HOWTO
Tie up your boat

A wander around any marina will reveal a hundred different variations of how to tie up a boat and to be fair, there is no universal one-size-fits-all answer. However, while many of the solutions on show are perfectly valid, there are also plenty of boat owners with very little understanding of what the lines are supposed to do and in some cases, it's a miracle the boat's still there when the owners return.

For an alongside berth in a non-tidal marina, or one with floating pontoons, you need a minimum of four lines. The bowline should lead forward from the bow cleat to a cleat on the pontoon a short distance in front of it. The sternline should lead aft from a stern cleat to a pontoon cleat a little way behind it. These bow and sternlines are to keep the boat alongside. Then comes a pair of springs to stop the vessel surging fore and aft in the elements.

The correct terminology for spring lines always causes some debate. As far as I'm concerned, a line which stops the boat from moving backwards is a stern or aft spring and usually runs forward from the boat's stern or mid cleat to a pontoon cleat several metres ahead of it. One that stops forward movement is a bow or fore spring and usually runs from a bow or mid cleat to a pontoon cleat several metres astern of it.

I always like the bow and sternlines to have a touch of slack in them so that the boat is 'relaxed' on its berth and can move a little way out from the pontoon rather than being pinned against it, rubbing on its fenders all the time. In contrast to this, I like the springs reasonably taut so that any fore and aft movement is kept to a minimum.

Most boats are tied up in this manner, but it is usually how the lines are set up on a cleat, known as the lead, that is incorrect. This lead is very important as it ensures the correct loading of a cleat and minimises wear on both the rope and the boat. It also allows the load to be released easily when the time comes to leave. A lead can be described as 'open' or 'closed' – we always want an open lead as this covers all of the above conditions.

Unlike sailors, who usually like to use a different line for each job, motor boaters are usually more pragmatic and often use one longer line to do two jobs, such as the bowline and stern spring or sternline and bow spring. To tie a motor boat up with two long lines, lead the sternline aft and make it off on the pontoon cleat ashore using the 0880 technique (see step 4), then return it by going forward to a centre cleat aboard the boat – this makes it a spring. Since this line will be stopping any forward movement, it is called a bow or fore spring even though it runs from a cleat positioned astern of the boat. Repeat the same process with the bowline, ie. lead it forward and make it off to a cleat ashore, then return it to a centre cleat on the vessel to act as a stern spring stopping any backwards movement of the vessel. The disadvantage of using two long lines instead of four shorter ones is that any adjustments to the bow or sternline means undoing the springs first.

The other consideration is where to start your lines. Either start the line on board with a bowline or made-up loop and then tidy up the loose ends on the pontoon, or start with the loops down on the pontoon cleats and leave the tails on the boat, which looks neater but means more hassle when you want to leave. This is one area that the motor boat style of using two longer lines has an advantage as all the tails end up back aboard in a tidy manner. Leaving is also simple as the springs naturally have to come off first. The choice is yours; so long as they're lead and made off correctly, the boat will be secure.

