



Kent Canoes, New House Farm  
 Kemsing Rd, Wrotham, Kent  
 TN15 7BU Tel: 01732-886688  
 Email: info@kentcanoes.co.uk  
 http://www.kentcanoes.co.uk

## Open Canoeing For Beginners - B.C.U. 1 Star

### Introduction:

Open canoeing, (often called canadian canoeing), has become much more popular in the UK over recent years. It is an ideal activity for anyone who wants to get on the water in a really manageable boat with friends or family. Open canoes offer some distinct advantages over kayaks. They are generally more stable than kayaks and have a much greater carrying capacity.



Many open canoes can take two or three adults or two adults and two young children with ease. Many canoeists also use them for extended camping trips on rivers. Canoes have a completely open deck so there is no fear of entrapment should you accidentally capsize.

They are very comfortable to paddle all day because you can change your sitting position, or even stand up and have a stretch if you wish! Like kayaks, they can also be transported on a normal car roof rack.

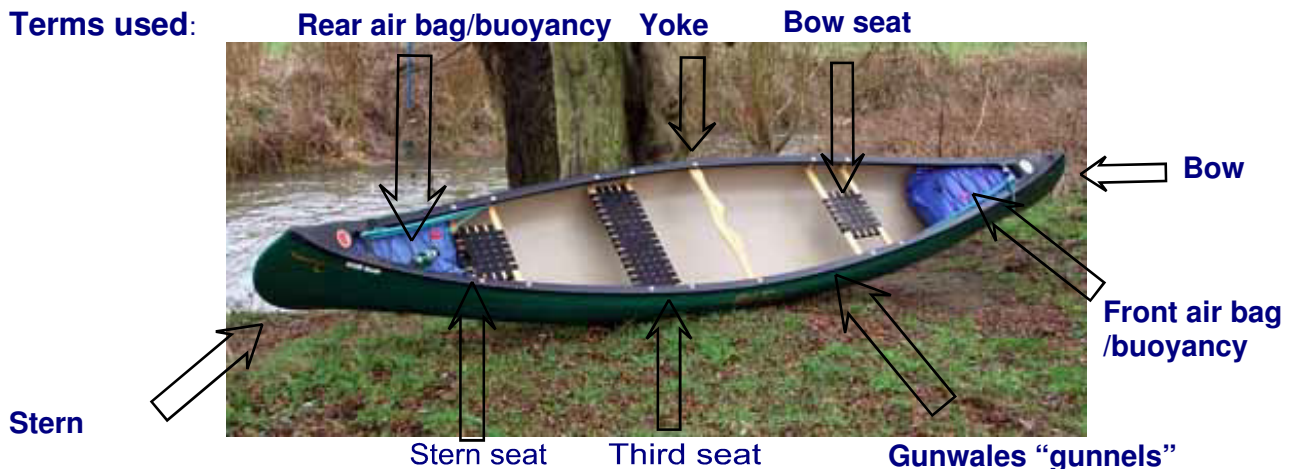
If the weight of the boat is critical, choose a canoe made from Royalex which is extremely light, and will be much easier to load onto the car roof than canoes made of other materials.

### Learning to canoe:

We would always recommend that you book onto a course to learn the basic principles of open canoeing in a safe, structured and fun environment.

This article covers the basics of open canoeing at B.C.U. 1 Star level, and is designed as background information to the courses we run.

### Terms used:



## Part A - Personal Paddling Skills:

### Lifting, carrying and launching a canoe.

Canoes are not necessarily heavy but they are bulky, so good lifting technique is as important as ever when handling them.

Good lifting technique is simply about using a few basic principles. There are a couple of words we can use to jog our memory every-time we are about to lift something:

#### SAFE:

- S Stop – before lifting, stop and: -
- A Assess the situation and: -
- F Formulate a plan of how to safely lift the equipment  
discuss this with your paddling partner
- E Execute that plan

Another word that is a useful check before we lift something is: LITE:

- L Load - look at the load
- I Individual Can the individual(s) safely lift the equipment?
- T Task Is this a reasonable task?
- E Environment Is the environment safe. (i.e. go round slippery banks).

