

**AMATEUR ROWING ASSOCIATION**

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Mr. John S. Pollard,  
H. M. Coroner,  
Greater Manchester South District,  
10, Greek Street,  
Stockport.  
SK3 SAB

December 19th, 2005.

Dear Mr. Pollard,

**Second Inquest into the death of Leo Blockley**

I am writing to you on behalf of the Amateur Rowing Association (ARA) in response to your letter under Rule 43 of the Coroners' Rules. Firstly, I would like to thank you for your comments and the interest you have shown in rowing safety.

In your letter you refer to a letter to the ARA from your fellow Coroner Mr. Peter Bedford, Her Majesty's Coroner for Berkshire, following the Inquest into the death of Sikander Farooq and you ask us to read your letter in conjunction with Mr Bedford's letter. Following the Inquest into the death of Sikander Farooq the ARA's Water Safety Committee initiated a thorough review of water safety in our sport. My response to Mr. Bedford outlined the factors we would take into account and, although there are specific differences in circumstances between the two deaths, I agree with you that there are overlaps and similarities. Accordingly, I have enclosed a copy of the response I sent to Mr. Bedford, and this letter should be read in conjunction with it and is an integral part of our response.

In your letter you set out a number of points arising from the evidence heard at the second Inquest into the death of Leo Blockley, and I will deal with each in turn.

**1. Lack of clear guidance to rowing clubs and individual rowers on safety.**

I appreciate that you did not hear evidence on the guidance the ARA offers to clubs and individuals during the Inquest, so I think it might be helpful to list some of the guidance the ARA offered to clubs and members prior to the death of Leo Blockley, and the additional guidance offered subsequently. I hope that this will go some way towards reassuring you that the ARA does offer extensive clear guidance on water safety and related matters.

Guidance offered prior to December 2000:

- Water Safety Code 1<sup>st</sup> edition 1984
- Water Safety Code 2<sup>nd</sup> edition 1994
- All clubs and Regions required to appoint a Water Safety Adviser
- Coaching Courses – Instructor Award – substantial element of safety awareness and practical for the first level of coach education. Bronze and Silver Awards offered additional safety awareness.
- Club safety checklist – 1994 – to help clubs respond to the Water Safety Code 2<sup>nd</sup> edition
- Trailer Driver's Handbook

Guidance subsequently offered:

- Water Safety Code 3<sup>rd</sup> edition 2003
- Reminder to clubs of buoyancy requirement in Water Safety Code, with advice on the plating of boats
- Second reminder to clubs regarding buoyancy and the purchase of boats from overseas manufacturers.

- Club Development. A series of regional conferences covering the whole country which have covered; the introduction of new Code, the rules on boat buoyancy and subsequent updates on water safety.
- Annual Club Safety Audit (self audit) required to be submitted to Regional Water Safety Advisers. Audit questions now extended to highlight both the Reading and Amposta incidents and other areas of development. This is to be completed and submitted on-line, with the intention of highlighting areas of safety requiring attention in clubs.
- Event Audit issued as guidance for the organisers.
- Guidance to Regional Councils on their role and responsibilities for events in their region.
- Lightning Guidance for events and clubs.
- Training Camp Audit issued as guidance for the organisers.
- Trailer driver's interactive compact disc.
- Amendment to rules and guidance in the Water Safety Code to cover the growing use of "flexible clogs".
- Guidance to clubs on health and swimming issues related to club membership application, including the provision of templates covering both juniors and seniors
- Incident logbooks issued to assist clubs to keep track of both major and minor incidents, and guidance on how to use the information in risk assessments.
- "Water Safety – You and Your Club"; highlighting the areas of safety an individual needs to address and the responsibilities a club has in the education and training of its members, and stating where to get more information on safety. Issued to every new and renewing member.
- The introduction of alpha-numerical identification codes on boats. Initially on the Tideway Thames, then to be extended to other navigation authority waters at a later date.
- Safety Posters; to be distributed to clubs and which will also become available on the ARA website for downloading.
  - "Watch where you're going" Prompting our members to be sure of the navigation rules where they are rowing and to keep a good lookout.
  - "Fit to compete!" Highlighting issues around buoyancy, conditions and "Will your crew know what to do in the event of an emergency?"
  - "Forgotten Something?" Highlighting the need to check equipment.
  - "Prepare for launch" Highlighting the requirement for launches to carry safety equipment. "Be safe be trained"
  - "Spot the driver" "Stay connected use a kill cord" Highlighting the dangers for launch drivers who do not use a kill cord.

