough training conditions with some of the build-up preparation races cancelled or postponed. The impact on training schedules has been considerable.

As DW2014 approached, the canal and river have a good steady flow. Fast crews will make good use of this, but it's unlikely to be fast enough to threaten record times. Slower crews should benefit from the additional flow that could assist with movement down the course. But the benefit is minimal in real terms.

In 2014 we're fortunate to see the return of Ben Hunt-Davis, (Rowing 8s Gold Medallist at Sydney 2000) who first entered DW in 2012 but did not finish. Ben and Senior Doubles partner Matt Parish – both with a rowing background, have been training steadily for over a year working on becoming good paddlers.

Retiring from DW is always tough, returning takes courage. We hope Ben and Matt make it to the finish line this year.

2014 also marks a new innovation for DW with the introduction of tracking technology for a selection of Senior Doubles as part of a trial. Close to 80 crews will be carrying GPS Tracking Technology providing updates of a crew's location roughly every three minutes. The DW Organising Team have selected 50 crews to carry devices with around 30 crews hiring the devices privately.

As one of the great open-to-all endurance events this year's entrant's ages range from 15 up to 71. The average age of juniors is 17. Average age of seniors is 40¼. Women make up 20% (127) of the 634 entrants in 362 boats. 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 there are entrants from 17 nationalities including: Australian, Belgian, Belizean, British, Canadian, Dutch, German, Hungarian, Irish, Nepalese, New Zealand, Polish, Romanian, Russian-French, South African, Swedish, United States.

Four people are celebrating birthdays while paddling over the Easter Weekend!

History of the Race

The Objective (as set out in the official rule book)

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 125-mile 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 is normally be negotiated in darkness through the night, some assistance is gained from the current with another 20 locks to be portaged. Crews that successfully catch the tide at Teddington, where the Thames becomes tidal for the last 17 miles to Westminster, may have as much as 5 knots assistance at the height of the ebb tide. 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 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 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 2014 is as strong as ever. The number of entries is approaching 1970s level, when the current record for the non-stop race was set in 1979 with a blistering time of 15 hours and 34 minutes. Today's elite marathon and endurance paddlers, with improved kit and training regimes, do their very best to get close to this time.

The Five Classes

There are five classes of entry to the Devizes Westminster International Canoe Marathon. The Senior Doubles class is the non-stop race. All other classes complete the course over four days, an equally demanding event, but for slightly different reasons.

Senior Doubles Class (non-stop) – 199 boats (398 entrants)

Seniors over 18 may start at any time between 0700 and 2000 on Easter Saturday, timing their departure from Devizes so as to arrive at Teddington 108 miles down the course at high tide (0649 on Easter Sunday morning) if they are to take advantage of the ebb on the final 17 miles of tidal water from Teddington to Westminster. In addition to completing the course, the departure time requires careful planning as well as tactical and strategic consideration. Serious competitors plan to paddle non-stop leaving the boats to carry boats or portage the 77 canal and river locks.

Junior Doubles Class (four-stage) – 60 boats (120 entrants)

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 their position.

Senior Singles Class (four-stage) – 62 boats (62 entrants)

This class was contested for the first time in 1985 and is open to crews over 18. It follows the Junior format with 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 minutes 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) – 28 boats (56 entrants)

This event is held over 4 days and is a challenge not a race, providing the opportunity for people to learn the course and to learn how to prepare properly if they decide to take part in 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) – 12 boats (24 entrants)

Traditionally Juniors can only race over 4 days and the Vet/Junior class 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 and relationships can undergo great change in this event.

Taking Part

To get to the start line, crews are recommended to train steadily for a minimum of six months. The training is tough but with planning can be result in a successful DW campaign for most people.

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:

- Anyone can take part in DW. It is open to all (subject to the usual conditions of entry)
- 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 £500 (second hand) upwards to £3,000 or more.
- 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 2015

Next year's race, over Easter Weekend, runs from 3-6 April 2015.

For interview, photographs or more information contact Peter Hutchison on peterhutchison24@gmail.com or call 07736 424200.

- ENDS --