

# Blyth Classic Yachts

## ARTICLE

This is an abridged version of an article written by us for the British Dragon Association magazine. The comments made herein are given in good faith for the interest of the reader and are opinions only. It is up to every individual to decide on his or her best course of action in the circumstances of each separate case. We are not recommending any particular course of action.

The Dragons we have worked on varied greatly in age and initial condition, but they have allowed me to see the different styles of their builders. These range from a 1947 Woodnutt (*Elska*, 138), two 1950s Pedersens (*Vivi*, 335 and *Blue Haze*, 375) and a 1963 and a 1971 Borresen (*Pandora*, 401 and *Dunlin*, 459). We are sure that those readers who have undertaken such projects will have their own opinions, but that is the nature of the game. Each of the builders had his own style and ways of finishing. However, all wood Dragons are basically the same, and each is prone to suffer similar problems with age. As with all restoration projects, be it a classic car or a yacht, it is vital to ask yourself the extent of your skills and your budget before you fall in love and get carried away. You must also decide whether you intend to cruise or race your classic Dragon, as this will influence the cost of fittings, rig and sails. Whatever work you think your Dragon will require on first sight will almost certainly increase significantly when you start to remove the deck and strip off the paint. At this stage you face yet another dilemma: when she is in this state, you will feel that you ought to do everything while it is easy to get at. When we rescued *Elska* from a field in Scotland, we thought that a third of her ribs would need removing and that the majority of the seams would take up. Hundreds of hours later we had replaced every rib and splined every seam!

### Deck problems

Restoring a Dragon usually includes renewing the deck, as that is the only way that many of the other jobs can be tackled properly. In any case, the deck appears to be the most vulnerable part of an old Dragon. The very ends of the beamshelf are prone to rot in the older boats, as are the ends of the deck beams, though these are relatively easy to repair and replace, respectively. The transom is also prone to rot.

### Fittings and Fastenings

At the beginning, spend some time taking each old item apart. This is the best way to learn how to put it back together again. Of course you will be keen to start the project as soon as you get your Dragon home. However, time spent noting fitting positions, labelling and re-assembling rollers and winches and so on, instead of randomly storing them, will save you days at the end of the project, when all you want to do is to get her afloat. We remove every fitting from the boat. This is the only way that allows you to get the inside varnish work like new from end to end. Ultimately many of the fittings will be replaced in their original locations. You will be surprised that some of them ever stayed on, and pleased to have the chance to re-fasten the key ones.

## The hull

Moving on to the hull, the seams in the bow area and around the runner positions suffer first and the joint between the ballast keel and keelson will almost certainly be weeping. We use mahogany splines on the topsides for cosmetic effect and epoxy splines below the waterline as they are quicker to do, and appear just as strong. Before attempting to put a spline in the topsides of a varnished Dragon for the first time, practise on something else with the router and guide! It is sensible to seal the keel line with a flexible sealer, as an epoxy mix here will crack out. You must also consider the condition of the keel bolts.

## Ribs

By far the biggest problem with older Dragons is the ribs. Many are broken at the turn of the bilge, which is particularly acute in the Dragon. The tops are prone to rot where there is a lack of air behind the beam shelf, and the laminated ribs are likely to delaminate with time. The solution is totally dependent on the severity of the problem. If the problem is localised, then the delaminated ribs can be opened up, re-glued and re-fastened. If the delamination is more serious, the only long-term answer is to replace the rib, as modern glues do not seem to achieve a strong joint unless the old glue is removed.

## The epoxy dilemma

Whether to epoxy-coat the boat is open to much debate. We think that it is perfectly acceptable to epoxy-coat the hull in order to give the wood some protection and slow the absorption of water. We coat the hull below the waterline with epoxy, and achieve the same effect on the brightwork by using a modern acrylic varnish. We cannot recommend the practice of allowing hulls to be glassfibre-sheathed. This appears to be merely storing up problems for the future, as the water inevitably gets in and the trapped wood rots. There is no need for this, indeed, we would argue that a glassfibred wood Dragon loses its classic status. We have found that it is perfectly possible to stop a Dragon leaking by splining the hull, sealing the keel joint and resealing the stern tube joint, as necessary.

## Adding a teak deck

A teak deck will undoubtedly increase the value of your restored Dragon, but is obviously more expensive in terms of time and materials. Don't lay the teak too thin, as you will, presumably, be keeping your Dragon for many years. The extra weight of a teak deck is more than compensated for by the extra stiffness achieved. A-frames, bulkheads and other stiffening devices have been discussed elsewhere and we will not dwell on those here. We have successfully fitted bulkheads in Blue Haze, but if you do this in a wood boat, be careful to leave the hatchways open whenever possible to allow the air to circulate properly.

### **A warning**

That brings us on to an important point: it is vital to obtain a copy of the Class rules before you start your restoration. The last thing that anyone wants is to spend years restoring a boat only to be told that it is no longer a Dragon. Restored Dragons can be competitive but there is no satisfaction in this unless they are kept within the rules. If you intend to race, you will need at least some of the modern controls and fittings. However, it is nice to see these incorporated sympathetically, thereby keeping your Dragon a classic.

### **Finishing touches**

Much has been written on how to achieve beautiful varnish work - one of the main ways in which you will be judged. The key factors are: spend as much time as you can in preparation, and choose the right conditions. Despite the hours of hard work, those who start a restoration project will be more than rewarded at her re-launch and on the day of the first sail.