This is a long list and I have not sent copies of all of these documents to you; it would require a substantial package. I have enclosed a copy of the latest edition of the Water Safety Code and the CD issued to clubs following the launch of that edition entitled "ARA Club Welfare Resource". This CD contains presentations on the changes in the Water Safety Code and on Criminal Records Bureau procedures which were delivered at a series of Club Welfare Conferences covering the whole of England during 2003. It also contains training modules on Risk Management, Club Water Safety Advisers, Participant Welfare and the ARA Trailer Guide. I would, of course, be happy to supply you with a copy of any or all of the other documents I have listed if you would like to have them.

As I stated in my letter to Mr. Bedford the ARA is engaged in a review of the guidance currently offered and I will send you copies of the new documents when they have been completed. The emphasis in future will be on improving the communication of water safety guidance to clubs rather than on issuing new rules. The ARA's Water Safety Code has evolved over the twenty years of its existence and there has been a shift from a rules based approach to one where we encourage clubs and members to think about the risks they are taking and to take responsibility for their actions. For rules to be effective they must be enforced. The ARA is a voluntary association of clubs and the water safety function at all levels in the sport is performed by volunteers. We are able, with volunteers, to strictly enforce safety rules at ARA recognised competitive events by the simple sanction not allowing the

event to take place or the individual to take part. Outside these events we do have to rely on the voluntary adherence of our clubs and individual club members, many of whom are not ARA members as individuals. Writing new rules will not change this situation. Indeed, I do wish that those in charge of Oxford University Lightweight Rowing Club (OULRC) in Amposta in December, 2000 had actually bothered to read our rules and guidance on water safety, let alone followed them. It was very disappointing to hear the OULRC Head Coach at the time of the death of Leo Blockley admit in her evidence at the second Inquest that she could not remember ever reading the ARA Water Safety Code before the event or since. Our challenge is not to frame more rules, but to get the message of the importance of water safety through to individuals like her.

## **2. The adoption of FISA guidelines and protocols.**

You are correct in stating that the ARA has the choice over adopting FISA guidelines and protocols; after all, they are guidelines and not rules. The draft FISA Guidelines for Safety Standards was mentioned in evidence given at the Inquest and I assume that it is these guidelines to which you refer. These guidelines have now been published under the title of FISA's Minimum Guidelines for the Safe Practice of Rowing (FISA Guidelines). The ARA will not adopt these guidelines because to do so would be to move back to an older, less comprehensive, version of our own Water Safety Code. The FISA Guidelines are based largely on the second edition of the ARA Water Safety Code, which was superseded by the third edition in April, 2003. Whilst the ARA welcomes this initiative from FISA, when we first had sight of the initial draft of the FISA document we were concerned that it was not sufficiently robust, and we expressed our concern to FISA together with suggested amendments, some of which were adopted. The general response from FISA was that these guidelines had been drafted to provide a brief guide to national federations who currently have no safety policies in place at all, which, perhaps surprisingly, is the case for all but a handful of national federations. They felt that the current ARA Water Safety Code, and also the previous edition on which the FISA document is based, would be too much for most rowing nations around the world to adopt and implement as a first step to developing safety policies and procedures. This intention is made explicit in the opening sentences which state; *"This document should be considered as an example for the development of a localised safety programme. Each national, regional or local rowing organization should have its own regulations for the safe practice of the sport of rowing which fully reflects local, regional or national laws, obligations and requirements."* For the reasons stated above, the ARA will not be adopting FISA's Minimum Guidelines for the Safe Practice of Rowing as a replacement for the current ARA Water Safety Code.

