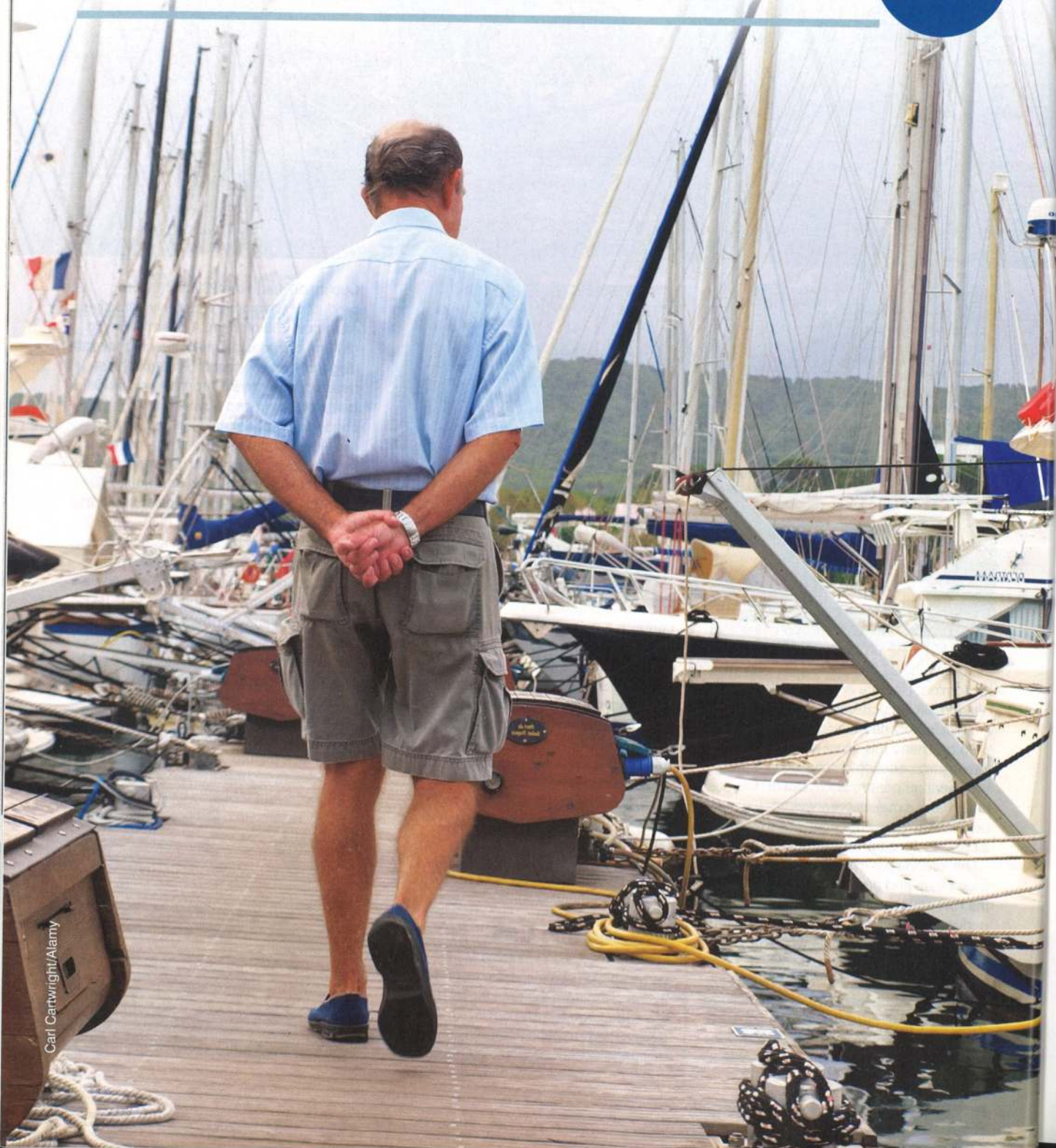


# Viewing the boat – essential checks

When should you make an offer to buy a boat, and when should you walk away? Rupert Holmes has the answers

**PART TWO**



Carl Cartwright/Alamy

Photos: Rupert Holmes

Geoff Smith/Alamy

**B**y the time you start viewing a shortlist of boats, you should already have a clear idea of how you plan to use your new vessel. You'll have assessed its essential attributes and those aspects you're happy to compromise on. In addition, you'll have a realistic budget – one that allows for upfront expenses such as insurance, survey costs, the first year's mooring fees and any essential upgrades.