The following principles are also very helpful when thinking about lifting:

1. Wherever possible, always share the load.
2. Keep the spine in line
3. Slide and glide rather than lift if possible
4. Make sure the load is properly balanced.

Always work on the basic that we only have one back so protect it!!

#### Lifting the canoe from the ground onto a car roof rack with two people

- With a straight back, bend down at each end of the canoe, and lift the boat up to waist height.
- From this position, turn the boat upside-down- (Picture 3)
- Keeping a straight back, lift the boat to a height just above the roof rack (Picture 4)
- Place one side of the canoe on to the roof rack and slide the boat on (Picture 5)

#### Lifting the boat off the roof of the car

Repeat the above in reverse order



Picture 3



Picture 4



Picture 5



- **Launching the canoe – two people**  
 Carry the boat to the waters edge.
- At the water's edge, lift the boat up from the centre, one person each side.
- Holding onto the 5m line attached to the end to the boat, lower one end into the water.
- Working together, "feed" your hands up the gunwales and then drop the other end of the boat in the water.
- Don't forget to hang on to the line before pushing the boat out on to the water.
- Bring the boat along side the bank, and with one person holding it steady, the stern paddler should get in and sit down. Remember to apply equal pressure on each side of the canoe whilst getting in.

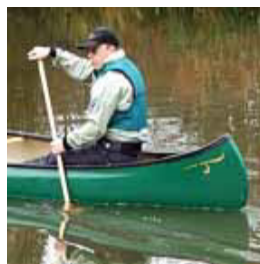
- Stern paddler holds the canoe steady whilst the bow paddler gets in.
- **Tandem forward paddling:**  
 When two people paddle an open canoe there is often a tendency for the boat to veer off towards the bow paddler's side. To understand good forward paddling technique it is important to understand both good individual stroke work and the relationship between what each paddler does.

**Principles of good individual forward paddling technique.**

- Swivel on the seat towards the side of the boat you paddle on
- Twist your body from the waist and push your "on side" shoulder (the one on your paddle side), forward
- Hold your top hand on top of the paddle vertically above your lower hand.
- Pull the paddle back through the water by untwisting your body.
- Recover the paddle by slicing it out as it passes the seat.

**Things to note:**

- The paddle should be vertical throughout the power phase of the stroke
- The paddle should follow the centre line of the boat





- **Principles of good tandem forward paddling:**  
 Both paddlers should paddle in perfect time with each other so the bow paddler needs to set the paddling rate.



- The bow paddler must develop a feel for what is happening at the stern of the boat because the stern paddler often has to apply a combined power and steering stroke to keep the boat straight.
- Good communication is important; if the stern paddler needs the bow paddler to slow down they need to say so!
- The stern paddler cannot see right in front of the boat (bow paddlers don't unfortunately come with windows) so the bow paddler needs to let the stern paddler know if anything is right in front of the boat.
- The stern paddler needs to let the bow paddler know if they need help steering the boat
- There is only one Captain in the boat and that is the stern paddler!
- Swapping positions helps each paddler to understand better what effect their paddling has on one another.

- **Steering the canoe on the move: - two paddlers**

- Because the stern paddler has more leverage than the bow paddler when paddling forwards, there is a natural tendency for the boat to veer off towards the bow paddler's side.
- To correct this, the stern paddler must learn to combine a steering stroke with each power stroke. There are two ways of doing this, by using a stern rudder or a J stroke. Here we are going to concentrate on the stern rudder.



- The stern paddler should do a normal power stroke followed by: -
- Place the paddle blade in the water just behind the hips. The blade edge should be pointing vertically upwards and the paddle shaft should be parallel with the centre line of the canoe
- Either pull or push the paddle towards or away from the canoe to adjust the steering

**Things to note:**

Usually you will be pushing away from the boat to correct the steering when forward paddling  
 If it helps you can support the paddle shaft against the edge of the canoe.  
 The paddle blade should be completely under water.