## **3. Alcohol and coaching.**

I entirely concur with your comment; it is totally unacceptable for coaches to be under the influence of alcohol when they are responsible for safety during rowing. We are very disappointed that there was no disclosure to the ARA, just as there was no disclosure to the first Inquest, by those senior individuals at OULRC who were in a position to do so, of their concerns about coaches being either under the influence of alcohol, or suffering the after-effects of alcohol, during the training session when Leo Blockley died. The President of OULRC failed to make any reference to his concerns about alcohol when he reported the incident to the ARA in February, 2001, and the Senior Member for OULRC failed to mention the issue at all when the ARA Honorary Treasurer and I met him, and other members of the newly established Council for Oxford University Rowing (COUR), to discuss the incident in October, 2002. What is particularly difficult to understand is that the President of OULRC failed to take action over his concern that his Head Coach was affected by alcohol on two occasions. Firstly, when, as he stated at the Inquest, he believed that she was affected by alcohol when she was in charge of the Trial Eights in the autumn prior to the incident in Amposta. Secondly, on the morning of the death of Leo Blockley in Amposta, he allowed the session to start, and then to continue, under her control, despite his concerns about her behaviour before and during the training session. In your verdict you state; *"Although there is evidence that some or all of the coaches may have partaken of alcohol on the evening the 28<sup>th</sup> December 2000, there is insufficient evidence to prove, even on the balance of probabilities, that the after-effects thereof so affected the judgement of any of the coaches such that it could be said to have materially affected the outcome of an accidental event."* Indeed, the collective decision making by the coaches and crews at Amposta was so faulty that it would have scarcely made any difference if they were affected by alcohol or not. The chain of key faulty decisions is set out below.

1. The coaches in the catamaran launch, once the propeller shaft had been fouled by a rope left trailing in the water over the side of the boat, did not attempt to use the anchor to prevent the boat drifting out of control from the sheltered, calmer, side of the river, and over to the bank exposed to the full force of the violent wind. Having been blown over it became stranded amongst trees where they had to await rescue. An attempt at rescue made by the crew of the mono-hull launch was unsuccessful and the catamaran launch crew had to wait to be rescued by a Fire Brigade launch. There was no mention of an anchor in the evidence to the Inquest, so it is possible that the coaches took the launch out without this equipment, which was listed as being required in a launch in the then current second edition of the Water Safety Code. Of course, allowing a rope tied to his seat to trail over the side of the launch and to foul the propeller shaft is an embarrassing mistake for the coach who was acting as helmsman, and therefore in charge of the boat, to make, but however embarrassing it is to that coach, it was not actually a faulty decision, but it was a basic failure of good watermanship. One puzzle is, why did the coaches decide to start their first training session on the water in the half-light and before the Fire Brigade were on duty at the neighbouring boathouse and, therefore, before the Fire Brigade were able to offer safety cover, which they routinely did for the local club? After all, they did have all day in which to train. During the second Inquest several witnesses stated that they boated just before dawn as first light broke, and that the boats set off down river so as to avoid the risk of hitting a buoy moored a little way up river from the landing stage, which they could not see in the poor light. It does not seem to have occurred to anyone, that if they had boated half an hour later they would have been able to see the buoy clearly, and thus have the freedom to row up river if they preferred.

2. The coaches in the mono-hull launch, led by the Head Coach, should have kept both crews together and in sight, in the sheltered waters near the lee bank where the crews were able to row without difficulty, while assisting the catamaran. Instead, they sent the two eight oared boats, in the charge of very inexperienced coxswains, back to the club, round a bend and into the teeth of winds gusting up to 70mph; winds so strong that the coaches in the two launches, when they were struggling to free the propeller of the catamaran from the fouling rope near the exposed bank, could not make themselves heard to each other, even when using loudhailers at 10 yards distance. The coaches gave no instructions on how to deal with the conditions, they did not remind the crews to adhere to the Amposta club's bad weather circulation pattern, the pattern which should be used in such conditions to avoid swamping when crossing the river to the club landing stage, and they did not tell the crews to return around the bend to the safety of the sheltered water if they considered the conditions too difficult. The only instruction appears to have been to return to the club.

3. The Head Coach and the other coaches in the mono-hull, if they decided that the two crews must return to the boat house, should have gone to the turn in the river below the club to assess the risk to the crews in the two eight oared boats of going around the corner, out of the sheltered waters, in the deteriorating conditions. The coaches could have kept the two crews in sheltered waters while the mono-hull went for assistance at the Fire Brigade boathouse, which was sited just down river of the OULRC training base at the Amposta club. Instead they sent the crews away unsupervised, whilst they concentrated their attention on the other launch, which was stuck fast next to the exposed bank and going nowhere.

