

Forth Ports' view on the Bathing Water Proposal for Wardie Bay

Forth Ports are the Statutory and Competent Harbour Authority for the Firths of Forth and Tay. As part of this function we are required to ensure safe navigation for all commercial vessels in our waters, this includes undertaking dredging, disposal of dredge spoil, maintenance of lights, marking channels (if appropriate) and licencing activities that could impact on navigation, such as construction works and in some cases, events.

Wardie Bay sits between the Ports of Leith and Granton (see Figure 1). The Port of Leith is a busy Commercial port, with large vessels, entering the lock system, often in tidally constrained windows. These vessels are often assisted by tugs. It is therefore essential that recreational users stay clear of these manoeuvres, which by far the majority of responsible water users would do if they saw a vessel present. There are a surprising number of tracks that transit the mouth of the locks on the Strava Heat Map presented by the applicants (Figure 2). If a vessel is entering the locks, there is no ability to change course and avoid a swimmer, even if one could be seen, which would not be easy¹. There are no reports of swimmers in this area known to Forth Ports, it would be concerning if there were such activities as inferred by the heat map.

By the Port of Leith is Newhaven (see Figure 1), which is a small harbour that is used for recreational activities and inshore fishing vessels. However, in the spring to autumn period this harbour can be busy with tenders from larger cruise vessels anchored off Wardie Bay, these tenders follow a dredged and maintained channel which appears to broadly coincide with a number of the tracks on the Strava Heat Map presented by the applicants (see Figure 2). Recreational users in this area are at potentially serious risk if the channel is in use, users of this channel would generally be travelling much faster than a swimmer. It may be that the tracks in this area, from the harbour are sailing or members of the Leith Motor Boat Club or other personal water craft users, rather than swimmers?

At the West end of Wardie Bay is Granton Harbour (see Figure 1). Granton is home to two sailing clubs, is the base for a number of small commercial outfits and the Pilot base. By far the majority of acts of Pilotage start with the Pilot being taken out to the Pilot Board location in the Forth from this base or returned to this base. Pilot vessels are small, close to the water surface and fast. Swimmers are challenging to see when close to the water, especially if there is any wave activity/swell. Again the Strava Heat Maps (Figure 2) suggest significant use of Granton Harbour itself, presumably these are tracks from sailing vessels or other recreational use, as we have not had any reports of swimmers in Granton Harbour, which would be a concern given the vessel movements in this area, whether through the Pilot Vessels, other small commercial vessels or recreational craft.

Oxcars disposal ground is the spoil disposal site for the Port of Rosyth and Babcock's Rosyth facility. All of these harbours need periodic dredging and disposal of dredge spoil. This activity is critical to the requirement to ensure safe navigation. Swimming near a dredger or any water craft (commercial or recreational) is dangerous if there is no way of knowing that the swimmer is present.

Looking at the Strava Heat Map, and zooming it out (Figure 3), it appears that there are other areas of the Forth that have much higher levels of Strava recording from a 'water' perspective; notably Portobello, Crammond, Port Edgar and parts of Fife from the bridges to Aberdour and beyond. It is thought that the heatmap has been collated over two years of aggregated data.

¹ A swimmer has a very low profile in the water, perhaps the profile of a football, which makes spotting them from a vessel exceptionally difficult, even if they are wearing brightly coloured swim cap and tow float. Unfortunately many swimmers do not see the necessity of such safety aids.

Forth Ports recognises the health benefits of swimming, especially open water swimming. There are many fantastic places to open water swim in Scotland and in the Forth specifically. A number of our employees are avid open water swimmers. Responsible swimming is absolutely compatible with our activities in the Forth, as long as swimmers maintain a safe distance from commercial craft and port infrastructure and are suitably visible if there is any chance that they could come into close proximity with other non-swimming water users – for example through the use of a high visibility tow-float, which can also act as an emergency floatation device if the swimmer gets tired. There are many hidden hazards, particularly if impounding pumps are activated or vessels unexpectedly move creating collision or wake risks. There is limited scope to communicate with swimmers, they do not carry VHF for example, unlike all commercial and some recreational vessels, and neither do they show up on radar. All that said, to date, bar organised swimming events or a number of challenging interactions between swimmers and other recreational water users, in particular jet-ski operators, there has been limited interaction with swimmers and Forth Ports. Our concern is that the designation of a bathing water may attract more users, which could in turn create risk to water users, encouraging them to move into areas that interact with commercial or recreational craft, which is a concern considering the lack of visibility of swimmers in the water and the strava tracks presented which suggest swimmers are extending into areas where commercial craft operate.

