A red boat with yellow paddles

Description automatically generatedHistory of Boatwatch

It began with theft: quite a lot of it. There were thirty Reported Incidents of marine theft on the Yealm in 1990; and two had a big impact. A Moody 33 was stolen on Father’s Day, just before the family were due to go on a cruise. Thanks to a keen ham radio enthusiast, the thief was tracked down and the boat was recovered several months later in France – considerably damaged. Also, a Dorey and its outboard were stolen from outside a house on Riverside Road East. They remember: “He was very upset, and angry. He had seen two people fiddling about near his boat the night before, and the next day it was gone”. He was incensed. He decided “something had to be done about theft on the river”.

*A\** recruited 4 other like-minded people, and they petitioned 300 mooring holders and members of Yealm Yacht Club. 105 agreed to volunteer to do a Watch on the river in 1991, and the following year 180 joined the membership of River Yealm Boatwatch. It was clear that the Boatwatch concept had struck a chord. The volunteers readily accepted the importance of maintaining a safe and secure environment for the boating community both on the water and along the shore.

The early days were critical: “*A*\* really wanted to get it going; and he took charge. He ran it in a bit of a militaristic style.” He developed a Master Plan with clearly defined objectives, and detailed operating/watch procedures for a minimum of two (six-hour!) watches per week, with six volunteers per watch. Each watch was comprised of three two-man teams: the Lead watch was based on a Mother Ship and it communicated by CB Radio, or VHF with two shore-based teams on both the Noss and Newton sides of the river. Watch teams switched between the Mother Ship and the shore during the night – which proved to be a bit hairy. Early Log-Book entries recount how some volunteers fell into the water while transferring to and from the Mother Ship!

*B\** recalls that in the early days, “although *A\** had well-defined plans and procedures, actually it was all a bit Heath Robinson: a lot of energy and enthusiasm, but a bit erratic. Some boat watchers just rowed up-and-down; others, were happy to keep watch from their windows on Yealm Road”.

Boatwatch Minutes recorded some spectacular events. *A\* and C\** were out on a balmy night Watch in the Pool and *C\*,* with nothing better to do, was varnishing in the bottom of his boat. They heard a powerful engine throttling back as it entered the river. They crouched in the bottom, then sprang up when the craft came abeam and shone a powerful spotlight right at it. “The no-gooders turned tail and exited the river at speed. The key fishing licence number was noted, and later that night the Police felt the owner’s collar in Sutton Harbour”. On one memorable watch *D\** noticed some suspicious activity across the river on Yealm Steps. He called the Police, and then – typically - in strict contravention of Boatwatch guidelines to only patrol in pairs, and never challenge potential criminals, he decided to investigate himself: he rowed across the river from Wide Slip and on arrival was very surprised to be met by the Police! And some patrols were carried out in very challenging conditions. “the real difficulty of getting out to the boat when the pontoons were covered in ice – it was like an ice rink”.

Boatwatch patrol activity was successful because, prior to each patrol, the volunteers were given current intelligence on likely criminal activity; firm guidelines on best practice for carrying-out a patrol; and the most effective means of reporting suspect criminal activity.

Intelligence given to patrol members covered three categories of criminal activity:

* Highly-organised professional theft (mainly by East European gangs)
* Opportunistic theft of inflatables, kayaks, fuel, dinghies and unmarked items
* Illegal “Netting of fish”, mainly Bass, Salmon and Trout by Plymouth-based gangs

Illegal Netting of fish in the South-West was (and is still) mainly carried out by 3 - 4 Plymouth-based family gangs: Typically, the Netters launch at about 23.00 hrs and depart at 2.30hrs. There recently have been many such visits by these gangs in 3 months.

**Netting of fish on the Yealm is illegal because the river is a unique, fertile nursery and breeding ground for high value fish (it is special because it has both fresh water and sea water on every tide). The netters plunder the estuary of anything and everything, regardless of species and size.**

After setting their nets the Netters usually roam up and down the local anchorage looking over-the-transom of moored craft, and into boat sheds/garages where they steal high value, unsecured and unmarked items: VHF’s, instrument monitor screens, depth sounders, and GPS kit; occasionally, agricultural equipment.

There are currently about a dozen local people so far who are passionate about stopping this activity; protecting our river and property.

For their protection (GDPR etc), we are not identifying them.(\*)

If you have thoughts on this topic or want to help, please e mail [yealmriverwatch@gmail.com](mailto:yealmriverwatch@gmail.com)

If any illegal activity is detected notification to those listed below would be welcomed.

**Devon and Severn Inshore Fishing and Conservation Agency (IFCA)**

**Duty Officer: 07740 175479**

HQ: Brixham 01803 854648

Chief Officer: Mat Mander 07515 050888

Bodmin Officer 07767 613478

Police

Marine Branch, Plymouth 01752 488101 or 999

Marine Special Constable: Russ Hall 07866 905928 – based in Looe: a very helpful and knowledgeable source of illegal marine crime.

MOD Police, Devonport 01752 553384

Environment Agency

Call Centre 0800 807060

Bodmin 0370 850 6506

**River Yealm Harbourmaster 01752 872533**

Names and identities removed for privacy and safety

Did you know that the boatwatch scheme no longer operates. It “petered out” in 2018– this is because it was deemed not necessary due to the Harbour Office having CCTV detection – but not deterrence - of illegal activities on the river. Recent illegal activity was recorded but not usable as the images were blurred.

However, this does not cover all of the Yealm. *AND* It does not protect your boat or equipment from vandalism or theft.