4. The coxswains of both eights lost control of the boats when they came round the bend into the strong wind. There was no evidence that they tried to use the crew and oars to complement the rudder in an attempt to ensure that the bows were kept in line pointing into the bank, and the boats under control. Given the lack of experience of the coxswains, and the limited extent of training offered to them as members of OULRC, it is possible that they had not been taught the basic skill of using the oars to enhance the steering effect of the rudder.

5. The coxswains should have used the local procedure for crossing the river in high winds i.e. go above the club, turn the bows into the wind and continue to face upstream to maintain control, and allow the wind to blow them across to the landing stage. This is what Axel Muller, the Director of the Spanish National Rowing Federation's Coaching School and formerly a professional coach working at Amposta, and who was present in Amposta during the OULRC training camp, told the OULRC group when he briefed them on rowing at this venue on the night before the death of Leo Blockley. Axel Muller states that those present at the briefing included the President and some of the coaches and coxswains. Axel Muller, who is now a

member of the FISA Youth Rowing Commission, is certain that had they followed this standard club practice neither eight oared boat would have been swamped. I sent this information to you before the Inquest in the form of a statement given by Axel Muller to me. Axel Muller had been willing to come to England to give evidence in person, but as you know he was grateful that you decided that was not necessary.

The performance of the coaches and crews at Amposta indicates that they were operating outside the scope of their knowledge and competence and it is very doubtful if the OULRC party should have been in Amposta at all. Some of the coaches had many years of experience in rowing but this seems to have been, with one exception, limited in scope, and their confidence in their own abilities and knowledge was not well founded. The Head Coach had undertaken no formal training or education as a coach, and neither she, nor the most experienced coach present could state, when asked to by you, Mr. Pollard, the standard navigation rule of two boats passing each other port side to port side. All they could state was a garbled version of the navigation rules used on the tidal Thames in London; information with no relevance to circulation patterns on the River Ebro in Spain. It is disappointing that coaches in positions of responsibility, conducting a training camp abroad, should have such a poor grasp of an absolutely basic navigation rule.

#### **4. Safety training for rowers, coxswains and coaches**

I agree completely with your comment. It is clear from the evidence presented that the coxswains and athletes received little or no safety training whilst members of OULRC, and none that was adequate to prepare them for a training camp on the River Ebro at Amposta, even without the exceptionally bad conditions they encountered on the day of the death of Leo Blockley. The complacent attitude to water safety is illustrated by the fact that the coxswain of Leo Blockley's boat could not swim well enough to meet the compulsory swimming standard set in the ARA Water Safety Code of the time. If the club had been rigorously adhering to the second edition of the Water Safety Code then in force she would not have been allowed out in a boat, and she would not have been taken abroad to cox on a training camp. If they had been adequately prepared or supervised then neither coxswain, under the instruction of the President in one boat and in consultation with the stroke in the other, would have attempted the unnecessary, dangerous and reckless manoeuvre of crossing the river immediately up stream and up wind of the bridge, side on to a wind gusting up 70 mph and to waves 2ft to 3ft high. Such a manoeuvre is rank bad coxing and displays a very poor understanding of basic watermanship by the coxswains and the other crew members. The inevitable consequence was that both boats were swamped and they foundered. The particular risk with this manoeuvre is that the boat could be swept or blown onto a bridge pier, resulting in the boat being overturned or broken up by the impact, and either way, the crew being thrown into the water, probably separated from the boat, if it were still in one piece and floating, with nine individuals swimming for their lives. The swamping of both boats was avoidable. It would have been avoided if the coaches had performed adequately, or if the crews knew what they were doing.

The inexperience of the coxswain of the boat carrying Leo Blockley is illustrated by one of her comments when she gave evidence at the Inquest. She stated that when steering the boat across the river that she attempted to steer a course that would compensate for the river stream. This would be normal practice on the Isis and on most rivers when there is little wind, but in this circumstance the overriding factor to be taken into account when steering across the river was not the stream, it was the ferocious wind which was driving her boat towards the bridge. Nearly five years after this tragedy, she still seemed to have little idea of what she should have been doing.