- **Stopping the canoe – two people:**

To stop the boat moving forwards it's simply a matter of paddling backwards.

- From a good forward paddling position, twist your body round and place the paddle blade in the water level with your hips
- Push the blade forward in the water by untwisting your body.
- Keep the paddle vertical and your top hand immediately above your bottom hand
- Recover the blade - slice it out at the end of the stroke.

**Things to note:**

Make sure the boat is travelling at normal speed before practicing this.

It is often easier to only use most of the blade area.

Using shorter strokes in quick succession works well.

The boat should be travelling in the opposite direction within two boat lengths at BCU 1 Star level.



- **Turning the canoe on the spot two people.**

- We can do this by what is known as a “sweep stroke”. It is called a sweep stroke because, instead of following the centre line of the boat, it sweeps out on an arc.
- The bow paddler places the paddle at the front of the canoe and “sweeps” the paddle through a 90 degree arc and recovers the paddle level with the hips.
- The stern paddler places the paddle at the back of the canoe and using the back of the paddle, (i.e.. the non drive face), simultaneously “sweeps” the paddle through a 90 degree arc and recovers the paddle level with the hips.
- The boat can then be spun round on the spot by applying several strokes with the stern paddler following the timing of the bow paddler.

**Things to note:**

The paddle shaft can be as near horizontal as possible whilst still keeping the whole blade area in the water. Twist and untwist the body whilst performing this stroke

## Turning the canoe on the spot - continued.

Things to note:

Don't sweep the paddle round more than 90 degrees since this will end up moving the boat backwards and forwards at the same time which is just a waste of energy!

The strokes can be reversed so the bow paddler sweeps from the hips to the front of the boat and the stern paddler sweeps from the hips to the stern of the boat.

## Trimming the canoe:

- This sounds complicated but in fact it's very simple. All it means is that the bow should be slightly raised above the water line when paddling forwards and the stern should be raised slightly above the water line when paddling backwards.
- So how do we achieve this? Well unlike a kayak we can move our weight forward on the seat or if necessary kneel in front of the seat to achieve this. We can also move any gear we have in the canoe back forwards or backwards to achieve the right trim.

### Things to note:

Because of their size, open canoes are affected by wind more than kayaks it is good idea to trim for wind conditions as well. We do this by moving weight forward if we are paddling into a head wind, and moving weight back if the wind is behind us.

## Moving the boat sideways – two people:

At this level the easiest way of moving the boat sideways is for both paddlers to do a "draw stroke" on the same side.



- Twist round on the seat to face the side of the canoe.
- Place the blade in the water at right angles to the canoe.
- Make sure the drive face of the blade is facing towards you.
- Your top arm should be almost straight and the blade submerged.
- Keeping the top hand in the same position, pull the blade in towards the boat.
- Recover the blade by rolling your top wrist away from you through 90 degrees whilst allowing the paddle shaft to rotate through your bottom hand, and then slice the blade back through the water to where you started the stroke.
- Rotate your wrist again and repeat the stroke.

### **Moving the boat sideways - continued:**

#### **Things to note.**

Don't rush this stroke, technique is much more important than speed or power here.

Keep in time with the other paddler.

The paddles should always be pulled in at right angles to the canoe.

If the bow or stern starts swinging round, just adjust the power you are putting into the stroke accordingly.

### **Reversing the canoe – two people:**

- Twist your body round and place the paddle blade in the water level with your hips
- Push the blade forward in the water by untwisting your body.
- Keep the paddle vertical and your top hand immediately above your bottom hand
- To recover the blade slice it out at the end of the stroke.

Look over your shoulders to check where the boat is going.

#### **Things to note:**

**Remember to “trim” the boat by adjusting your seating positions or kit so the stern of the boat is now a little higher in the water than the bow.**

When reversing, the stern and bow paddlers' roles are “reversed” and it is the bow paddler's responsibility to keep the boat straight. The bow paddler can then adjust the steering by using a “reverse J stroke” - see below.

