



RIVER OF OPPORTUNITIES

As a new initiative designed to tempt more women into Thames jobs takes off, *TG* profiles the participants who already call the Thames their workplace

While the maritime industry is still male-dominated, the Thames itself has seen huge efforts of late to redress the gender imbalance. Among the organisations leading this change is the Thames Skills Academy, a not-for-profit established to raise safety standards and improve skills for those working on and alongside the Thames.

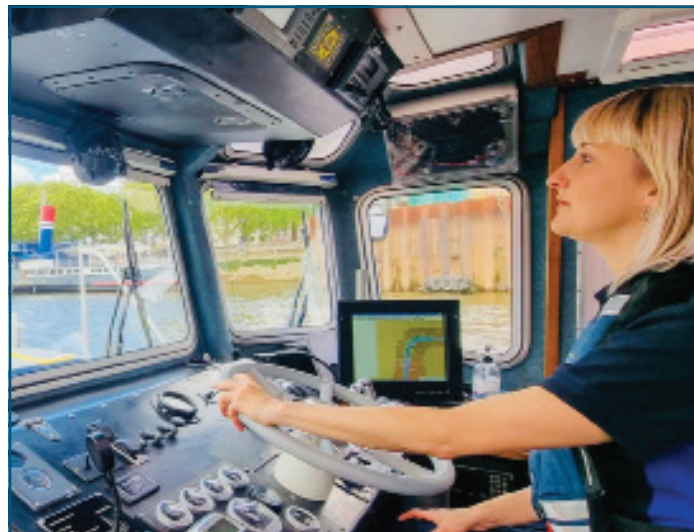


**Thames Skills Academy
CEO Katherine Riggs.**

Founded by the Port of London Authority, Transport for London, Tideway and the Company of Lightermen & Watermen in 2016, one of TSA's aims is to attract a wider diversity of talent for the growing needs of the river. Its CEO, Katherine Riggs, is adamant things are off to a strong start, especially when it comes to the apprenticeship programmes it promotes. Here, she says, "more than double the percentage of women and people coming from a BAME background are on the boatmaster and maritime engineering apprenticeships compared to the maritime sector generally."

Elsewhere on the river she points out that women increasingly hold important roles with some of the most influential companies along the Thames. Many are part of TSA's 'Women on the Water' network group, which is open to all women in operational roles on the river.

The network hosts informal events where women share their experiences and best practice. Members include apprentices, established long-term employees and those on the management teams of London's top maritime companies. "It's a great opportunity for women working in SMEs, particularly those with few female team members, to get support and advice," says Katherine. "I'd encourage all women to join."



Clémence Barbey

MARINE APPRENTICE AT PLA

I've worked for the Merchant Navy since 2013 within the tourism and hospitality department. I really enjoyed living on board and was fascinated by the bridge and the navigation side of it.

I decided to move to London in 2017 when I started working for City Cruises and then joined the boatmaster apprenticeship, which was developed by TSA and employers on the Thames and is delivered by SeaRegs and the Marine Society. My role at PLA involves working across many different departments (surveying, harbour services etc), but also being trained for pilotage, navigation, boat handling, work in confined spaces, meteorology and health and safety.

In the process I've fallen in love with the Thames for its history, traditions, and how everyone makes the workplace really enjoyable. My plan is to work hard and go as far as I can within the industry. I couldn't imagine myself anywhere else.



Ellie Wooldridge

HIGH SPEED MASTER AT UBER BOAT BY THAMES CLIPPERS

Being from south-east London, I was aware of Thames Clippers long before I started working for them. However, I thought the best way to get a real idea of what the job consists of would be to secure a couple of days' work experience on a restaurant boat. Not only did the crew look as though they enjoyed their jobs, they were constantly on the move, they had the chance to engage with different people and were surrounded by some of the best sights in London. The work itself appeared to be hands-on and a very unique experience, which was exactly what I was looking for.

My current role is skippering high-speed catamarans carrying up to 220 passengers and leading a four-person crew. I ensure the boat is navigated safely in accordance with the approved port passage plan. I also manage deck crew training for all onboard emergency situations and monitor their career progression.

My proudest moment was achieving my boatmasters' licence. It takes commitment and dedication as a lot of the studying is done at home. I also won Employee of the Year at the London Transport Awards in 2019 for contributions to training and always being willing to go above and beyond my day job.



Helen Gregory

DUTY OPERATIONS MANAGER FOR WOOLWICH FERRY

I completed a degree in structural engineering then joined Transport for London on the civil engineering graduate scheme. After managing the transition of Woolwich Ferry into TfL last year, I moved into an operations role there. This includes looking ahead to plan new projects, vessel movements, crew rosters, certification and interfacing with engineering to schedule their works. Sometimes, however, my days can be completely unpredictable – managing the response to a fault, for instance, or responding to the Blackwall Tunnel closing and a huge increase in traffic queuing for the ferry.

