

Boating for Beginners

Contributed by Jonnyboy

Jonnyboy provides an introduction to boat ownership...

There is something about owning a boat, perhaps it's our idea of ourselves as a nation of seafarers, or maybe as we're actually a nation of beach visitors we've spent our formative years landlocked and watching someone else enjoying a calm sea on a fine sunny day.

Whatever the reason, there aren't many people around who aren't struck by the romance of putting to sea yourself, catching a flapping supper and pulling up a couple of pots along the way to provide something a little bit finer.

As a newbie to boating, who has learned the hard way that I know very little, here is my guide to getting yourself into the water, and back out again!

What boat?

Ok, I'll make things clear from the start. If you have a budget of 10k then this article isn't for you. If you have £10k then give it to me and I'll write you something useful in about a year.

There are loads of different designs of boats around; inflatable, ribs, dorys, clinker built, etc, etc. I'm going to concentrate on the most popular design, the GRP clinker style. Clinker boats were originally made in the 19th century and the style relates to the process of overlapping boards to make the hull. Modern GRP boats emulate this style but in a more advanced hull design.

So, there are two important aspects to the boat of your choice, hull design and shaft length.

There are three main types of hull design, displacement, semi planing and planing. The displacement hull simply does that, the hull is supported exclusively by the volume of water it displaces. A semi planing hull does more or less the same, whilst it can develop 'lift' through forward motion. A planing hull is mostly supported by dynamic lift (although it retains enough displacement to remain afloat)

If you think of a surfboard, sit of it and it will just about keep you afloat but it's mostly underwater. Catch a wave and you can stand up whilst the majority of the board is on top of the water. That's the difference between displacement and planing. So.

Displacement hulls – simple, low speed boats, good buoyancy and stability.

Semi-displacement – retain elements of the displacement but are capable of additional speed with the correct engine

Planing hull – need some decent propulsion to get up on a plane – basically a speedboat.

Thus we are going to discard the final option of a planing hull and look at displacement or semi displacement hulls. These give you the best stability, buoyancy and ease of use.

My first boat was a 16ft with a semi displacement hull, as she had a 25hp engine I could get her up on the plane easily and be where I wanted to go fairly quickly. However. As I don't tend to go far out to sea (and this article doesn't cover that) then my next boat is probably going to be a 16ft with an 8-10hp engine as that would suit my needs even better.

Outboard motors

Outboard motors come in three 'lengths' - short, standard and long shaft. The type of engine you need depends on the length from the top to the bottom of your transom (the bit at the back that the outboard bolts onto). As a rough guide

Transom length – 16' or under, short shaft

Transom length – 20' or over, long shaft

If you get your measurements correct then the cavitation plate (a large finlike bit above the propeller) will be level with the bottom of the boat. It is very important to get the right shaft length for performance, safety and effective cooling of your outboard engine.

Outboards come in two types of engine, two stroke and four stroke. Most older engines are two stroke and require two stroke oil to be mixed in with the fuel (some have premixing). Two stroke outboards are no longer manufactured due to environmental legislation, but stocks of new two stroke engines are available, but becoming more and more restricted

Two stroke – Lighter, less complex, cheaper second hand, easier to service

Four stroke – 'Greener' & quieter, more economical

In terms of performance 15hp is the minimum you'll need to be able to plane; if you want to pull a donut or skier then 25hp is your

requirement. In a sheltered bay then 4hp is fine for pottering, but if the area you expect to travel is subject to strong currents then an 8hp should be your minimum, all things being equal. Of course, the important thing is that you match your engine to your boat. A 40hp on your 13ft dingy will just rip the transom out, whereas a tiny engine on a 17footer will struggle to make any headway.

Most outboard engines come with separate fuel tank, with a fuel line connector and pump & primer; they are pretty reliable, but one thing you must always, always remember is never go to sea without a second form of propulsion. This can be as little as a pair of oars or as much as an auxiliary 9.9hp engine on its own movable bracket.

When it comes to checking out engines it's about common sense, if it's running then a good stream of water should be coming out of the 'pee hole' (outboard engines use the water they are immersed in as their cooling system) Any dodged electrics or build up of salty deposits (outboards should be flushed through with fresh water after being used in the sea) will point to an engine that hasn't received much TLC. However, used outboards are easy enough to come by, and £500 should get you something pretty useful, if you didn't get one with your boat.

