

USING WINTER COVERS ON SAILING YACHTS



Traditionally a boat was laid up in a mud berth, the mast lowered and used as a ridge pole to support a canvas cover, often a piece of ex WD lorry tarpaulin. GRP and marina charges brought about a change in practice, owners laying up boats ashore, mast standing.

Covering boats for the winter is once again becoming more common with the re-opening of canals, necessitating lowering masts for transits. Clubs also have mast down rules to prevent halyard noise from annoying nearby residents. The following is based on covering a GRP yacht for twenty winters on the East Coast of Scotland. A half hearted attempt can see a cover ruined in days with potential for damage to the boat whilst a thorough job makes the cover last and preserves the boat, saving money and ultimately sailing time.

In our yard there is a particular incentive to get the mast down and cover a white GRP deck at the end of the season. At this time of year berries are ripening and eaten by wild birds, their coloured droppings staining the deck. Yachts' cross trees provide an attractive perch for birds, concentrating their fire on the boat below.

Lowering the mast and sheeting over for the winter is desirable for a variety of reasons. When a boat is afloat it can heel to gusts of wind. On the hard nothing can give, the rigging has to take the full force of the blast, a salient point with winters becoming stormier. Mast down over the winter extends the life of standing and running rigging.

Covering a boat keeps it clean and dry, stopping frost from lifting varnish, widening GRP cracks and opening up joints such as under coach roof grab handles. It preserves cosmetic finish and improves security. Modern fabrics let light through and provide a comfortable working environment below. For success the following may help:

- A cover needs to be wide enough to reach a foot or two below the rubbing strake and long enough to partially wrap around the stern. If the cover does not come below the rubbing strake the tie down ropes will chafe grooves in it like a prisoner cutting cell bars with scouring powder and a piece of string.
- When using the mast as a ridge pole, support it at the bow with a board across the pulpit rail, a crutch at the stern, a plastic crate and packing in the middle, lashing all in place.
- Remove the side deck stanchions. These poke holes in covers and are liable to be bent by gusts. Removing the stanchions allows the cover to form a pitched roof, throwing off rain water and deflecting the wind.
- Remove the cross trees from the mast and pad all projections generously; chain plates, stanchion sockets, winches, mast fittings, eyes on pulpit and pushpit, ends of the pulpit board etc. or they will very quickly chafe holes in the cover. Old L/J's, blankets, cushions and large items of clothing serve the purpose.
- Tie the cover down with the ropes away from the hull or they will chafe and leave marks. A cover wrapped round a painted hull is liable to trap moisture and warmth, causing paint to soften and blister. Tying down the cover away from the boat allows air to circulate and forms a vertical drip edge, keeping the underside of the hull and area below the boat dry. The keels can then dry out for patch priming and the storage space underneath finds use for timber, dinghy trolleys and other boat gear.
- The more ropes used to tie down the cover, the less strain on individual eyelets. If short of anchorage points use any convenient weights. Polypropylene rope ends are kept tidy by tucking them through the lay to prevent it unlaying.

- A separate small piece of tarpaulin can be used to cover the crutch, enclosing the stern leaving gaps high up at bow and stern for ventilation. Under the cover the boat's scuttles and lockers can be left open to air the boat.
- Any old covers can be put on top of the new one. They add strength and reduce U/V degradation of the new cover, overlaps covering any holes.
- If eyelets pull out of the cover, ropes are best re-attached with something stronger. Bradshaws' Holdons do the job, reducing localised stress to the fabric. If corner eyelets have pulled out, ropes are easily attached to corners by forming a 'U' in the cover material and tying on the rope with a double sheet bend.
- Shake off accumulated snow before its weight has a chance to stretch the cover and cause damage. I use a long handled wooden rake made for the task.
- A rolling hitch is handy for ropes that need to be slackened for access.
- Pieces of heavy vinyl tarpaulin are used to cover the protruding ends of the mast. This protects masthead sheaves, furling gear and running rigging. Formed into a U shaped tunnel, open at the bottom, they provide protection without trapping water.

A mast crutch is made from 2in x 4in softwood hinged with a bolt and two large washers. Its height needs to allow sufficient head room to insert the main hatch wash boards when the mast is lying above. Make it too short as I did on my first attempt and you can't insert the wash boards. Shaped blocks improve the crutch fit to the pushpit. One is made thicker than the other by the thickness of the crutch timber to take up the gap arising from the overlap of the timbers.

The crutch should be no higher than necessary to minimise windage and clear low bridges during canal transits. Having the mast down the centre line of the boat conveniently keeps the side decks clear for canal transits. The air draft of my Westerly Centaur with crutch in place is 7ft 9ins (2.82m) which allowed plenty of clearance to pass under the Kerse road bridge to enter the Forth and Clyde Canal before construction of the Helix cut and its new sea lock.

The bow timber can be made to fit snugly, rounding its edges and fitting blocks underneath so it cannot slide athwartships. The woodwork does not take long to make. It can be stored with the padding and short lengths of rope needed to tie the supports, mast, rigging and padding in place.

Covering the boat becomes a well oiled routine and with all the necessary items to hand is soon done, enabling one to get on with the rest of the lay up tasks in comfort.

Paul Shave, *Blue Spindrift*

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