

Boat-owner's diary

The PBO 'family' share their boat-owning treats, trials and tribulations

It's boom time for a budgeting Ben Meakins - not chastened, still chasing. Meanwhile, David Pugh tries a kayak for two, Tom Stevens savours the last of the summer wine and Stu Davies gets away from it all

Missed last month's diaries? Visit www.pbo.co.uk to catch up

Boom and bust

Speedy sails in autumn gales strike something of a blow for Ben Meakins and Polly

We've had a succession of seriously windy weekends recently. The days are getting shorter, and the autumn gales are blowing in - which must mean that, come Sunday mornings, it's the Hamble Winter Series again.

We've been driving the boat hard. There's nothing like the knowledge that you've got a good crew and a boat that will do anything you ask of her. That means that while all around you are broaching, flogging sails and making heavy weather to windward, you can power away, with sails bladed out, crew hiking hard and the

fleet left for dead behind you.

Having said that, it's not easy on the boat. The first week, in 25-knot winds, a stanchion base lost its battle with the guy's twinning line. Then, last week, we had 26 knots of wind. We pulled on serious amounts of kicker and the boat reached previously unheard-of speeds upwind, with the No3 up,

Inspection revealed a stress fracture up one side of the boom

the mainsail bladed out and the traveller down. We won nearly every race.

However, up the last beat of the weekend we noticed the 32-year-old boom had an interesting bend in it. Further inspection revealed a stress fracture up one side, next to the



Hamo Thornycroft

Big winds and big waves have been a feature of Ben's autumn so far

kicker attachment. Ouch.

So, it's a new boom for Polly, and we've reawakened a dilemma: namely, boat-speed versus budget. On the one hand, we have every faith in the boat and crew - but on the other, however well we maintain her, there's no doubt that racing hard in a breeze puts a strain on the boat and her fittings, however conservative we are with small spinnakers and cautious manoeuvres.

The budget wins out in a rational

sense, when ashore and sitting at the kitchen table. But once the wind starts to blow and the 5-minute gun fires, the thrill of the chase takes over and the devil sitting on my shoulder whispers: 'You're here, so you might as well go for it'.

Here's hoping for some lighter winds next week!

■ PBO's features editor, Ben Meakins, and his girlfriend Steph co-own Polly, an Impala 28, with friends. They keep her on the Hamble on a river mooring

Paddle do nicely

A honeymooning David Pugh resorts to a two-man kayak while Red Dragon is hauled out for winter

It's been one of those months. You know, the ones where you get married and spend two-and-a-half weeks on honeymoon. Result: no time on the water. And yet my new wife still has the cheek to say that I give the boat priority! I had hoped to get in some dinghy sailing in Mauritius, but a healthy westerly put paid to that and left us paddling a two-man kayak instead - hence the photo.

Joking apart, it's a good thing that this column is entitled 'Boat-owner's diary', not 'Boat-user's diary'. Sailing is a time-consuming pastime, and inevitably there will be periods when you just can't spare any of that essential commodity. Which is why it makes sense to share boat ownership. My brother Ben, sister Frances and I

jointly own Red Dragon, meaning that even when one of us is too busy to use her, she still gets use and regular checks over.

Sometimes, such an arrangement can really get you out of trouble. For example, Poole Harbour authorities, our sailing club and insurers are all equally

My new wife has the cheek to say I give the boat priority!

insistent that boats should not be left on harbour moorings after 1 November, so it

was with relief mixed with a twinge of regret that I found my brother had moved the boat up to Wareham for her winter haul-out on the weekend we returned from honeymoon. I wouldn't have had time to do it until November was upon us, leaving me at the mercy of the wrath of the bureaucrats, so I'm grateful. Nevertheless, it's sad to think that another season is over.



'We've only been married two weeks and we've already got into a row...'

What next then? Ridge Wharf Yacht Centre will be balancing Red Dragon onto her trailer over the course of the next week, after which we'll be towing her back to her winter residence - an industrial unit in Somerset.

And the job list? In previous years Ben and I have upgraded the rig, bought new sails, rerouted all the running rigging, added extra sail controls, changed the reefing system and changed the engine - twice.

Meanwhile, the interior has remained largely untouched apart from replacing rotting canvas bunks with plywood.

This year, we plan to paint things, renew the berth cushions and upholstery, and add an infill piece to convert the forward V-berth to a double. You would never guess there is a female influence at large!