The ARA has offered a number of training schemes and initiatives over many years for the purpose of encouraging proficient and safe practice in rowing. I have briefly outlined some of them below.

#### ARA Coaching Award Scheme

From the nineteen seventies until now the ARA has offered this scheme for the education of all coaches, and the courses on offer from the nineteen eighties to this year have included:

*1. Instructor Award:* emphasises safety with practical experience of swimming test, capsize drill, artificial resuscitation and instructing beginners for their first few weeks on the water.

2. *Bronze Award*: focuses on the preparation of participants who are moving into competition

3. *Silver Award*: focuses on preparing athletes for higher level competition. It is this Award which is suitable for those preparing for a serious athletic event such as the University Lightweight Boat Race. Apart from the coach from New Zealand who held foreign coaching awards, only one coach with the OULRC party held the ARA Instructor Award, and the others apparently held none.

#### The UK Coaching Certificate.

The ARA is currently one of five sports in the first pilot group establishing the new UK Coaching Certificate. This is a government supported initiative aiming to foster greater competence in sports coaching through the establishment of coaching qualifications which are nationally recognised across all sports and of a comparable standard to vocational qualifications outside sport. The ARA was asked to be one of the sport national governing bodies to lead this initiative because we are recognised as being committed to coach education and because we have been successful in implementing similar initiatives in the past.

#### Rowing technical workshops.

In addition to Coaching Award Scheme courses, the ARA also offers locally delivered workshops and seminars on rowing technical topics which are open to all.

#### ARA Coaching Conference.

Since the nineteen eighties, the ARA has organised an annual national conference on a wide variety of topics every year. This conference is open to all, coach or not, qualified or not.

#### Regatta magazine.

Our own magazine, circulated to all individual ARA members contains articles relevant to coaches with the intention of keeping them up to date.

#### GoRow

This is a teaching scheme used by clubs in the National Junior Rowing Programme. The emphasis is on teaching young newcomers to rowing how to row, safely, enjoyably and technically well.

Again, it has to be emphasised that rowers, coxswains and coaches are mostly amateurs and volunteers and that we cannot compel such individuals to attend training and education courses. We also do not have the power to prevent inexperienced, undereducated and ill-prepared groups embarking on training camps abroad. In our current review we are considering how best to communicate the message of the importance of safe practice and the value of undergoing training and education to our clubs and individual members. We have also started to address the training of coxswains, which seems to be particularly weak in some of our member clubs. As a first step we are currently preparing a Coxing Award for club use.

### **5. Clear differentiation between the administrative and safety responsibilities at training camps.**

We agree that there should be clarity about responsibilities for safety, not just during training camps, but at any time or place when rowing is taking place. In this case the responsibility lay with the President of OULRC as the senior officer of the club present. He had been to Amposta the previous winter, and he was familiar with the venue. He selected the venue and organised the camp, but he does not seem to have given sufficient consideration to the safety requirements for the camp. Some of the factors which could have been considered are set out in the Skeleton I presented to you on October 5th, when I offered to give independent expert evidence to the Inquest. The President also appointed the Head Coach, who, although experienced in preparing for, and racing in, the annual University Lightweight Boat Race, had not attended any formal coach education and held no coaching qualifications at all. The President was ultimately accountable for the success or failure of the camp and of the whole racing season. He should have set out the policy on safety, or he should have ensured that this responsibility was clearly delegated. We can see that signing a document would focus minds on the issue of safety, but the difficulty is that there is no means of enforcing such a rule. Further, there is the danger that such a requirement would foster just the unthinking box

ticking mentality we wish to avoid when dealing with safety on the water. We prefer to encourage every individual to take responsibility for their own safety and not to be merely passive participants who leave safety to others. This is one reason why we do not ask clubs or regions to appoint Safety Officers. Such a title could be taken to imply that the individual concerned has sole executive accountability for safety. If that were the case few individuals would volunteer for the role. We ask our clubs to appoint a Safety Adviser with the responsibility of advising club officers, committee members, coaches and athletes on safety matters. In this case the accountability for safety is more clearly seen to be where it actually lies; with the officers of the club. It is their role to ensure that there is a safety policy in place for the club and to ensure that it is adhered to. In the case of OULRC, which was described during the Inquest as a fiercely independent club which resisted interference from outside, even from within the University, the President, who, it seems, had the sole authority to hire and fire coaches, was clearly accountable for the safety of his club members. As far as one can tell from the evidence, the President did not have safety on his radar screen, just the preparation for the University Lightweight Boat Race. This may seem a heavy burden for a student to carry, even one who is a postgraduate student. However, given the privileged status of OULRC within Oxford University sports, which allowed the club to act virtually independently, this burden was inescapable.