Last month we talked about the importance of the boat's condition and equipment on board, and how considering a wider choice of craft (not an exact model) will give you more options in your planned search area. This month, I'll talk you through what happens when you go to view your shortlist.

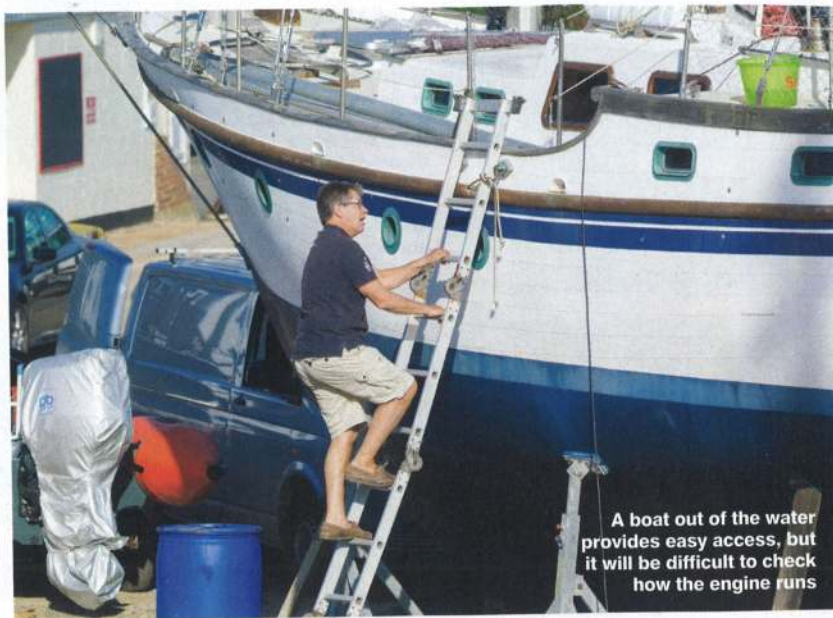
### Is winter a good time?

It may seem odd to look for boats during the winter, but I've bought as many during the dark days of December and January as sparkling summer months – and there are compelling reasons for doing so.

A key reason is it often takes time to set up a new boat with the equipment you want and confirm there are no unexpected problems. Given that marine tradespeople tend to be flat out from March to mid-summer, buying a boat early can give a chance to beat the queues and avoid missing much of the first season of cruising.

Another benefit is that vendors may be more pliable on price, especially if it means they have more chance of getting their own next boat before the following season, or avoid having to sign up for a further 12 months of mooring fees. In any case, for most of us buying a boat is a long-term decision and therefore not one that is switched on and off depending on the season.

We also now tend to sail more in the winter than ever before. In the past, most boats came out of the water for much of the off-season, but that's no longer the case. A poll of owners a couple of years ago by PBO editor Rob Melotti found that more than 70% stay afloat for most of the year, with the majority of these coming out of the water for less than three weeks.



A boat out of the water provides easy access, but it will be difficult to check how the engine runs

## 'Cosmetic blemishes must be allowed for, but it's important to look past the aesthetics'

### First impressions

A challenge in viewing a boat is that you have to make an impartial assessment of its condition in each of its many departments, as well as figuring out whether it's intrinsically the right make and model of boat for your needs.

Given the many different boat models of the past 50 years – most of which only number a few dozen or, at best, a few hundred – you'll need to decide if it's the right model, in good condition and whether the inventory and equipment matches the asking price.

As with a used car, or a house, presentation can reveal much. Sadly all too many boats on the market are not well

cared for in this respect, while a few are so bad they are positively unpleasant.

