

*“The PLA shall be established for the purpose of administering, preserving, and improving the port of London and otherwise for the purposes of this Act.” (Port of London Act, 1908)*

**T**he Port of London Authority (PLA) manages 95 miles of the River Thames, one of the UK’s most important commercial and leisure waterways. This vital stretch sees everything from major international cargo transport to boating events. Chief Harbour Master James Stride and his team oversee its safety and operations, ensuring the smooth running of an artery crucial to the UK economy.

**THE PLA**

The PLA was founded under the Port of London Act 1908 to bring order to London’s chaotic docks, where private wharves undercut each other and edged towards collapse.

As a Trust Port, the PLA has no shareholders and operates on behalf of its stakeholders – anyone using the river. This trust model, like those of other UK ports, such as Dover and Harwich, allows for long-term investment in critical infrastructure. Alternative types of port operations include private and local authority ownership.

**CHIEF HARBOUR MASTER**

The maritime career of Chief Harbour Master James Stride spans over two decades. He served in the Royal Navy for 24 years, rising to command a Type 45 destroyer. After leaving the Navy in 2015, James worked for the Cruise Liner company, Carnival in both Southampton and Hamburg. Whilst in Germany, responsibility included overseeing nautical operations for their fleet of 35 ships. This included further developing the company’s in-house software systems, and providing a telematics capability. This allows tracking of vessel movements, as well as shoreside access to technical and nautical data to allow diagnostics of issues. This was an innovative first for the cruise industry.

Raised in Christchurch, Dorset, James’s love for the sea is in his blood. His family’s 200-year maritime history led him naturally to a career at sea and navigation. Now at the PLA, his current role allows him to combine his passion for navigating with the operational complexities of managing the River Thames.

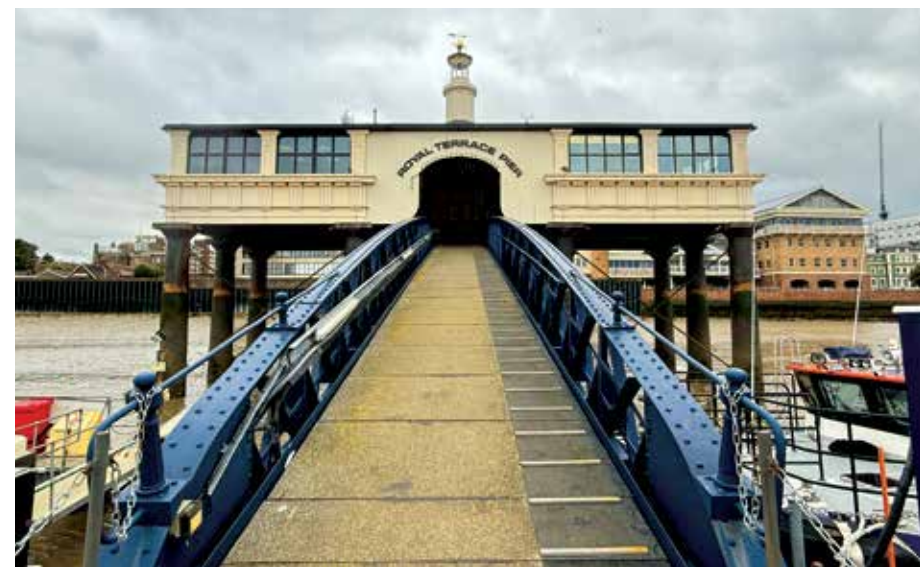
**STRATEGIC INVESTMENT**

As the authority responsible for navigational safety on the Thames, the PLA invests heavily in technology. “Innovation is key to maintaining safety and efficiency,” James says. The PLA is upgrading the Vessel Traffic Service (VTS) system. It provides pilots with portable navigation systems offering sub-1 metre accuracy when manoeuvring vessels. The upgrade involves working closely with the UK Hydrographic Office for hydrographic trials.

Port Control Centre, one of the PLA’s headquarters buildings, is undergoing a major £10m refurbishment, delivering a cutting-edge VTS, as well as a vessel planning centre. Once complete, it will act as a control centre for the whole tidal river, bringing pilot planning, operations, and vessel management under one roof.

James emphasises this is one of the advantages of the Trust Port model. “We reinvest profits into the business, allowing us to make long-term strategic investments in technology and infrastructure.” The investment extends to the workforce, ‘Pilot turnover is very low when taking out retirement,’ James explains, ‘there is a loyal workforce with opportunities to move between different parts of the PLA and the organisation invests in people and grows individuals within the business, developing talent rather than just bringing it in.’





## ENVIRONMENTAL RESPONSIBILITY

Managing the Thames comes with significant environmental responsibilities. The Thames is divided into three districts:

- Commercial section: Large vessels like tankers and aggregates up to the Thames Barrier.
- Middle section: Barges, pleasure boats, and waste transport.
- Upper section: Predominantly leisure boats, from Putney upwards.

With 56 million tonnes of cargo passing through annually, the Thames remains one of the UK's busiest ports. "Environmental concerns are central to our operations," says James. The PLA has introduced measures to reduce pollution from smaller vessels, requiring houseboats to use pump-out facilities. It's also working toward Net Zero, with solar panels and electric or hybrid road vehicles forming part of the strategy.

The PLA supports alternative fuels, such as LNG and methanol, with several shipping operators operating new ships delivered with engines able to run on these new fuels. However, James acknowledges that challenges remain with the energy density of these options.

The organisation also plays a key role in the Thames Estuary 2100 project, which aims to protect the river from rising sea levels driven by climate change. "We know the river will rise, and we're preparing for that reality," says James.

## LOOKING AHEAD

James points out that it is important to recognise that the PLA is part of a global transport network and emphasises

the importance of cooperation. "Ports and associations don't compete on safety and environmental standards. We're all working to maintain safe practices," he says.

James sees further innovation on the horizon. 'In five years, I expect electric vessels to be more common on the river, alongside developing hybrid freight operations.' The PLA's latest pilot cutters boast 40% greater fuel efficiency thanks to innovative hull designs.

He also predicts more automation in port operations, with digital twins – virtual models of port infrastructure – being used to manage traffic and plan new developments. 'We're seeing autonomous shipping emerge in places like Norway, but for international vessels, crews will remain essential. Still, AI and digital technologies will play an increasing role in port management.'

## CONCLUSION

The Port of London Authority is a vital part of the UK's maritime industry, with a well-respected, long history and a forward-thinking approach to innovation and sustainability. Significant challenges lay ahead, particularly around the impact of climate change. For the PLA, it is about finding a balance between navigational safety, environmental responsibility and technological advancements that will continue to shape the Thames as both a commercial and leisure waterway. ■

Learn more about the PLA here: [www.pla.co.uk](http://www.pla.co.uk)



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