■ PBO's deputy editor David Pugh and his two siblings jointly own Red Dragon, a Contessa 26 that they keep moored in Poole Harbour

Making a meal of the Indian summer

A few idyllic sails with which to end the season? I'll eat and drink to that, says Tom Stevens

Iclosed last month's diary by cautiously hoping we would have an Indian summer in which to enjoy a few last sails this season: I couldn't have hoped for a better result as the past three weekends have been fantastic, probably as good as any during the 'summer'. We have taken full advantage on Oystercatcher, culminating last weekend with a cruise in company to Ramsholt.

Four Aldeburgh boats, including ourselves, left on Friday evening and headed down to the Butley River for a night at anchor where we all enjoyed a great meal and the odd drop of wine. The night was slightly interrupted by one yacht dragging her anchor and visiting another at 0230 - but I couldn't possibly say who might have been the culprit.

We were ready for a convivial meal - and another drop of wine

The next morning, Caroline and I anchored just short of the river mouth and took our Labrador Molly ashore for a walk on Orford Ness. Legs stretched, we waited for the other yachts to join us and Caroline did her usual magic by serving a huge cooked breakfast to fortify us all for the sea passage.

Leaving the mouth of the Ore about two hours after low water we carried the flood and a perfect sailing breeze down the coast, across the Deben bar and up to Ramsholt where George, the harbour master, had reserved us four mooring buoys close together.

George proudly told us he had made the latest issue of the RNLI newsletter by asking for a donation of £5 from each visiting yacht. It goes to show how popular Ramsholt must be, as he had amassed £2,500.



Afrin - sister ship to a yacht designed by Maurice Griffiths for Tom Stevens's late father

I was particularly pleased to be moored next to Afrin, a beautiful yellow-painted 38ft (11.6m) wooden ketch. She is a sister ship to Good Hope, the yacht Maurice Griffiths designed to my late father's specifications and built by Whistocks of Woodbridge. Good Hope now belongs to a GP in the West Country, so as I never get to see her it is always nice to have a reminder by seeing Afrin at Ramsholt.

Another walk ashore and we were ready for a very convivial meal - and another drop of wine - in the Ramsholt Arms before heading to bed for an uninterrupted night on safe moorings. The next morning was amazing, not what you would

expect for mid-October. Clear blue skies, glassy water and not a breath of wind. We felt very guilty shattering the silence with our outboard, motoring ashore to walk Molly. After another huge fry-up we headed back over the Deben bar where the breeze obligingly filled in just enough to waft us back to Aldeburgh.

I suspect that will be the last weekend on the boat this year - but what a fabulous way to finish the season!

■ PBO ad executive Tom Stevens and his wife Caroline keep their Trapper 500, Oystercatcher, on a swinging mooring on the River Alde by summer and lay up over winter at nearby Aldeburgh

In summary: autumn fair

Stu Davies marvels at remarkably clement October weather which has somewhat shamed the best efforts of the summer

It's well into the autumn as I write this month's column, and surprise surprise - we are having nicer weather now than we had for much of the summer!

We had sort of planned to start working on Sacha during this mid-October weekend, but then we received a phone call from my eldest daughter, who is working in the oil fields - somewhere hot, just like her dad used to.

'I've got a week off, dad, and I've bought tickets for you, mum and nan to come and visit me: my treat.'

Sunshine and a light breeze - perfect sailing weather

The only problem with this was that all of our summer gear was still on the boat, 150 miles away. Panic stations for Mrs Davies - no shorts or swimming cozzies! 'Right', said I, 'We'll kill two birds with one stone: go down to Milford Haven, take along the bits and pieces I bought from one of the PBO advertisers who was at Southampton Boat Show, check they are correct and then we can bring home your summer gear'.

It was a superb weekend: the sun shone and there was a light breeze - perfect sailing weather... but we had to get back home to Llangollen to pack and get ready

for our long-haul flight.

Although the weather has been less than perfect this summer, the autumn has turned up trumps. We had a cracking weekend at the beginning of October, staying out on the Saturday night at Dale with beautiful sailing there and back.

By the time we return from our week away and next visit the boat it will be nearly November, so I have decided to drain the domestic water system, just in case. The spares are all correct and we are ready to go into maintenance mode.

Bits and pieces bought at the Southampton Boat Show and destined for Sacha at Milford Haven



For the moment, we are packed and prepared to depart: Mrs Davies is happy and - with a bit of luck - next month's diary will be written in a hot place with a photo to suit!

■ Stu Davies has written many practical articles for PBO. He and his wife Laura keep their Bénéteau Océanis 381, Sacha, moored in Milford Haven