Since 2000 the ARA Water Safety Committee has issued guidance to all clubs on running a training camp abroad, but we have no control over whether or how the current leadership of OULRC follow it.

#### **6. Personal buoyancy aids.**

I refer you to point 2 in my letter to Mr. Bedford.

#### **7. Capsize drills.**

I refer you to point 4 in my letter to Mr. Bedford, and I extend to you my invitation to him to support us by recommending to local authorities and schools that they help us by making their swimming pools available for safety training for rowing. The ARA on its part, is investigating, with manufacturers, the production of a "pool friendly" boat which can be used and shared between clubs for the sole purpose of capsizing drill.

#### **8. Boat buoyancy.**

The ARA is in favour of boats being sufficiently buoyant so that they can support the crew when they are swamped. A boat which is this buoyant will, as you point out, keep the crew out of the water and reduce the risk of hypothermia when it is swamped. The ARA Water Safety Code third edition contains the following mandatory rule, which applies to our members in and out of competition;

*1.11.5 Boats constructed after 1st April 2003 must have inherent buoyancy sufficient, together with their oars and sculls, to support a seated crew of the correct design weight in the event of being swamped.*

This rule is supported by the following guidance;

*2.6.1 All equipment used for rowing, sculling and coaching needs to be properly and regularly maintained to ensure that it is safe and adequate for its intended purpose and to ensure that it does not expose its users to danger. All new boats constructed after 1st April, 2003 must carry a plate indicating the maximum average crew weight the boat can carry and support seated in the event of being swamped. A club or individual purchasing a new boat must ask the manufacturer to supply this information.*

*2.6.1.2*

*b) Check that buoyancy compartments, seals, hatch covers and ventilation bungs are secure and watertight.*

*i) If, after risk assessment for a planned activity, it is judged that a boat, new or old, does not have sufficient inherent buoyancy, additional buoyancy should be added.*

Further guidance has been provided to clubs stating the data they should ask the boat builders to put onto the manufacturer's plate they fix in the boat. This data should include the amount of freeboard the boat will show when fully swamped and carrying its seated crew.

These provisions on boat buoyancy were the first adopted by any rowing governing body in the world, as far as we know, and they were adopted following the death of Leo Blockley, which was the first death in English rowing where it was suggested that boat buoyancy could have been a contributory factor. It is worth noting that FISA has not adopted a rule requiring that boats used in FISA competitions must meet the buoyancy standard set out in the FISA Guidelines. They have merely stipulated that from January 1st, 2007, that boats used in FISA competitions must carry a plate stating whether the boat meets the FISA Guideline for Minimum Flotation set out in the FISA Guidelines. FISA does not attempt to regulate any rowing outside events organised by FISA, and the FISA Guidelines are advisory, including the provision setting out a buoyancy standard for boats. Given these facts, we are puzzled by the suggestion that the ARA should follow the lead of FISA and adopt the rule on boat buoyancy approved by the FISA Congress earlier this year. The effect of doing so would be that we would remove any requirement for ARA clubs and individual members to buy boats that are sufficiently buoyant to support the crew when swamped. A club's or an individual's boat would merely have to carry a plate stating whether or not it met the standard. By pointing out this difference between ARA and FISA rules I do not intend to suggest that the ARA position on boat buoyancy is perfect. The difficulty for the ARA is that although we have adopted a mandatory provision for our clubs, we are unable to police this rule. It is not a practical proposition for us to test swamp boats. We do not have the means to test boats, we have no power to regulate boat builders in the UK, let alone the rest of the world, and we have no intention of attempting to do so. We believe that the design and construction of boats is properly left to those who have the requisite technical knowledge and competence. It is the boat builders who have the duty of providing equipment to their customers which is fit for purpose, and the ARA will not usurp that duty. We have to rely on co-operation between boat builders and our members, and the willingness of our members to comply with our rule. There is some debate about the proper definition of what is sufficient buoyancy, and we have asked FISA why they have defined it in the way they have, but we have received no response. However, whatever the definition used the difficulty of verification and enforcement would remain.

