

GUIDANCE FOR SMALL CRAFT OPERATING IN THE MENAI STRAIT

SMALL CRAFT AND SHIPS – COLLISION AVOIDANCE

Merchant ships visit the Menai Strait relatively infrequently (on average there are only 60 to 80 ship movements per annum). Consequently many owners / skippers of small craft based in this area may be unaware of what to do when they do meet a ship in the Strait.

Ships visiting the Strait include a variety of craft and are normally in the range of around 500 GT (Gross Tonnes) up to 3,000 GT. Most commercial shipping is bound for Port Penrhyn in Bangor and these vessels include the aggregate dredger MV City of Cardiff that delivers sand to Port Penrhyn and other vessels shipping occasional cargoes of slate from Port Penrhyn. The passenger ship Balmoral, which can carry up to 750 passengers, also visits the area every year, normally calling at the piers in Menai Bridge and Caernarfon.

Also based within the Strait is the research vessel 'Prince Madog', which is normally berthed at St George's Pier, Menai Bridge.

HOW MUCH ROOM DO SHIPS NEED?

This depends to a certain extent on the size and manoeuvrability of the ship. As an example, the Balmoral is relatively shallow draughted, fairly manoeuvrable and can pull up relatively quickly if necessary. In the wider parts of the channel she may therefore be able to deviate from her course to some extent where necessary and desirable. However, you should still give her room and you should avoid any sudden alterations of course to cross her path. Larger ships are much less manoeuvrable and being constrained by their draught will be unable to deviate significantly from their course. Whilst the Strait may look like a vast expanse of water at certain states of the tide, the channel itself is fairly narrow in many parts and therefore bear in mind that ships may need to keep to a certain path. They will also take some distance to stop should this become necessary. If forced to put her engines astern due to perceived risk of collision, a ship may lose directional control.

In the buoyed channel most commercial ships will normally be proceeding at speeds of between 9 and 12 knots (or 14 knots in the case of the Balmoral). When you see a ship approaching it is therefore better to make an early alteration of course in order to get clear and give the ship plenty of sea room. If you need to cross over to the other side of the channel make sure you do this early enough – do not cross the path of the ship at the last minute. What constitutes a safe distance will depend on the circumstances. In general you should not attempt to cross ahead of a ship if this will result in you being less than 3 ship lengths away by the time you have cleared the path of the ship (the safe distance will depend on your speed relative to the speed of the ship and so if you are in a slow moving vessel you will need to allow more time). Bear in mind that the ship may need to alter course whilst you are crossing and therefore it is better to stay well clear. If in doubt it is better to pass astern of a ship that is moving ahead – the consequences of getting it wrong could be fatal.

In areas of high traffic density ships will usually slow down to give small craft more time to get clear, but they cannot reduce speed below about 5 to 6 knots otherwise they will lose steerageway. In some areas ships will be unable to slow down at all - this could be in areas where the tidal stream or wind could set the ship off course if she reduces speed. An example would be the stretch of water between B5 and B10 buoys off Beaumaris, where the south-west going tidal stream sets to the south and a ship could end up the wrong side of B10 if she slows down (this set is not felt to the same extent by small craft).

WHAT SHOULD I DO IF I MEET A SHIP IN THE SWELLIES?

One area where many small craft skippers dread meeting a ship is in the Swellies. It will come as no surprise that pilots / masters onboard ships do not enjoy meeting small craft in such an area either! Navigating the Swellies in a ship is challenging enough without the added complication of meeting a number of small craft. For this reason the Balmoral will sometimes (but not always) go through via the Anglesey channel during busier periods in order to avoid small boat traffic in the main channel. However, deeper-draughted vessels must use the main channel on the mainland side. Whatever channel they are using, if you meet a ship in the Swellies you will need to give them room as they will be unable to deviate from their course.

Many small boat skippers are afraid to stray off-track in the Swellies, but in reality the channel is reasonably wide for a small boat at high water slack. Keep an eye on your echo sounder and move over early enough to the outer limit of the channel that lies on your starboard side (remember the ship will be drawing considerably more than you). If it looks like the ship is going to pass you in one of the narrowest parts of the channel (shaded red on the chartlet shown below), and if circumstances allow, it may be better to pull over to starboard and slow down or stop before you reach these areas. Whatever you do, do not linger or stop mid channel! Bear in mind that the ship will need to head in close to the mainland shore to pass the tail at the eastern end of Swelly Rock and there will be little room between the ship and the shore at this point. Also, in areas where the ship will need to alter course significantly, such as coming around Price's Point, bear in mind that the pivot point of the ship (apparent centre of rotation) is well forward of amidships when moving ahead

and there can also be considerable sideways drift. Therefore you will need to give plenty of room for the ship's stern to swing around. If the ship is turning to port, her stern will swing to starboard and if turning to starboard her stern will swing to port.

