

PREPARING FOR SURVEY

Amid the excitement of buying or selling a boat, the survey might just seem like a dull, necessary overture to the big day... but it's vital to get it right, says Steffan Meyric Hughes of Aquamarine Surveys

THE BUYING PROCESS

Usually, a prospective buyer visits the boat, decides if it fits the bill, and makes an offer subject to survey. After this exhilarating burst of optimism, the broker or seller will ask for a deposit. The buyer and seller should sign a contract that lays out the amounts and timings. As a buyer, you should choose your own surveyor. Let the broker or seller know who you have chosen and let them make arrangements with each other. Remember, once you make an offer, you will be buying the boat unless there are significant issues.

LIFTING TIME

For obvious reasons, all small leisure craft and working vessels are surveyed ashore. Normally the broker will arrange this with the seller and your chosen surveyor, but if not, you will have to reach an agreement with the surveyor and the boatyard/marina staff as to how and when that will happen. At a larger yard, this will be on a travel hoist, and at a smaller yard, it might be a crane hoist. Either way, remove the log impeller and replace with blanking plugs. You may want to protect your depth transducer in a similar way. This will protect these delicate items against any accident. If it's a crane lift or small travel hoist, the operator might ask you to remove the backstay, to allow easier access for the crane's spreader boom. The boat will either be lifted and held in slings with a block under the keel or placed on a cradle, depending on availability. The hull should now be pressure-washed to allow inspection by the surveyor and as a matter of normal good practice, particularly with a view to any potential buyers/brokers; but this goes for insurance surveys too. If there is no cradle, the boat (assuming it's GRP and under 40ft/12.2m) can generally sit in slings for an hour or two while the surveyor examines the outside of the hull and steering gear and so on, then go back into the water to allow the surveyor to finish the job on and below decks. This is not the case for wooden or steel boats, which take longer to examine. NB: if your boat is antifouled in silicone or a similar slippery finish, it's important you tell the yard staff and surveyor. Such a finish can (and has) caused boats to fall out of slings, a danger to property and life. Most metal or GRP yachts, whether sail or power, and up to the 40ft mark, will take the best part of a day to survey, but it could take two. Larger yachts will take two days or more. The surveyor should be able to give an idea of how long the boat needs to be out for. Most surveyors will welcome buyers turning up towards the end of the survey, but few will appreciate them hanging around all day, so give them space to work.

CLEAR BOAT

The usual scenario is as follows: the cockpit lockers will be full of out-of-date flare packs, tins of bilge and other paint rusted shut, folding day shapes that have never been used; leaky plastic buckets; at least one adjustable spanner, rusted shut; and some stiff rags once soaked with the noble fluids of conservation and pride. Boats get messy and rubbish piles up. Mild steel rusts at around the same pace as good intention wanes. Even the chart table will fill up with dead AA

batteries, manuals for the stereo, even the kettle. One boat had a half-used sachet of saltwater impeller grease. Why wasn't the grease on the inside of the impeller housing you might ask? So... tidy the boat. If the surveyor can't see through the jungle of a cockpit locker to a hull breather, or trace the path of the engine exhaust, the report is more likely to end up riddled with the sort of half-baked exclusions people hate surveyors for, and they usually sound more ominous than the truth would have been. For instance: "The exhaust hose could not be seen at the time of survey. Suggest full inspection ASAP" sounds more expensive and alarming than "The exhaust hose clips are rusty and should be replaced." Having a tidy boat is of benefit to the surveyor, who can get on with the job in hand, the broker, who can compile a clear inventory and take pride in his job, the buyer, who wants a tidy boat and a good survey, and the seller, who wants a buyer! Do remember to flush the loo with fresh water several times and make sure there's no forgotten food in the oven or the fridge. The seller may not be as keen as the buyer for a thorough survey, depending on the condition of the boat, but trying to hide defects with rubbish or mess is an instant alarm bell to the surveyor. A messy boat is no good to anyone!

GEAR

One thing the surveyor will want to do is to check off the gear listed as part of the sale against what is actually there. Things like lifejackets, fire extinguishers and so on are not so important: they are nearly always out of date, and the assumption is that new owners will review the boat in terms of safety gear and have their own clothing. Sails are usually not checked by the surveyor, other than as to their existence, if they are on board. Other than that, items included with the boat should be on the boat where possible, and particularly if they are expensive, like a windvane steering gear or tender outboard. It's not a deal-breaker, but it helps.

DOCUMENTATION

Documentation review is part of a survey. The usual things are: registration papers (whether Small Boat Registry or full/Part One), maintenance logs and service history, particularly if the yacht has been yard-maintained, as that's a plus; manuals for engines, electronics, systems etc (but not small, simple items like kettles!) and any past surveys. Leave these somewhere obvious, like the chart table. And finally, don't forget to leave the boat open, or a key with the broker, if there is one.

CLEAR HEAD

Don't decide whether to buy or not at the end of the survey. Wait until everyone has had a few days to consider the outcome, read the report, then take your time to make a decision. You might agree to go ahead at the offer price, ask for a reduction appropriate to any faults that turn up, or walk away if the boat has significant issues, usually where repair costs are 10% or more of your offer price.