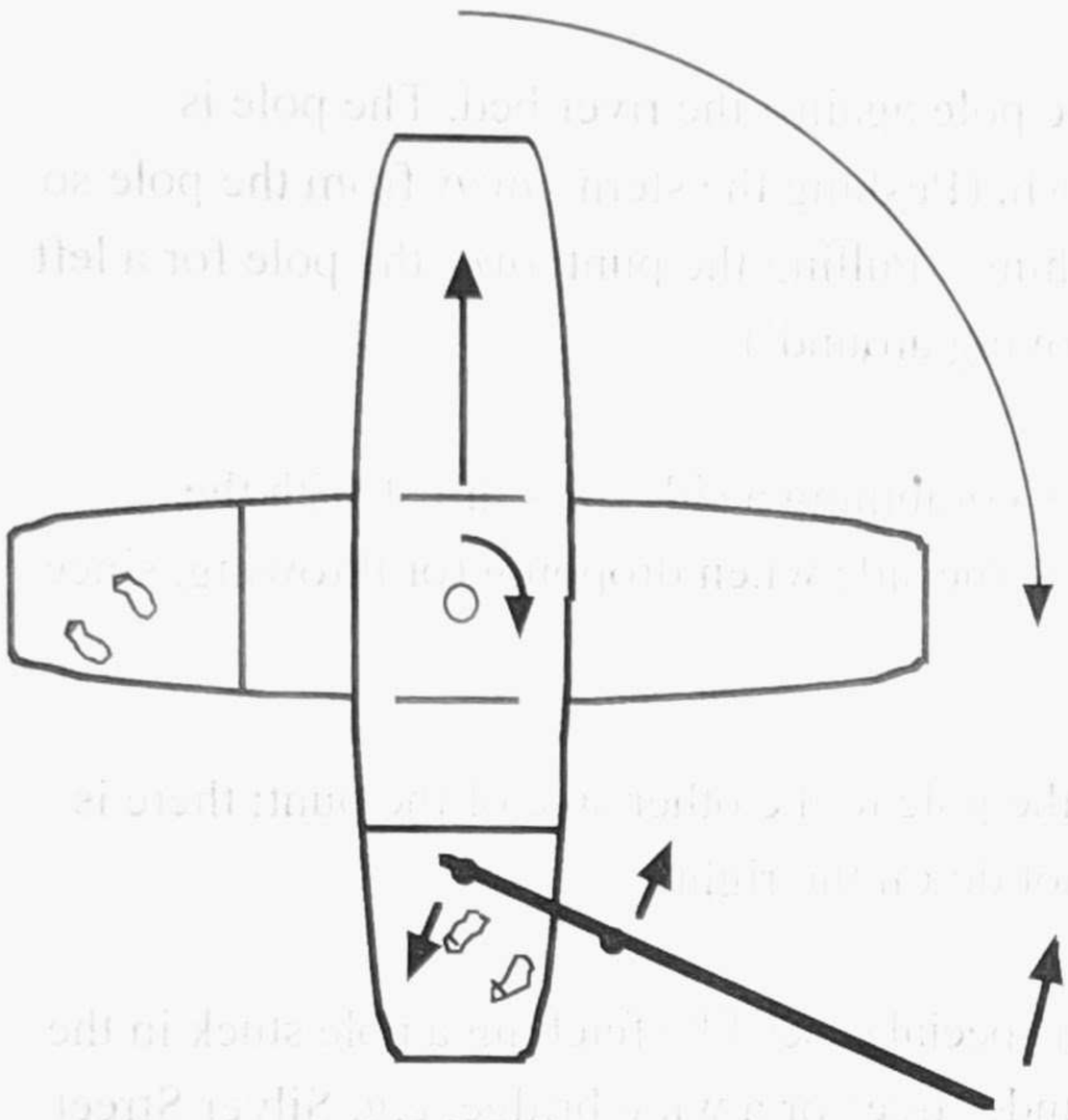
BASIC PUNTING FOR DARWINIANS



1. A punt has two motions, **forwards** (or backwards!) of its central point, and **rotary** about its centre. Both are achieved with the pole, by bracing the body against it; it is the feet which actually propel and turn the punt, so take a firm stance and maintain it.

