



Dave Selby in *Marlin*, his beloved Sailfish 18

Bag a bargain boat

More than 50 years of glassfibre production means yachts have never been cheaper. Dave Selby explains how to buy a bargain

It's a fact: getting afloat in a boat of your own has never been more affordable or accessible. Let me put it another way: boats have never been cheaper. I've said it twice because people just don't believe it the first time they hear it, as it seems so at odds with the sheen of glamour and exclusivity that surrounds the business side of sailing.

Take the 26ft Westerly Centaur that formed the back-drop of the PBO stage at the London Boat Show. *Sapphire III* was built three years into the production run in 1972, costing her first owner around £4,000. Back then that was almost twice the price of a brand new E-type Jaguar sports car, so the very substantially built Centaur was an expensive bit of kit (successful too, with 2,444 built from 1969 to 1980). Today, the new Jaguar F-type starts at around £50k, and new production 25-26 footers run the gamut from £40,000 to £100,000-plus. So you could argue that not a whole lot has changed.

Except for one thing. PBO reader Aurora Allen bought *Sapphire III* last year for £6,000! For that money what I was expecting to see in the PBO Theatre was a slightly tired old tub in need of TLC. None of it. *Sapphire III* is simply lovely, with a shiny unblemished hull and decks, and a beautifully preserved interior, all of which defy her 46 years. Aurora knew the old Volvo Penta needed some attention, but that was factored into the price.



Snapdragon 23 with Yanmar 1GM inboard: bought for £500, enjoyed for a couple of years then given to the sea scouts

Aurora didn't get lucky, she got smart, because this is the reality of today's market, according to brokerage Boatshed.com, which has 19 years of sales data and has sold 160 Centaurs in that time. Currently



Hurley 20, owner Phil Brook, a trainee yacht surveyor, bought *Ciao Bello* for £500 six years ago and has sailed her across the Channel to France and back

listed are five with prices ranging from £4,250 to £8,995. The Westerly Owners Association (www.westerly-owners.co.uk) has four listed from £3,500 to £7,900.

The highest price paid for a Centaur at Boatshed since 1999 is £17,750, the lowest £1,250. Moreover, in those 19 years the average selling price of Centaurs has declined from £11,500 to £7,000; that's a reduction of 39%.

Perfect storm

So what's wrong with Centaurs? Absolutely nothing. Neither is there anything wrong with my beloved Sailfish 18, but prices have similarly declined over the years, as they have across the board. In market terms we have a perfect storm, brought about by a combination of austerity, an ageing population – which means many older people are giving up the water – and the simple fact that there's an ever-growing stock of used GRP boats. On top of which, many early glassfibre boats were overengineered and really built to last. If they've lasted 40 years, there's



Looking in a sorry state when discovered in a boatyard covered in green mould and grime, this Hurley 22 was free. Don't be put off by superficial appearances. Under the slime she was a fine boat

Getting a survey

Owners' associations can help, but if you don't have the knowledge to make a judgement yourself, or a mate with know-how, consider a survey. It's human nature that many people buying budget boats balk at the cost of a survey, which may be more than the value of the boat. This can be a false economy. If a survey advises you to walk away it will save you money; if it highlights minor faults, you can balance rectification costs against the asking price and see if the seller is prepared to haggle.

no reason they shouldn't last 40 more.

In the late 1990s Ellen MacArthur circumnavigated Great Britain in an aged 21ft Coribee. You can still do that today in a Coribee costing less than £2,000. When I go round the country doing talks I show a portfolio of boats bought for pennies, such as a Hurley 20 bought for £500 and sailed across the channel; a Pandora with £1,900 just spent on a new mast and standing rigging, also bought for £500; a Snapdragon 23, like the PBO project boat, bought for £500 but, unlike the project boat, up and running and in commission.

I also show boats that have been given away, and these are not wrecks. The fact is that for the owner of an unused boat lying on the hard accruing storage costs it can make more sense to give it to a good home rather than hold out for a sale and continue paying yard fees.

There really is no better time to get on the water in a boat of your own.