BUT DON'T THE COLREGS SAY THAT POWER GIVES WAY TO SAIL?

In general, yes, but not always. There are several special cases where this does not apply, including:- narrow channels, separation lanes, overtaking, and avoiding vessels that are: not under command, restricted in their ability to manoeuvre, constrained by their draught or vessels engaged in fishing (as defined in the COLREGs). If you think about it, it makes sense - in essence the onus is on the craft with the best chance of avoiding the other craft.

In general the advice given in this guidance applies equally to sailing vessels when it comes to keeping clear of ships in the Menai Strait. In practice it may be more difficult to keep to the outer limits of the channel if you are tacking to windward, but you are still required to not impede the passage of a ship. Depending on the area in question and the state of tide, you may have the option of sailing outside the buoyed channel in order to keep clear. If you cannot avoid a close-quarters situation you are still responsible to keep out of the way. Whatever you do, you should never tack into the path of a ship – the ship may not be able to take avoiding action in time.

It is also worth noting that a yacht that is racing has no more priority under the COLREGs than any other sailing vessel and in a narrow channel must not impede the passage of a ship. Having to put a tack in or alter course may disadvantage you in a race, but ultimately your safety must always take priority over such considerations. If you plan ahead you can help to avoid or reduce any disadvantage by taking early action.

COLLISION AVOIDANCE CHECKLIST – STAY CLEAR TO STAY AFLOAT!

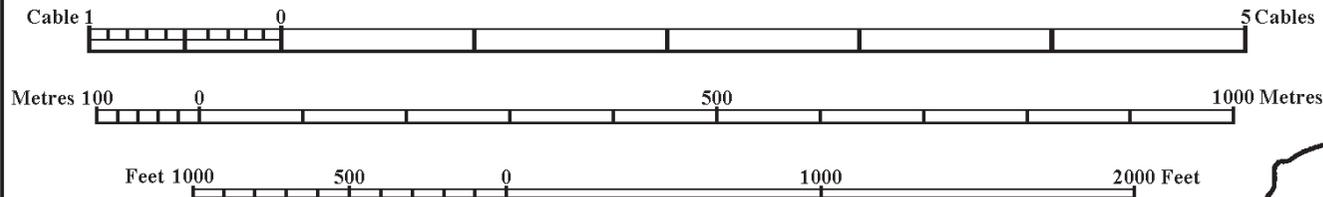
- Be alert – keep a good lookout at all times – watch out for other vessels and ships, especially behind you.
- Be seen, especially at night.
- Remember that in “narrow channels”, powered craft under 20m, sailing boats and vessels engaged in fishing must not impede the passage of ships that can only proceed in the channel.
- When proceeding along the channel keep to the outer limit that lies on your starboard side.
- When in doubt get out of the way - make your alteration of course early enough so there is no doubt you're avoiding a close-quarters situation. Bear in mind that whilst you may know where you are heading, your intentions may not be clear to the ship. Make your alteration obvious - a few degrees change of course or an alteration in speed won't be seen.
- Pass at a safe distance. Merely avoiding hitting the ship is not enough. A boat length of 10m may be enough between two 10m boats; it is grossly inadequate where one of the vessels is a ship.
- If you need to cross the channel you should not attempt to cross ahead of the ship if this will result in you being less than 3 ship lengths (about 200 to 250m) away when you have cleared the path of the ship. If in doubt it is better to pass astern of a ship that is moving ahead.
- If the compass bearing of any part of the ship remains steady you are on a collision course – take action.
- Keep an eye on the ship until she is finally past and clear – she may need to make an alteration of course that brings her closer to you than you thought.
- Remember that visibility from the bridge of a ship is limited. If you can't see the centre of the bridge clearly it is likely that the pilot / master has already lost sight of you.

