

Changes to the channel

By Wells Harbour Office

All Harbour users, including locals and holidaymakers crossing to the east side of the channel by foot, should be aware of the changes to the channel from the lifeboat house northwards to the sea. With initial dredging work on the channel progressing well from the new Outer Harbour to the 'bar' where the channel joins the sea, the timing of the ebb (outgoing) and flood (incoming) tide is now slightly different.

Because the bottom of the channel in the dredged part (from the Outer Harbour northwards) is now at sea level, the incoming tide runs into the channel sooner than it used to. This means that anyone on the east side (Bob Hall's Sand) will need to cross back to the west approximately five hours before high tide, rather than three. As a result, the siren, sounded from the Coastwatch station on the beach, is being set off earlier. This does not affect the channel from the Outer Harbour southwards towards the town.

As intended, this change helps boats entering or leaving the harbour by giving them an extended 'window' of time when the water is deep enough for safe navigation. On neap tides from a height of 2.5 metres and below (where the tide rises and falls by the least amount), there is approximately one metre of water in the outer channel at all times.

On spring tides 3 metres and above (where the tide comes in most and goes out most), there is approximately an extra one and a half to two hours each side of the tidal window.

This helps the vessels servicing the wind farms, which was the purpose of the dredging. It also helps other boats who don't moor permanently at the Outer Harbour pontoons but can make use of it when needed, so long as space is available. This includes the ALBs (All Weather Lifeboats), which have used the pontoons for bringing casualties ashore (rather than having to go all the way up to the town), and the Wells ILB (inshore rescue boat) has been able to launch straight into

the channel at times of the tide when it previously would have had to be towed across the sand to be launched.

Visiting boats which cannot 'take the bottom' can also lay at the new Outer Harbour pontoons when the Harbour Master feels this is necessary, although there are not permanent moorings available for leisure boats, as it has never been the intention to create a marina, which is a place where permanent moorings are available to pleasure vessels. Moorings will remain in the creeks, the channel and the pontoons by the Harbour Office.

The availability of the Outer Harbour also helps the local fishing boats, which have moored at the Outer Harbour to wait, before going to sea. For example one boat was recently able to leave on a tide at 6am rather than having to set out at 3.30am – which meant the skipper was able to spend more time at home in bed rather than going to sea in the middle of the night! In bad weather it will make it easier for boats to enter the channel and find a safe haven. Offering 'safe haven' is one of the primary responsibilities of a port.

Now that the channel is improved in this way, the harbour team have laid new buoys around the west end and inside the bar. The bar is the high sand bank which always forms at the northern end of the channel (although it shifts position from time to time).

For vessels that have a draft of no more than one metre it is a possibility, with the Harbour Master's permission, to get around the western end of the bar on neap tides and down as far as the lifeboat house at low water. This will particularly assist wind farm vessels and some fishing boats that face time pressures.

On spring tides or when there are strong northerly winds, boats should still access by the old route straight towards buoys 1 and 2 from the Leading Buoy. All harbour users must refer to the Harbour Master's instructions at www.wellsharbour.co.uk to follow the latest advice.