2. In motion, the punt is driven forward by dropping (or throwing) the pole vertically downwards close to the side of the punt and pushing ("shoving") directly backwards against the river bed. I find a convenient stance for this is with feet comfortably apart, diagonally facing front right, about 20 cm from the side and 30 cm from the stern (As a right-hander I keep the pole on the right of the punt. This is assumed throughout).

3. When the punt is moving only slowly or stopped, tilt the pole top forward (not left or right, the learner's usual mistake) in order to give the backward push, the 'half-shove'. When the pole is on the bottom, the backward push can be prolonged by moving the grip hand over hand to the top of the pole. At the end of each stroke twist the pole to and fro to free it from possibly being stuck in a crack or between rocks.

4. After the stroke the pole may be lifted out of the water by successive grips hand to hand down the pole. It is however quicker (the more strokes you make the faster you go!) to cross hands: when the right – lower – hand has thrown the pole forward, the left grips it below the right, which then passes across the left to grip the pole further down, and so again once (or twice) more, thus bringing the pole out of the water and vertical.

5. The punt is rotated by swinging the pole, held nearly horizontally, against the resistance of the water, clockwise to turn left and anticlockwise to turn right (one foot pushes forward, the other pulls back). The turn is ***produced*** by the feet on the deck but ***operates*** around the centre of the punt. ((Note that the angle made by the pole with the line of the punt is immaterial.) Furthermore it follows that if the bow turns to right, the stern moves off line to the left. Keep this in mind when negotiating traffic, passing, avoiding etc.

6. Just before the desired heading is reached, the turn must be checked by an opposite swing. Make sure the punt is steady on the new direction before shoving again.

In practice a small sideways swing at the end of a shove while the pole is still in the water corrects any observed turn of the bow away from the desired direction.

7. The punt can also be turned by pushing the pole against the river bed. The pole is dropped at an angle and given a sideways push. (Pushing the stern *away* from the pole so that the bow turns to the right is called 'pinching'. Pulling the punt *over* the pole for a left turn is rather more difficult; this is called 'shoving around')

8. The punt can be steered when in motion by combining a sideways thrust with the backwards shove, that is by leaning the pole to the side when dropping (or throwing, since its buoyancy resists descent) it down.

9. It is practically never necessary to move the pole to the other side of the punt; there is nothing you can do on the left that you cannot do on the right.

10. A paddle is carried but not used except in special cases like fetching a pole stuck in the mud or between rocks, or getting out from under trees or a wide bridge, e.g. Silver Street bridge, against the current. A paddle can add considerable speed but has very little *turning* effect. (A good reason for not using the paddle as well as the pole is that it is obviously impossible to maintain control when two minds are making independent decisions!).

NOTES

1. The above description of propelling a punt with the punter standing firm on the deck and moving the pole from hand to hand was called 'pricking a punt' as contrasted with 'walking' it when the punter kept a steady grip on the pole and pushed the punt by walking down its length.
2. Using the pole to steer is often called 'using the pole like a rudder'; this is inaccurate because a rudder is *fixed* to a boat and is only effective while the boat is in motion, but by swinging the pole a punt can be turned around while stationary in still water.
3. With reference to 7 above, the sideways thrust also produces a sideways movement of the whole punt which is however negligible because of the great resistance of the water to it; pushing sideways at the back of the punt to give it a 'spin' has the same effect as that produced by striking a snooker ball to the side of centre: the ball acquires a spin and also moves forward in the direction of the impulse but in this case there is very little resistance (from the air and friction with the cloth) to the latter motion.

I really would appreciate some feedback on this: is it easy to understand? – too dense? – logical? – too complicated? – helpful … ? Comments please (& further copies) via the Porters' pigeonhole N

PUNTING FOR DARWINIANS – FURTHER NOTES AND ADVICE

1. If the pole gets stuck in the mud or in a crack, try twisting it to and fro. If this fails, abandon it before you fall off! Paddle back for it. (Safe practice is to twist the pole at the end of every stroke to make sure it is free.) Lower the pole when approaching a bridge – especially Darwin's! Avoid going under trees where you cannot manipulate the pole (apart from the enormous Oriental Plane at St John's where there is plenty of clearance) and watch out for 'pole-pickers' who try to grab your pole when it is high in the air close to a bridge!

2. *Special hazards:* the river around and downstream of the Mathematical Bridge at Queens' is particularly tricky with broken masonry on the bottom, the remains of the barge-horse causeway on the east and the vertical shuttering under water on the west bank.