Following the introduction of the buoyancy rule in 2003, British boat builders, as well as some based overseas, were informed of the rule, the guidance and the suggested plating of boats. Since then British boat builders have manufactured eight and four oared boats with inbuilt under-seat buoyancy. However, many of these boats purchased from overseas manufacturers do not have improved buoyancy by this, or any other means, as standard. On the option of retro-fitting additional buoyancy to boats built prior to the rule introduced in 2003, this suggested compulsory provision would present clubs with potentially crippling costs that would be disproportionate to the risk involved. Many boats are never used in a situation where there is the risk or history of swamping. Over the sixty years since the Second World War we are aware of six fatal incidents in English rowing, including the death of Leo Blockley in Spain. In only one other case, in 1954, did the fatality follow the swamping of a boat, and in that case, as in the case of Leo Blockley, the individual who died swam away from the boat instead of using it as his life raft.

When we consider the events in Amposta and boat buoyancy it is clear that Leo Blockley's boat did not capsize or sink. It remained upright and sufficiently buoyant when swamped to be used as a life raft by those members of the crew who either, stayed with the boat, or returned to it after initially swimming away towards the bank. Although the boat was in danger of being swept against one of the very large bridge piers, the crew were able to manoeuvre the boat as they clung on to it in the water so that they avoided a potentially catastrophic collision, and they eventually reached the safety of the bank, still using the boat as a life raft, several hundred yards down stream. If the crew had felt able to stay sitting in the boat when it became completely swamped, it has been assumed by some that the whole crew would certainly have survived, that they would have been swept by the wind and stream down the river to the safety of the bank on the bend. This assumes that they would have been able to avoid a collision with the bridge pier, with the likely potentially catastrophic consequences, because they would have been lucky with the course the boat took, or because they would have been able to manoeuvre the boat with their oars sufficiently to avoid a collision.

The assumption that a crew would be able to manoeuvre a boat with the oars, even when it has been completely filled with water, seems to be based on some tests organised by the coxswain of Leo Blockley's boat, conducted with the help of fellow college rowers at Oxford



sometime after his tragic death. In the tests Janousek four oared boats, which have in-built under seat buoyancy compartments of the type advocated by some campaigners for improved boat buoyancy, were filled with water while a crew sat in the rowing position. The crews were able to row the boats and to manoeuvre to some extent. However, the conditions were like a mill pond. I have observed one of my club's Janousek four oared boats being swamped at a regatta in Dartmouth harbour in rough conditions. The crew were helpless and unable to manoeuvre the boat, and they had to be towed to the shore. From this personal practical observation, rather than a staged test in ideal conditions, I find unconvincing the proposition that a crew sitting inside an eight oared boat, even with under seat buoyancy compartments, which was swamped full of water and wallowing in the middle of the River Ebro, sideways on to a 70mph wind and waves of 2 to 3 feet height, would have been able to row sufficiently well so that they could manoeuvre the boat at all, let alone so well as to be able to save themselves from hitting the bridge if they had to. A crew sitting out of the water in such a swamped boat would be more exposed to the wind, the boat would have been blown faster down river towards the bridge and they may well have been less able to steer the boat out of danger than they actually were, being in the water alongside the boat and not exposed to the force of the wind.

I do not make this point because the ARA is against boats being buoyant; we are fully in favour of boats being buoyant, and we were the first governing body in the world to take action about it. I make this point because the evidence presented at the Inquest by some witnesses could give the impression that if only Leo Blockley's boat had been more buoyant, then there would certainly not have been a death on that day. The importance of the chain of faulty decisions leading to the swamping of the boat has scarcely been acknowledged by those who were there, and not at all by those who are most vociferous in their attacks on the ARA over boat buoyancy.