In a soft market a poorly tended boat might appear to be a route to a bargain, but be careful. I've certainly done well buying boats with a couple of feet of kelp growing on the bottom (but an epoxy construction, so no osmosis worries), or a bilge full of rainwater and muck (but clear of any structural woodwork). A bit of probing showed that both these could be easily cleaned up, though emptying and drying the bilge of someone else's boat so that I could unveil enough to figure out whether a survey was worthwhile was not a pleasant task.

In his excellent talks at the Southampton Boat Show yacht surveyor and PBO writer Ben Sutcliffe-Davies cautioned that some boats are so bad in this respect there's no chance of either a prospective owner or a surveyor being able to see enough behind the dirt or chaos to ascertain whether the structure is sound. In these cases he says the only sensible option is to walk away.

It's often thought that the market for used boats, particularly those significantly more than 20 years old, is a soft one in which buyers hold all the cards. However, the reality is different – if a boat is realistically priced, well presented, carefully maintained and well equipped it will often sell relatively quickly. This leaves the bulk of the craft on the market at any given time as being those that are less well presented and may have deteriorated further during an extended period of time.

Don't waste your time – or the broker's or vendor's – once you've seen enough to know it's not the boat for you. Obviously this may be harder to identify if it's the first boat you look at, but that judgement gets

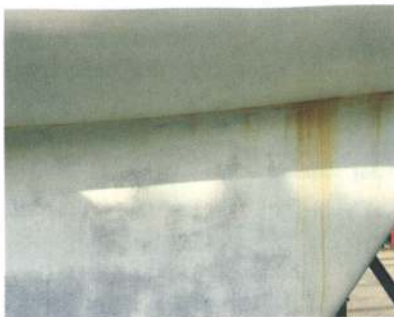


**ABOVE** A broken structural matrix as the result of a hard grounding

**LEFT** A gap between the leading edge of the keel and the hull is a sure sign of problems



Photos: Rupert Holmes



**LEFT** Rust stains on a hull/keel join are indicative of problems and will need an opinion from a surveyor



**BELOW** Lift the floorboards to look at the bilge. Not all will be as immaculate as this, but walk away if there's so much grot you've no chance of seeing the structure



It's an easy task to check whether most electrical items work

easier after you've seen a couple. In any case, you can always ask for a second viewing at a later date.

Incidentally, don't think you need to view every boat in person. Obviously it makes sense to do so if they are local to you, or if a number can be lined up on the same day. However, if your needs are very specific and there's a contender a long distance away it's possible to get a surveyor to take an initial look. If this involves less than an hour on site, with a verbal report by phone it can be a cost-effective way of making a first viewing on a distant boat.

### Next impressions

After the first impressions it's worth taking a bit of time to get a general feel for the boat, particularly if it's a model you've not been aboard before. Is there the space and stowage inside that you were expecting? What about the deck layout – does the cockpit layout look as though it will work for you? Are side decks wide enough to get forward easily?

If the basics of the boat are OK but it's lacking in attributes such as good natural light and ventilation, or the ability to reef the mainsail from the cockpit, for instance, these can be improved. However, it costs

## 'As with a used car, or a house, presentation can reveal much'

time and money, to do so, which ought to be reflected in the price. Vinyl headlinings are notoriously expensive, time-consuming and messy to replace, while re-upholstering is also not cheap.

The cost of replacing electronics on a lower-value boat can be significant, but be realistic about what you need. This may be no more than depth, boat speed and a DSC VHF set, plus an iPad or tablet in a waterproof and shock-proof case to use as a chartplotter. In any case, it's worth turning on all the instruments, lights and so on and making a quick list of anything that doesn't work.

The engine is a critical piece of kit that can quickly rack up big bills for remedial work or replacement. Fortunately, if well looked after marine diesels are robust and long-lasting – there are many 40-year-old motors with well over 10,000 hours of use still giving good service. It's therefore worth checking any service history, even if this has been carried out by the owner; there may still be receipts for oil, filters, impellers and so on.

Beyond that, does the engine bay look clean and tidy? Are there any fluid leaks? What does the paint on the motor look like? If the boat's afloat you may be able to see it running, but if not, then this can be a condition of an offer.