Dave's tips for buying your first budget boat

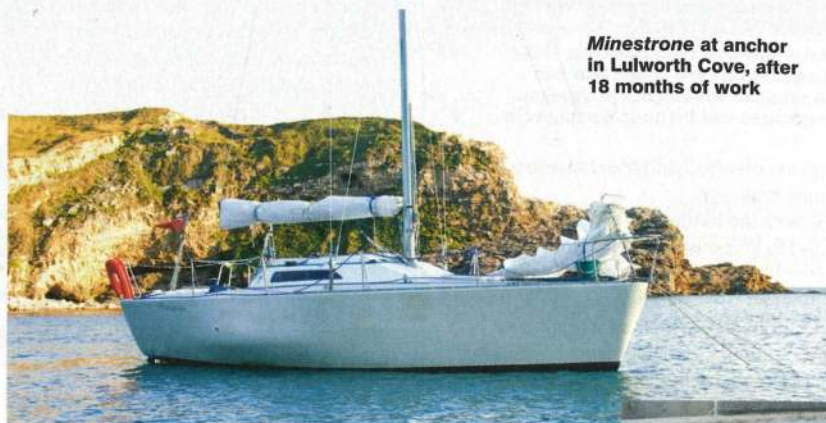
- **If it's your first boat buy the smallest boat that gives you the space you need, not the biggest you can afford. You can always trade up, but if your first boat is too big it can knock your confidence and put you off.**
- **Buy a boat they made lots of. If made in decent numbers there will be an active owners' associations to provide invaluable support, knowledge and advice. Some even remanufacture spare parts.**
- **Join the owners' association before you buy. Many have boats for sale on their websites: they may well know the particular boat you're looking at and advise on important inspection points, and a member may even come and inspect the boat with you.**
- **Scour for-sale ads and start clambering over boats.**

Fancy a project boat?

Rupert Holmes takes a realistic look at the practicalities of buying a project boat



Minestrone at anchor in Lulworth Cove, after 18 months of work



At first sight buying a project boat – one that is priced to reflect the fact that it needs more than just cosmetic repairs – may appear to be a route to a bargain boat. However that's rarely the case. As regular readers will have seen through PBO's first project boat, and before that the restoration of my own 24ft Quarter Tonne, *Minestrone*, it's easy to find you end up working on a boat that doesn't justify the time or money spent by any fiscal measure.

In my case, the project turned out to be much more extensive than I'd hoped, which added greatly to the cost and time taken. If I'd costed my time at the minimum wage the refit would have been very expensive.

On the other hand, my efforts resulted in a boat that was updated and modernised, including a completely different rig and deck layout that made the boat both faster and easier to sail. It therefore exactly suited my requirements at the time. The only other route would have required either a much newer vessel or a lot of customisation on one that was already fundamentally sound, both of which would have cost a lot more money. I was also in the lucky position of having another yacht, so the project didn't actually prevent me spending time on the water.

There may also be less tangible benefits in taking on a project. In my case I hadn't done any serious boatbuilding work since I was a student and I wanted to update my skills and experience in that respect.


However, most people contemplating a project are simply looking for a boat to get afloat without throwing large amounts of money at it. That's most easily achieved by buying one on which someone else has already done all the work. As Dave Selby says opposite, there are plenty to choose from.

RIGHT An apparently small flaw can hide bigger problems. This crack in the paint on *Minestrone's* gunwale had let in water that caused a much larger area of rot in the deck



Be realistic

Be warned – when you see a nice-looking boat at a price you can afford it's easy to convince yourself that it's a good deal. I knew that *Minestrone's* fibreglass over plywood decks had problems. But I first saw the boat during an early season heat wave, so the damaged timber was bone dry and it would have been a (relatively) straightforward job had I been able to start work immediately.

However, by the time I'd moved the boat nearer home and carved out time from a busy schedule, the weather had changed into one of the wettest summers on record. That, in turn, meant working outside would be futile, so I waited. But of course, by then, far more water had got 



Buying a major project may make it seem as though you're getting a larger, more capable or prettier boat, but often you're only paying for a bigger headache



Make sure you're certain the fundamentals are sound – or can be rectified within your budget, as breakages can be hugely expensive

into the plywood and the damage was more extensive.

Check the fundamentals carefully. You need to know what you're letting yourself in for in terms of safety and big-ticket expenses. That means skin fittings, keel and rudder (plus their attachments), standing rigging, chainplates and spars. If all these are sound, then it limits what can go substantially wrong.

In the case of any wooden boat it's vital to assess the condition of the basic structure. Be warned – there are plenty of examples of boats that look outwardly reasonably well kept, but turn out to need new fastenings, framing or planking. Rain water is the most usual culprit – the salt in sea water tends to act as a preservative – so boats that are kept afloat, or in a mud berth, tend to fare better. Decks and coachroofs are the first to succumb to rot.