There is one other very important point to be made in relation to buoyancy. However buoyant boats are, and whatever precautions we take as a sport, rowing will remain an outdoor water sport, and one with its own inherent rewards and risks. One of those risks will remain the certainty that, from time to time, some rowers will find themselves accidentally in the water. When this happens, it is essential that the rower takes what is demonstrated to be the most effective action they can take; stay with the boat and use it as a life raft. Leo Blockley, who was a strong swimmer, had previously swum successfully for the shore following a boat swamping whilst he was a student at Cambridge and, having become separated from his boat in circumstances which you have found to be unclear, it is unfortunate that he attempted again to swim for the shore instead of back to the boat. He drowned as a consequence. The events in Amposta illustrate well the difference in outcome for those who do stay with the boat compared to those who do not. In the case of Leo Blockley's boat, all of those who stayed with the boat, or returned to it after initially attempting to swim to the bank, were able to use the boat as a life raft and they survived, and of those who swam away from the boat, one managed to reach the bank without mishap, one was very lucky to avoid being swept away and drowned, and one, Leo Blockley, did suffer that awful fate.

As part of the review of the ARA Water Safety Code we will be looking at how we can more effectively ensure that this eminently sensible message, "stay with the boat", is received by our members.

## **9. Coaching launches**

I agree with your comments about the need for coaching launches to be of a reasonable standard, and that they should be properly equipped. I have already expressed my concern that the OULRC catamaran may not have been equipped with an anchor, and it is an additional concern that the safety bag carried in the launch did not contain a knife, as required by the Water Safety Code. It will be worth emphasising in our communication to, and training for, our members that there is a danger in assuming that a launch safety bag is fully equipped, and that they should be checked before going out. I am afraid that the option of requiring a Safety Adviser to perform such checks would not be practical. If the club is operating on more than one site at the same time, or if the volunteer Safety Adviser is not available, this check would have to be performed by someone else. Those who take charge of a launch must take responsibility for checking the equipment, just as the master of any vessel is responsible for the equipment in his or her charge.

## **10. The use of written logs.**

The point made by Mr. Bedford in his letter to the ARA at 2vi refers to the supervision of junior athletes, and I refer you to point 8 in my letter to Mr. Bedford. The extension of this practice to those dealing with adult students would be sensible. In this case no one appeared to apply their mind to the levels of experience of those attending the camp, but those who were responsible for organising and running the camp were inexperienced themselves. Unfortunately, this did not appear to be appreciated by those same participants. However, the ARA would be unable to ensure that such a student membership would both see the sense of the measure, and actually implement it. Perhaps the Oxford University authorities will be better placed to encourage the students at OULRC to adopt this practice.

Listening to those participants during the Inquest I gained the impression that, even now, they do not appear to appreciate the chain of faulty decision making that led to this tragedy. It was depressing and uncomfortable to sit through much of the evidence because it revealed the ignorance, incompetence and overconfidence that the OULRC party displayed. There could have been some consolation that Leo Blockley's death had not been in vain if those who were involved could demonstrate that they had learned the lessons to be drawn from this tragic waste of life. However, even after the passage of nearly five years, after appearing at two Inquests and making several statements, and in the case of some individuals significantly differing statements, about the events at Amposta, most of those participants did not give the impression that they knew what they would do differently if they were unfortunate enough to be placed in the same situation again, save that they would rely on the panacea of the "Titanic" option of an unsinkable boat. I found that to be the really dispiriting outcome from the week I spent as an observer in the Court in Stockport.

I propose to publish on the ARA website your letter to the ARA, this response, your summary and the verdict so that these important matters, and the lessons to be learned from them, can be shared with the wider rowing public. I would be grateful if you would agree to this.

As you have copied your letter to us to COUR, I will send a copy of this response to them as well. I will also arrange to meet COUR to discuss what has already been done, and what can be done in future, to ensure that those in charge of OULRC give the proper regard to safety.

Finally, I would like to thank you again for your comments and would like to assure you that the ARA, like you, wishes to encourage safe rowing whilst maintaining the enjoyment of the sport. We aim to do this whilst emphasising the importance of good practice in water safety, and individual and club responsibility.

Yours sincerely,

G. Harris.  
Deputy Chairman, ARA.

Enclosures:

1. Letter from G. Harris to H.M. Coroner Berkshire, Mr. Peter Bedford, August 19th, 2005.
2. Skeleton from G. Harris, October 5<sup>th</sup>, 2005.
3. ARA Water Safety Code, 2003.
4. ARA Club Welfare Resource CD.