Standing rigging generally needs to be replaced after around 10-15 years, or after 25-40,000 miles of sailing. However, this is one aspect that many owners leave for longer. If there's no paperwork showing

### KEY WARNING SIGNS

- Dirty and chaotic presentation
- Musty/mouldy interior
- Evidence of deck leaks
- Gap between front of keel and hull
- Depression in hull at aft end of keel
- Cracked gelcoat on structural matrix
- Damage on leech of sails
- Rusty engine with fluid leaks and dirty bilge
- Spongy decks



Does the boat interior smell dry and well ventilated, or is it damp and musty?

Rupert Holmes



the age of the rigging, then this will need to be factored in. It's also worth looking at the sails and making a quick assessment of age, quality, likely shape and structural integrity. The material tends to fail first near the leech, so that's where to look for early signs of problems.

Painted surfaces and external woodwork have a big impact on the cosmetic condition of a boat and can also be expensive to repair. A professional repaint with two-pack paint can easily cost more than £5-6,000 on a 34ft boat. However, if you're happy with a neat, but less durable surface and a little less shine, the same hull could be DIY painted with a couple of coats of one-pot paint in a long weekend for a materials cost of less than £200.

Teak decks can be a particular problem, especially if they are original or have been regularly scrubbed. Signs of a deck that's in need of attention include loose caulking, movement of wooden plugs over screw heads and splits or cracks in the timber. The more extensive these problems, the closer the decks are to the end of their life.

This is particularly true for older boats, which may already have had remedial work carried out to prolong the life of the teak. An additional problem is that any leaks through screw holes may be into the core material of the deck, creating a structural problem. Fortunately, more recent teak decks are glued down, rather

**ABOVE** If it's a model you've not seen before, is the layout, space and stowage suitable?

**RIGHT** Will the cockpit layout work for you and the people you will most often be sailing with?



than screwed, which eliminates this.

Hatches and windows don't last forever, although surface crazing is merely a cosmetic issue. The lens of a hatch can be replaced as can the seals, while if opening portlights are too expensive to repair initially, they can be removed and the hole covered with a fixed acrylic window. Medium-sized windows can be replaced for around £100-150 each, although a DIY job will may save up to two thirds of the cost (see PBO September 2018).

It's easy to overlook skin fittings as they tend to lurk in remote corners, but they are key factors in keeping a boat afloat. A survey will reveal more about their condition, but you can start by checking the handles turn freely.

### Assessing the structure

As well as assessing the suitability of the boat for your own purposes, you also need to get a sense for the boat's structural condition. Once it reaches a certain age a few cosmetic blemishes must be allowed for, but it's important to look past the aesthetics. Get the floorboards up to look in the bilge – does the reinforcing matrix look in good condition? Sutcliffe-Davies says that damaged gelcoat in this area can be an indication of excess movement. Is there any evidence of water leaking past the keel bolts?

Equally, it's worth looking at the bottom of the mast compression post on boats with deck-stepped masts. Has it been sat in water for many years and started to rot or corrode? Is there any dishing of the mast-step plinth on deck? And do the decks feel solid, or are they spongy? The latter may be a sign that water has entered

**'Osmosis related blisters are often not obvious beneath layers of antifouling'**

the core material causing it to become unbonded from the fibreglass on each side, or in the case of balsa cores degrading the material itself.

If the boat is out of the water, start by inspecting the underwater surfaces. Are there many layers of antifouling that are peeling off, leaving a crater-like surface behind? If so, this doesn't need to be a deal-breaker – professional blasting costs around £500 depending on the size of the boat. Unfortunately osmosis related blisters are often not obvious beneath layers of antifouling. They are therefore often only revealed during a survey that will also check for moisture readings in the hull laminate.

It's important to examine the joint between the keel and the hull. Does this look uniform, without a gap at the front, or depression into the hull at the aft end? Are there any telltale rusty marks caused by water leaking from a keel bolt? Equally, it's worth inspecting the rudder (and skeg) for any cracks or other damage. And wiggle the blade to check for play in the bearings. On a smaller boat with solid bushes these can be custom made for less than £100, but on a larger boat with cage bearings



**The dishing under this deck-stepped mast is a sure sign of water ingress into the wooden pad underneath**

they may cost £500-£1,000.