Figure 1: Extract from Admiralty Chart showing Wardie bay and its setting

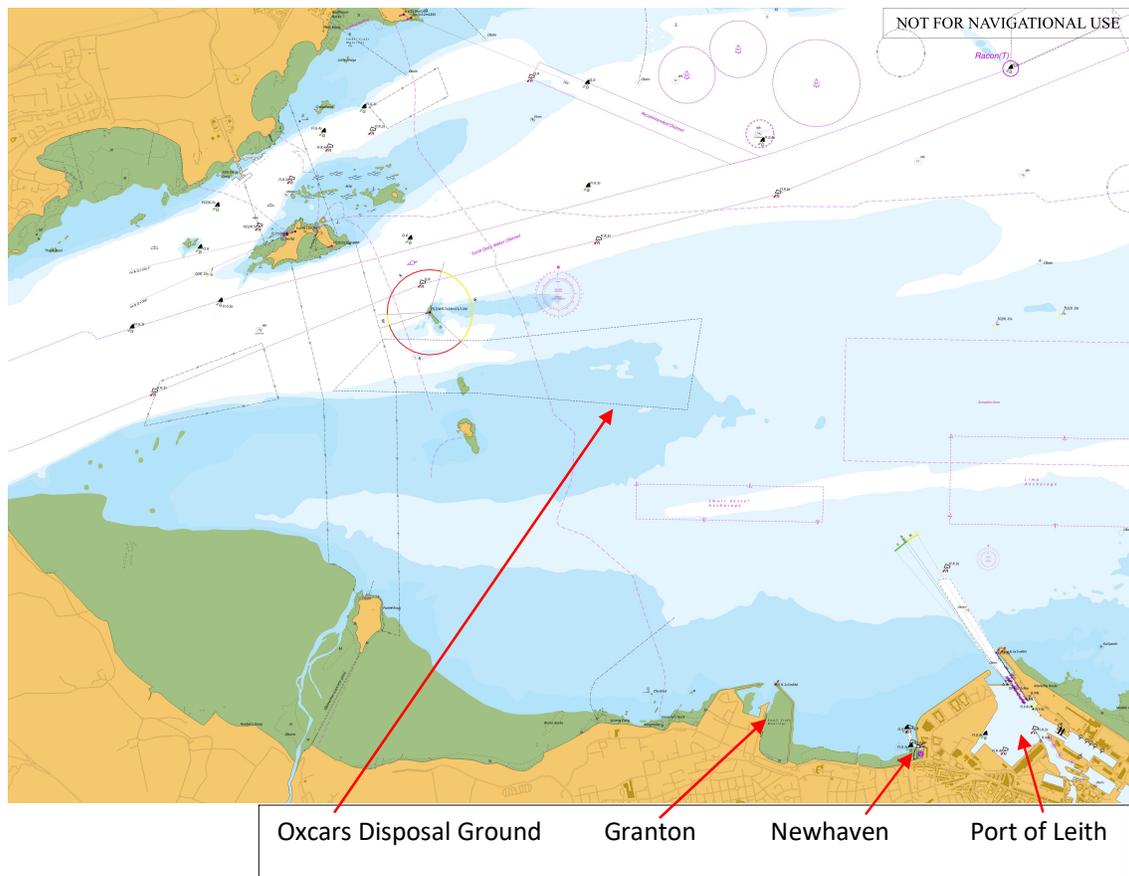


Figure 2: Strava Heatmap of Wardie Bay

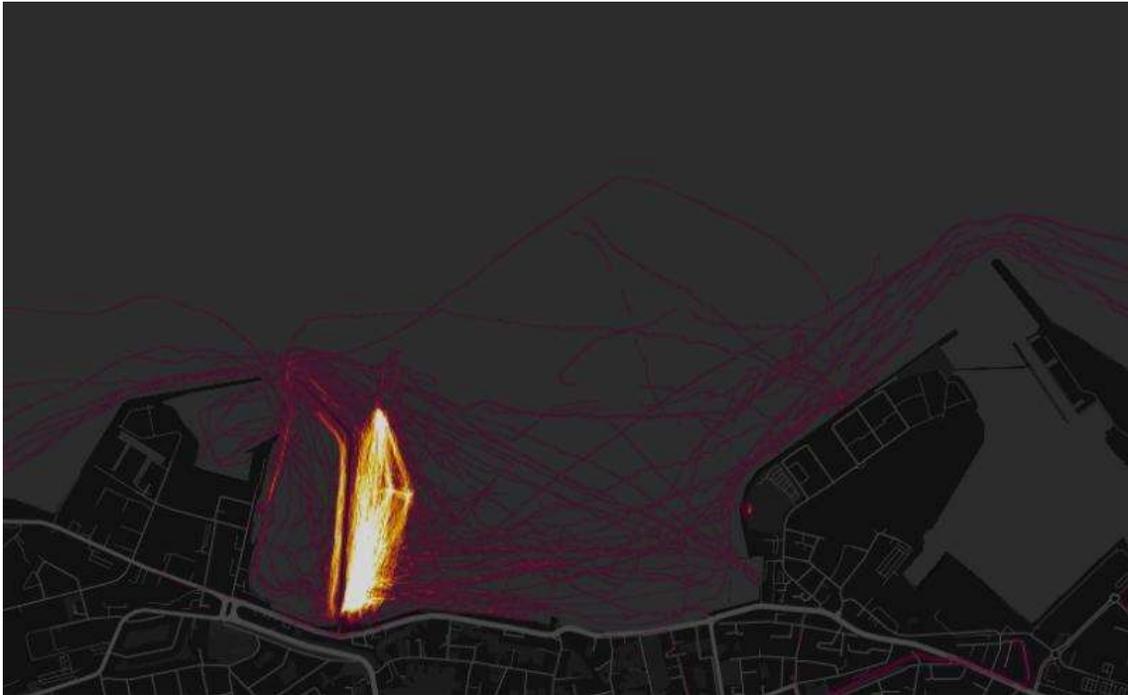


Figure 3: Strava Heat Map of Part of the Firth of Forth