Trailers

When it comes to the romance of the sea, boat trailers are the ginger cousin left at home. Rusty frames, poor design and self destructing hubs can make it a very unpleasant experience towing, launching and recovering a boat. When a trailer is reversed into water, then the lubrication in the hubs often gets a hammering. It's important to check and lubricate the hub bearings on a boat trailer regularly, likewise check that the frame is solid, the tyres uncracked and that the rollers for launching the boat move freely. It should have a workable jockey wheel and a front hand winch in good condition. Check the strop on the hand winch for frays as they get put under some serious tension when recovering your boat.

You'll need a trailer board to hang from your boat, and a spare wheel for the trailer. So don't forget to carry a spanner that fits!

Again, you can get a decent new trailer for £600-£700, or pay £2000 for a rollercoaster, twin axled, fully braked job.

A ratchet strap is invaluable for securing your boat, fit two for luck.

Safety

If you check the picture above, there's one idiot in it not wearing a life jacket!

If it's your boat then you are responsible for the safety of everyone on it. My basic safety package for inshore fishing (less than half a mile off shore) is.

100 Newton lifejackets for everyone on board.

Marine flares

Anchor, chain, rope

Secondary propulsion

Baling bucket

Fire extinguisher

First aid kit

Hook on a 6ft pole

Mobile phone

You can get a VHF radio to contact the coast guard if you wish, however they require a licence which requires you to take a course first, budget £200 as a minimum for the course and radio. If you can afford it then I would recommend that you get one.

The RNLI also offer many resources for sea safety, including free sea checks for your boat.

http://www.rnli.org.uk/what_we_do/sea_and_beach_safety/sea_safety/sea_safety_home

Launching

Really a two person job, but can be done by one if you like getting wet. The key here is the angle of the slip way. First things first, get the boat ready for the water, check drain bungs are in, remove lighting boards and ratchet straps, prime the fuel, and check that the outboard starts (briefly, remember it has no cooling out of water)

Check that you have your safety equipment on board, check again and be sure everyone knows what to do. And always keep your outboard in the raised position to ensure it doesn't catch on anything.

Ok, so you reverse into the water until the back wheels of your car get

wet – success! The boat floats off your trailer and out of reach (not really, because you had a bow line secured to the trailer or your assistant)

you can then beach the boat, tie her off, park your car and trailer and get back to the boat.

The more common occurrence is the trailer is still too far out of the water, but hopefully the well maintained rollers on your trailer mean that with a pair of waders on you can push the boat off into the water.

If not then tie a rope between the trailer and tow hook, release the trailer and let her slowly into the water – after the boat has floated you can pull the trailer out with the rope attached to the car.

Moving off

Go slow, be deliberate and be careful. All my mishaps have involved too much speed too early. Check that everything is stowed, that none of your ropes are trailing in the water, and that your engine is firing out of the peephole, let the engine warm up before moving to three quarters or full power.

Recovery

Again, it's far easier with two people around, you need to moor or beach your boat and then get the car and trailer reversed ready for recovery. If you can beach on the slipway then run a line from the bow, push the boat out and then pull her in to the first runner on your trailer, if you have a helper then one can operate the winch whilst you keep the boat lined up to the trailer, on a windy day or alone this can be a right PITA to line up, but the better your trailer the easier it is. And most importantly, make sure the tide hasn't gone out!

Putting it together

You want a small boat to go out in fine weather, drop off a few pots, catch some mackerel and have fun. Relax – it really isn't that difficult!

A small 16ft day boat with trailer and outboard can be picked up for less than £2000. All your safety equipment need cost no more than £200. If you can find a mate to pay half and share ownership then you can be

on the water for a fairly inexpensive sum.

You won't be going more than half a mile offshore, and your season will probably end around the first week of October, but that's OK. You've caught your fill of tasty fish during the summer months, watched the sea boil with fry around your boat, jumped for joy at the first lobster from your own pot, and gawped as a seal pops his head up 50 yards away, or a school of porpoises herd fish past your boat into the bay.

It's not a way to get cheap fish, but you won't eat a fresher fish than one you caught yourself, and I can honestly say that sitting out on a calm sea, that reflects the summer sun, and catching mackerel with the kids is one of the most joyous and satisfying things I've ever done.

If you have any questions or points to raise please visit our forums.