At this stage you're not seeking to replicate the surveyor's job, but rather to take a quick look to check for obvious problems. You'll rarely find a boat with nothing to fix, but if there appear to be problems almost everywhere you look the only sensible option is to walk away.

### **Inventory**

You should expect to see a list of all the boat's gear and equipment before viewing. Brokers should do this as a matter of course when listing a boat, although some private sellers don't get round to doing so until a late stage in the negotiation process. Either way, it's important to check that key items are actually on board and that they appear to be in serviceable condition.

On less well looked after boats many items may have been left in damp lockers, or been many years overdue for service or replacement. If the rest of the boat looks viable to you, it's therefore imperative to inspect the inventory to both make sure that everything is present and to assess its



**LEFT** When examining sails take a careful look at the leech, which is where problems are likely to start

**BELOW** If viewing a boat ashore it's possible to inspect the underside of the hull



**RIGHT** If the boat is afloat you won't be able to assess the condition underneath, but may be able to run the engine

**BELOW** Has the engine been properly looked after? Is the compartment clean, dry and free from fluid leaks



Photos Rupert Holmes



## 'In many ways it's a golden time to own a boat, or upgrade to a better one'

stopper, providing everything else about the boat is right. In some cases the outcome will depend on the surveyor's opinion, so flag any concerns for discussion when commissioning the survey. Once at the boat many surveyors will look at these areas first, then give you a call to discuss their findings. If you opt to walk away at this stage, many will charge a reduced fee, especially if you no longer need a written survey report.

### Avoiding mistakes

There's an old adage that says the two happiest days in a boat owner's life are the day of purchase and the day the boat is sold. Fortunately for most there's a host of great days in between, but it's important to avoid these common mistakes:

**Overstretching finances** Incidental costs, repairs and maintenance always seem to cost more than expected.

**Buying too large a boat** In addition to increased annual costs, boat handling in confined spaces is harder. There's much to be said for buying a younger, but smaller, boat. In many cases this will have



The damage to the front of this keel should ring alarm bells

a similar amount of space and speed to a slightly larger but older model.

**Getting carried away** Buying a boat should be a fun and exciting process, but make sure you make decisions based on hard facts, not impulse.

**Underestimating a project** It's easy to look at a list of defects and assume each task is easily sorted, but the reality is each one will take longer and cost more than expected (see Drew Maglio's feature on page 64 for a real-life example).

Nevertheless there are many excellent boats of all descriptions on the market and in real terms prices are at historically low levels. In many ways it's a golden time to own a boat, or upgrade to a better one – they are more affordable, more comfortable and arguably more reliable than at any time in the history of boating.

### Next month

Rupert Holmes looks at negotiating the deal, surveys and the legal aspects of buying a boat

condition. This is particularly true for the trailer of smaller boats. Many of these are the age of the boat and in some cases would be next to impossible to make roadworthy. Yet a replacement trailer may cost more than the value of the boat.

At this stage you can also start to factor in the cost of extra kit you may need to buy to make this particular boat work for you. This may include items such as a tender, outboard, trailer, electronics, safety equipment, ground tackle or sails and running rigging. This process will again help to identify whether an individual boat meets your needs and budget.

Many good boats will have one or two small problems, and possibly even one larger one. These need not be a show-

### FIRST VISIT CHECKLIST

On a first look at a boat you may have limited time, but many items on this list can each be checked in only a couple of minutes...

#### Exterior

- Deck paint or non-slip surface
- Cockpit space and layout
- Standing rigging

- Running rigging
- Ground tackle
- Topsides finish
- Exterior woodwork
- Condition of antifouling
- Visual inspection of keel/hull joint
- Rudder/skeg

#### Interior

- General presentation
- Layout
- Space

- Stowage
- Musty smells
- Evidence of deck leaks
- Upholstery
- Headlinings
- Electrics
- Electronics
- Engine
- Bilge
- Keel bolts
- Inventory and equipment
- Safety gear