Cosmetic appearance

Plenty of boats that are badly presented and don't need much more than the vendor's mouldy personal kit putting in a skip and the whole boat cleaned inside and out. Even better if a fibreglass boat has been ashore for a few years and you therefore know that the hull is dry.

Don't be dismayed by an interior that looks untidy. Instead work out what it really needs to sort it out. Tired, waterstained interior woodwork, for instance, can be painted easily (or even faced with white melamine) providing it's not rotten or delaminating. On the flip

Do's and don'ts for project boat buying

Do...

- Be properly realistic
- Check the fundamentals carefully
- Keep the boat simple
- Walk away from a project that's overpriced

Don't...

- Let cosmetic appearance influence you
- Ignore lesser known boats
- Buy a project as your first ever boat

All about engines

Marine engines can cost as much as the entire value of a boat under 30ft, so it's important to check them out carefully. Older diesels that were based on small industrial diesel engines, such as the Yanmar GM series, can frequently be reconditioned as pattern parts are relatively affordable, but that's not the case for units that were built specifically for marine use, including Bukh and pre-1990s Volvo Pentas.

My Dad, for whom anything mechanical was an unfathomable mystery, was always adamant that he would never own a yacht with an inboard engine. His reasoning was that if you can take the outboard to a workshop, rather than a mechanic to the boat, then labour costs are greatly reduced. If necessary, you can always buy another second-hand outboard, or even borrow one. But you can't borrow an inboard diesel for a fortnight's summer cruise.



LEFT Don't overlook less well known boats. No one goes out to search specifically for a Nova 27, yet it's a solid and spacious cruiser, designed by John Westell, who's best known for the 505 dinghy

side, given that many second-hand boats are presented really badly, canny vendors know they can gain an advantage simply by cleaning up an otherwise tired boat.

In praise of simplicity

Keeping a boat as simple as possible will mean you'll get afloat sooner, with less expense, and the boat will require less long-term maintenance and repair. Think carefully, for instance, as to whether you need any wired-in electronics other than a depth sounder and DSC VHF. If existing wiring is beyond saving, then instead of spending a couple of weekends rewiring you can simply use battery powered LED lights held in place with Velcro. These last for weeks on one set of batteries.

Walk away

The decline in the value of older boats over the past 10-15 years means that many vendors are in denial as to the true value of their craft. A project boat should be priced so low that the initial purchase price is only a small factor in the overall budget.

Boatyards and marinas around the country periodically sell on yachts whose

owners have long ago stopped paying the storage fees. Many smaller boats change hands this way for mere three-figure sums.

Buying your first boat

One of the aspects of owning a boat is that it ought to increase the amount of time you can spend on the water.

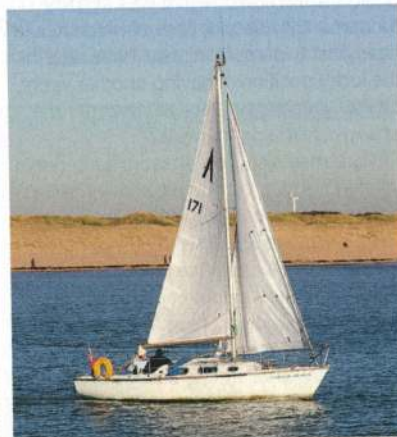
It's therefore worth settling for a smaller craft that's well up together, as your first one, with a view to a major project boat being your second vessel. This approach also has the benefit that you'll gain a much better feel of the type of sailing you want to do and therefore what you want from your next boat. And there's less chance of your project joining the legions of unfinished boats around the country.

Lesser known designs

Good examples of well-known boats that are sensibly priced tend to get snapped up very quickly. On the other hand, there are many great lesser-known designs whose owners struggle to almost give them away, even if they are really nicely looked after. So if you can't find a good example of a popular boat, don't automatically dismiss one that's less well known. Taking this attitude has served me well over 30 years of boat buying.

What are you waiting for?

There's a sense in which all rules are made to be broken and bringing a boat back to life can be hugely rewarding. Just make sure you choose the project very, very carefully. Even then, given the decline in the value of older boats, if you look carefully you're more likely than ever to find a really decent boat on which someone else has lavished their time and money that you can buy for a fraction of the cost of revamping a tired example. That's a much more sensible way forward than a project that will eat up too many weekends on which you would otherwise be sailing.



There's much to be said for a solid, but simple, small boat like this Achilles 24