A strong breeze can seriously affect one's control, especially when funnelled between the tall buildings of St John's.

At Magdalene the stretch from St John's punt basin to the road bridge is exceptionally deep on the north side, as much as 4m; it is advisable to keep to the south side going upstream (ignoring the general rule 'keep to the right'!).

The stretch alongside Jesus Green is very muddy and sticky near both banks.

3. We punt 'from the Cambridge end'. Punting 'from the Oxford end' means standing in the bow and going stern first. Three reasons why this is less effective are: standing at a lower level means the arms have to reach higher to recover the pole; the footing is on a slope and usually on a duckboard so there is less good contact of the soles of the shoes with the punt; standing further from the edge, and lower down, entails poorer control of the pole angle. Complete beginners are sometimes to be seen standing *at the front!* (I call this punting 'from the Tokyo end'.) In this way they cannot steer straight, only zigzag, by swapping the pole from side to side. Spot them and give them a wide berth.

Judge whether other punters are competent: do they know how to steer? is someone aboard paddling? Look well ahead and plan your course accordingly. Keep control of your steering with every stroke and observe the practice of the experienced chauffeur punters.

4. Watch out for and avoid the Terror Paddlers! They drive hard with the paddle at you or where you will soon be, mistakenly believing that they can steer their punt by paddling. Try to turn in the direction they have come from before you reach them. [The paddle is in fact a more efficient instrument of propulsion than the pole since it is one third of the weight (1.3 kg against 4 kg), acts directly and closely on the water, and does not involve the manipulation of the unwieldy pole in the air and on the river bed (the centre of gravity of the pole has to be raised by more than a metre in each stroke). The same effort produces greater speed with the paddle than with the pole, but paddling has very little turning effect.]

5. Darwin's punts, mooring posts and keys are all colour-coded. Note that going down the river and back turns the punt through 180°; it must be turned round again at starting or before finally mooring and locking. (Remember to stack the cushions on end after use; do not dump them in a soggy heap! Take bottles and rubbish away from the punt shed area to the appropriate bins.)

6. *My best time from Darwin to Jesus lock is about 24 min for the 0.9 miles implying a speed of about 2 knots. My challenge – break 20 minutes!*

APPENDIX

There is an excellent and deeply researched book on the whole story of punting entitled "Punting: Its History and Techniques" by R. T. Rivington, an Oxford man, who drew on a wide range of sources, including Darwin's Archivist, Dr. Elisabeth Leedham-Green. It is available in the city library (temporarily closed). Darwin library's copy has long gone missing! His chapter on Techniques of Punting differs widely from my account which is based on my own experience and analysis (in particular, he and his sources all refer to taking a step back during a stroke; they are against steering by swinging the pole, and standing on the deck!). I welcome comments from anyone who understands and has practised the methods given by Rivington. *My* concern is for Darwinians punting on the Backs with their particular hazards, especially on a summer weekend; Rivington barely mentions 'collisions'! (He deals at length with punt racing which I do not refer to.)

OTHER POINTS OF DIFFERENCE BETWEEN HIS ACCOUNT AND MINE:

In Rivington's pictures the punter stands sideways, but in practice he needs to look ahead to both sides so my diagonal stance compromises between good vision and efficiency.

He writes of making a 'keel' by having the passengers sitting off centre, so that the punt tilts, thus presenting one deeper face to the water, the slight 'keel' effect helping to keep the punt on a straight course. This is absurd for various reasons: it is not necessarily desirable to keep the punt on a straight course, especially on a busy summer's afternoon on the Cam; nowadays there is much more traffic including large 16-seater punts! What is necessary is to *control* it, which may involve quick and substantial turns. It is certainly not desirable to stand on a sloping, probably wet, deck because one's whole control depends on firm stable contact of the feet with the punt; furthermore sitting on a sloping seat is not comfortable for the passengers and the 'keel' effect is anyway very slight!

Standing near or at the punt's centre may be advantageous when racing (e.g. enabling a quick reversal of direction) but for steering by angling the pole against the river bed, the further the punter stands from the centre the greater the turning effect he can produce.

Keeping hands in the same place on the pole during a stroke may be advantageous when racing, but moving the hands up the pole enables a longer more powerful stroke.

Another book of Rivington's is "Punts and Punting" which contains extracts from the above work and many different illustrations.

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