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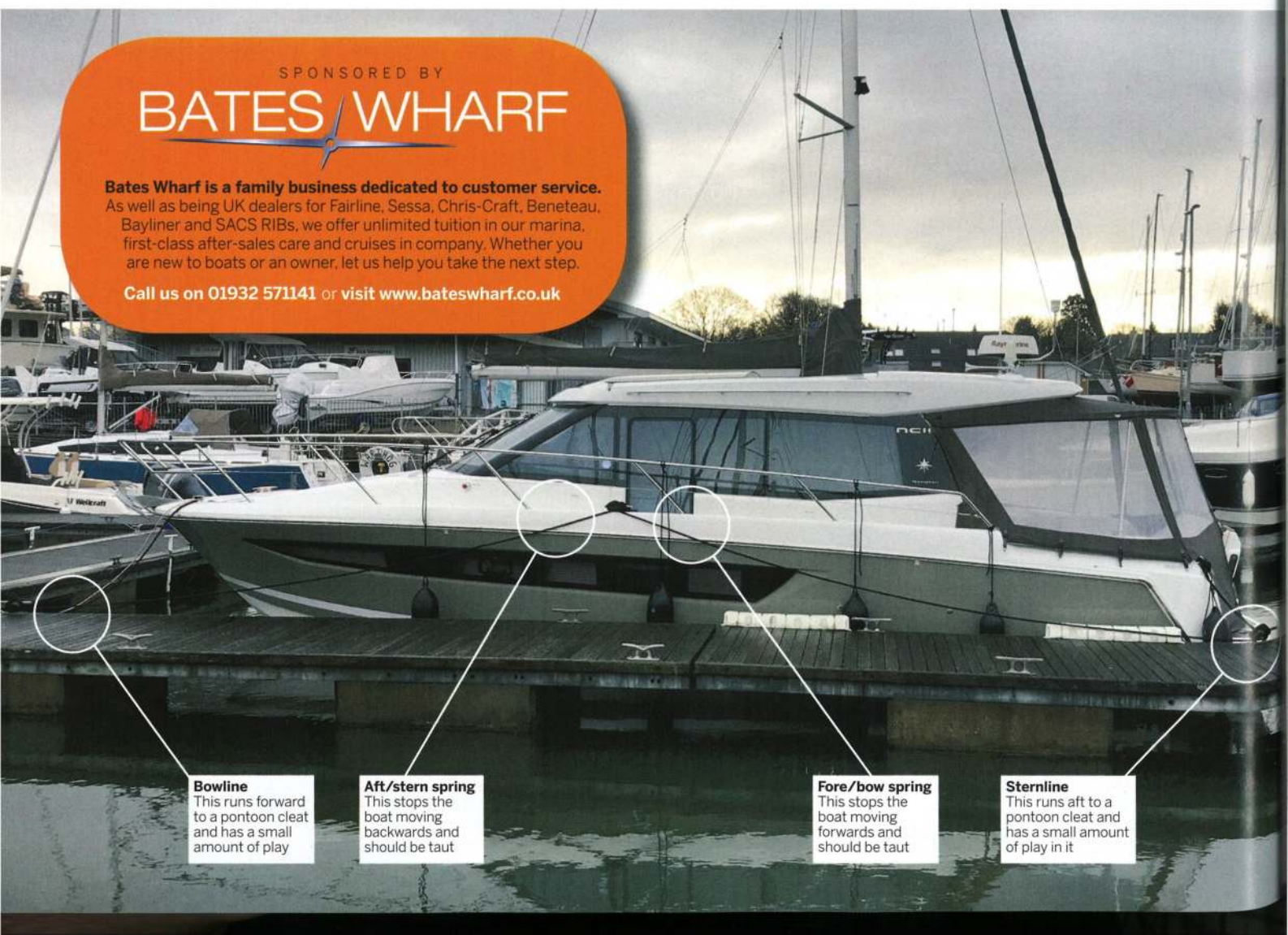

1 INCORRECT LEAD The way you lead the rope around the cleat is crucial to tying up a boat correctly. Here, the lead is the wrong way around the cleat and is described as 'closed'. The weight and wear are on the toe rail instead of the cleat, causing premature wear to the gelcoat and the rope. It also makes it difficult to tension the line by 'sweating' it in.

4 TYING OFF To make off a line to a cleat, take a turn around the base (0), followed by two crossing turns around each horn (88), then a second turn around the base (0) to leave an '0880' shape. This grips the cleat well and allows an easily controlled release. It also leaves the tail pointing in the right direction to become a spring line.

2 CORRECT LEAD Now the wear and weight of the boat is on the cleat not the gelcoat. You or your crew can now assist with tensioning the line by keeping the line taut with your right hand while pulling on the standing part of the line and sweating in the slack.

5 SPRING LINES Once the bow and sternlines are secure, they can now be returned up to the mid cleat to become stern and bow springs. As many boats only have a single centre cleat, you may have to use a simpler 080 in order to leave enough space for the second spring to be made off here too.

3 BOAT TO SHORE When running a sternline from the boat to the shore, it has to go from the boat's stern cleat to a pontoon cleat located a little way aft of it. A bowline has to go forward. To ensure the lead is correct, always go to the furthest side of the cleat from the boat to keep it open and don't pull it too tight.

6 SWEATING IN The spring lines should be nice and taut, so sweat them in by leaning on the standing part and taking up the slack. The second spring should have the full 0880 to keep it secure. Locking turns aren't needed if done correctly.