SOUND SIGNALS (for vessels within sight of each other)

Here are some sound signals that you may hear from the ship and their meanings:-

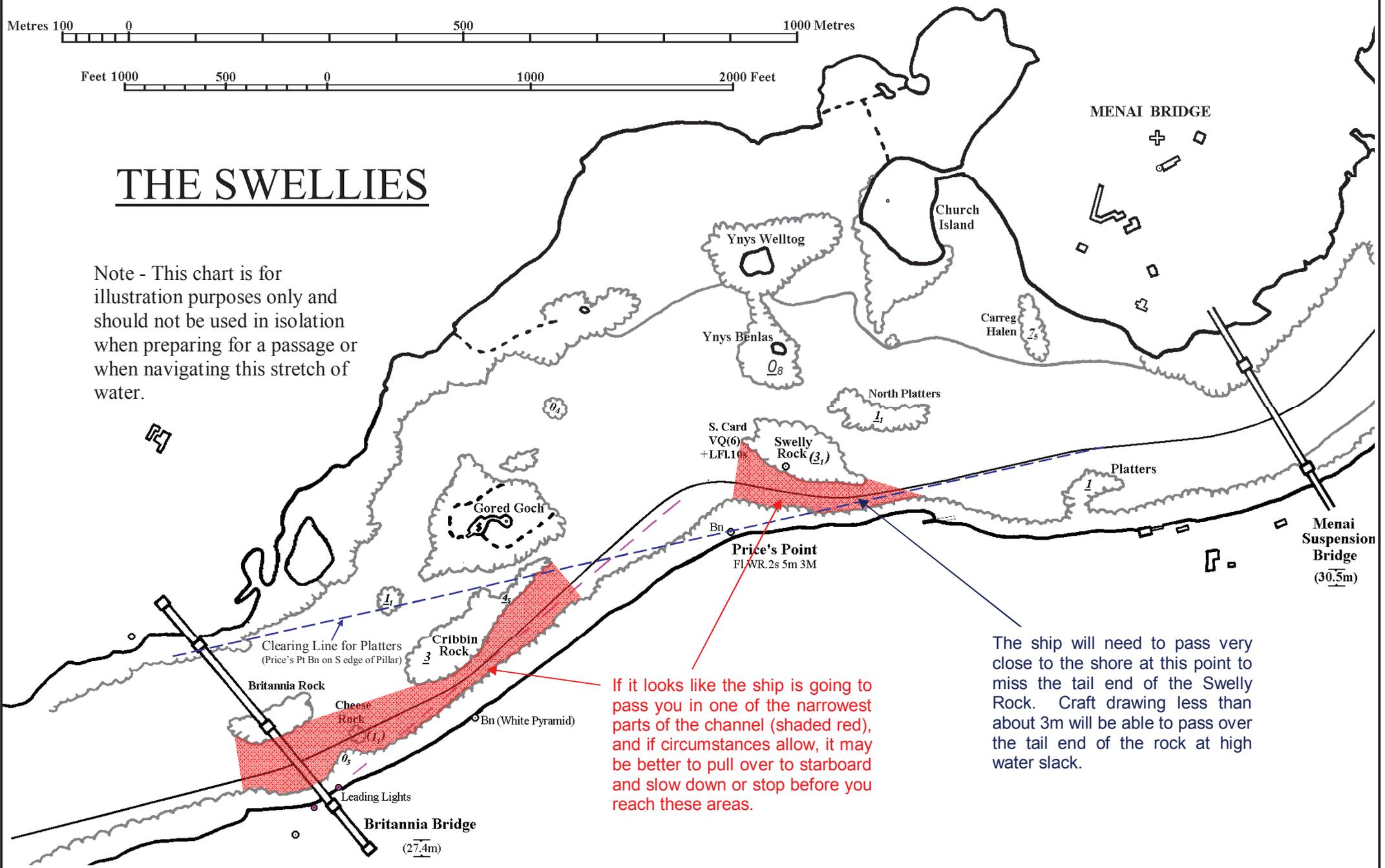
- 1 short blast – I am altering my course to starboard
- 2 short blasts – I am altering my course to port
- 3 short blasts – I am operating astern propulsion (this does not necessarily mean that the ship is moving astern – merely that engines are running astern)
- If the ship gives 5 short blasts, he is worried that you are not taking sufficient action to avoid a collision or he doesn't understand your intentions. GET CLEAR!
- A ship may give one long blast when approaching a blind corner, such as around Price's Point in the Swellies, to give advance warning of its approach. This can be answered by a long blast to confirm your presence.

NB – in all cases boat owners / skippers should ensure they have a good 'working knowledge' of the COLREGS and this guidance in no way supersedes the legal rights and responsibilities of all seafarers.



THE SWELLIES

Note - This chart is for illustration purposes only and should not be used in isolation when preparing for a passage or when navigating this stretch of water.



If it looks like the ship is going to pass you in one of the narrowest parts of the channel (shaded red), and if circumstances allow, it may be better to pull over to starboard and slow down or stop before you reach these areas.

The ship will need to pass very close to the shore at this point to miss the tail end of the Swelly Rock. Craft drawing less than about 3m will be able to pass over the tail end of the rock at high water slack.