### **Reverse J stroke:**

- Do a normal reverse stroke followed by:
- Pushing the blade forward in the water and keep the blade fully submerged
- At the same time, roll your top hand over so your thumb is pointing downwards and your hand is touching or almost touching your shoulder.
- Steer the boat by levering off the edge and moving your top hand away from or towards the edge of the boat.
- Lean forward if needs.





## Part B - Rescue Skills:



### Rescue skills- capsizing and being rescued.

- If you capsize, the most important thing is to try and keep calm and listen carefully to your instructor/ helper who will get you safely back in the boat in no time.
- Once in the water, take a few seconds to get orientated, then, whilst hanging onto your paddle, swim to the end of the canoe and hang onto the boat. **DO NOT** attempt to right the boat.
- Your instructor will then position his/her boat close to you and ask you to hang onto their boat.
- Your instructor will then quickly empty your boat and place it parallel with theirs.
- You will then be asked to place your paddle in the instructor's boat and move round to the centre of your boat.
- Your instructor will then help you climb back into your emptied boat.

### Swimming to the shore with an open canoe:

Sometimes it is quicker to swim to the shore with the canoe rather than be rescued. This would usually be the case where the shore is close at hand and the river depth near the banks is shallow enough to stand up in, making emptying the boat easy.

- **Tandem paddlers:**  
 Once in the water, take a few seconds to get orientated, then, whilst hanging onto your paddles, swim to each end of the canoe and hang onto the boat. **DO NOT** attempt to right the boat.
- Use one hand to hold onto the canoe, and the other to hold on to your paddle.
- Make sure you communicate with the other paddler so you both know which point of the bank you are aiming for.
- Holding onto the canoe at the bow and stern, swim to the bank with the boat.





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### **Emptying open canoes:**

- Once you have reached the shallow water near the bank, (the water should ideally be knee to waist depth), both paddlers should gently lift the gunwales on one side of the boat up about six inches to break the "air lock" under the boat.
- Then lift the opposite gunwales up six inches above the water so the boat is level - and still upside down.
- The boat will now quickly drain of water.
- Lift the boat up to waist/chest height.
- Now quickly flip the boat over and place it back in the water.

### **Things to note:**

Timing and communication with your paddling partner are critical when emptying a canoe.

Remember to apply the principles of good lifting technique which are covered at the beginning of this article.

## **Part C - Safety, Leadership and Group Skills:**

### **Personal risk management:**

This covers basic subjects such as:

Safely lifting the open canoe off a car roof rack/trailer.

Handling the boat safely to the water and taking into account conditions under foot

What clothing/outer garments to wear to prevent getting cold.

Water type of clothes to wear to ensure that you dry out quickly and get warm again following a capsize

### **Awareness of others:**

This covers:

Keeping an eye on other members of the party and letting the leader know if there are any problems.

Being aware of other water users and communicating with the group if action needs to be taken i.e. Moving to the side of the river if necessary if encountering other boats.

Water action to take in the event of a capsize.

The importance of keeping together and never being out of sight of another member of the group (in another boat).



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## Part D - Theory

### Theory:

Listed below are typical questions that a One Star paddler should have some knowledge of:

#### Equipment:

- What do we mean by “chill factor”?                      Why is it important to wear a buoyancy aid?

#### Safety:

- Why are some weirs dangerous?                      Why should we avoid trees?

#### Hypothermia/First Aid:

- What are the signs of hypothermia?                      How do we prevent hypothermia in the first place?

#### Access:

- What is meant by a navigation?                      On which side of the river should we paddle on?

#### Environment:

- If you found pollution, what would you do?                      How do we avoid damaging banks?

And that’s it for the Open Canoe part of the BCU One Star syllabus. If you have any questions or feedback on this article, please do contact us. Please feel free to use these notes to develop your own personal paddling skills or as a coaching aid but please note they are the copyright of Kent Canoes.

This article was written by Grant Scamell who is a BCU Level 5 Coach.



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Estelle Leyshon



Jo Kenny



Martin Ballington



Rob Lee