I'm really proud of the ongoing improvements to facilities that I have implemented at Woolwich Ferry, including customer signage and female locker rooms and toilets. Sometimes the little things make a big difference. We are soon hosting a networking event for other women who work on the river, and I hope we can tempt more of them to consider Woolwich Ferry as an attractive career option.

The more female role models and mentors on the river, the more it will encourage young people to consider a career on the Thames. We also need to provide appropriate facilities and flexibility for a good work-life balance.



Hannah Liptrot

VOLUNTEER CREW MEMBER AT TOWER RNLI AND TRAINEE SENIOR MARITIME OPERATIONS OFFICER

I've lived in London for 25 years and am training to be a coastguard officer at the Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre in Woolwich, known locally as London Coastguard. The coastguard coordinates search and rescue on the Thames from Holehaven to Teddington Lock. On a daily basis this means sending out craft (RNLI lifeboats, the Metropolitan Police Marine Units and the Fire Boats) for search and rescue missions on the river. As a crew member at Tower RNLI I am also involved in these missions from the other side, attending incidents on the river where people or vessels are in urgent need of help.

I am proud to play my part in keeping Londoners and visitors to our city safe on the river. The Thames is exciting, but it can be a cold and dangerous place. People can find themselves in trouble very quickly and all of the emergency services that operate on the Thames are immensely skilled in taking fast and decisive action to save lives. I have no regrets about the career path that I've chosen. I've reached this point in a roundabout way with 10 years working for the BBC as a producer, then 10 years as a stay-at-home mum. When I looked at my options as my children grew older, I was determined to work on or near the river and I've been welcomed and helped every step of the way by the community who work here.



Rachel de Bont

TRAINING & LIAISON OFFICER AT PLA

I was brought up racing Thames Sailing Barges on the east coast, which was the perfect foundation to my career working on the river. While my friends were out at the park, I would be antifouling the bottom of a barge.

In my current role I coach, mentor and support apprentices, deckhands and masters through various stages of their careers to achieve their licences. My proudest moment so far was when four of our boatmaster apprentices qualified last year. In what proved to be a challenging time for practical and face-to-face training, they all worked exceptionally hard to juggle exam preparation with their roles as key workers.

I would 100% recommend a career on the river as there are so many avenues to progress within the industry. My advice would be to work hard in exams. Everyone says maths and English are important, and they really are. You should also grab any opportunities in your local area to learn more about ports and boats.



Helen Jacobs

OFFICER WITH THE MARINE POLICING UNIT

I joined the Metropolitan Police in 2002, working at Deptford and New Cross in the Response Team. I always knew I wanted to specialise but was not sure which direction to take. I applied for the Mounted Police twice, but didn't progress past the interview on both occasions.

Then I saw a Marine Unit recruitment post. What a cool job! I immersed myself in the process and was successful in late 2011, despite not knowing what the pointy bit at the front of a boat was called! Travelling to France and back on a ferry was as far as my experience of boats went.

I am attached to a response team working 24/7, 365 days a year, made up of 12-hour shifts (days and nights). Our patrol zone is between the QEII Bridge and Teddington Lock, covering 47 miles of river. Internal waterways are also our responsibility, racking up some 250 miles of navigable canals, ditches, reservoirs, lakes, ponds, marshes and anything water related.

We deal with a large variety of calls including rescues, boats sinking or adrift, public disorder on party boats and counter terrorism. As team trainer and mentor, I enjoy passing on my knowledge and experience to new colleagues. The process to get them to police coxswain (akin to a boatmasters' licence) takes around two years. I also teach Level II Powerboat to the Specialist Firearms Unit and internally in the MPU.



Rosie Arrowsmith

MARINE ENGINEERING APPRENTICE AT PLA

I grew up in Erith, which means the Thames has always been (and still is) on my doorstep. As I sailed from a young age, I always knew that I wanted to work on boats when I was older, so the river was my first port of call when looking for a career.

I'm currently a marine engineering apprentice (mechanical) at South Essex College. The apprenticeship was set up with help from the TSA and my proudest moment so far has been going on a test run for two outboard engines that I worked on with little assistance and seeing them operate with no issues.

In around 10 years' time I'll probably look for a more managerial role, but still with plenty of time on the tools!

At the moment, the main challenge facing women looking at careers on the Thames is the perception that it's so male dominated. Soon enough, as more and more women take up roles on the river, this will no longer be the case. By 2050 I think we'll be looking at a lot more females in engineering roles and an even more diverse river.

FIND OUT MORE

The TSA's #WomenOnTheWater network group is open to all women in operational roles on the Thames as well as other inland waterways, and is free to join. It aims to encourage more diversity in the inland waterways sector, support members through knowledge sharing and mentoring, and position the industry as an attractive career choice for women.

To find out more or to see forthcoming events, visit thamesacademy.london/news-events/events.

