YACHTING MONTHLY

EXPERT SAILING SKILLS

NO NONSENSE ADVICE THAT REALLY WORKS

- Seamanship
- Navigation
- Boat handling
- Sail trim
- Skippering
- Emergencies

Tom Cunliffe

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FERNHURST BOOKS

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Securing alongside

Walk around any marina and you'll find that no two boats are secured alike. It's a major cause of concern for many yachtsmen, but if you go back to basics and think it through logically, it's relatively straightforward

Any instructor running a Day Skipper course spends hefty chunks of time on bringing the boat into a berth. Although handling her on passage, seeing to crew and making sure there's enough water to float her are useful skills, the one that bothers people more than any other is, 'What happens when I get there?'

I'd been spending a week working on skippering skills with Simon Slade aboard a chartered Hallberg-Rassy 36. Simon was managing fine at steering into a berth, and now it was time to consider what to do with the ropes. Strolling around the marina to see how other people managed, it wasn't a surprise to find no two boats secured alike and that all manner of ideas were used to lose the ends.

To date, Simon had been sailing with friends and his experience mirrored the sort of 'snakes' weddings' we were seeing, so we went right back to first principles. I was once mate on a coastal trading vessel. Her policy was the same as every ship I've seen since, as well as most large professionally run yachts. It works just as neatly for the rest of us.

The procedure for securing alongside

Here's how a fully crewed boat comes alongside a conventional berth.

As the dock is approached, fenders are deployed. Four lines are prepared by feeding the end that's to go ashore through the fairlead or guardrail, then pulling out what seems enough for the job plus an extra 50% for contingencies. There's generally no hurry about the springs. They can often wait until later. The two crew who will take bow and stern lines ashore now coil up the business ends and move to the shrouds to step off as the boat comes alongside. The end of the bow line is secured on a dockside bollard, cleat or ring –the method may depend on which it is – and the slack is pulled in aboard. The bight is made fast on its own deck cleat and that is that. The same thing happens at the stern. Run out a couple of springs in the same way, secure them to their own cleats and put the kettle on.

What is a bight?

The bight of a rope is the part between the two ends. Often it falls into a curve or loop and for this reason pilot books sometimes refer to a shallow bay as a ‘bight of land’. Any reference to ‘making fast the bight’, means cleating off the middle of the line.

How do ships and big yachts secure alongside?

As simply as possible, is the answer.

- One rope, one job.
- One rope, one cleat.
- Ends on the dock.
- Slack taken up and made fast on board.
- Coils on deck.

And that's it! Even in ideal circumstances (a marina-style berth with no stream or wind), a larger vessel needs access to each line individually so that her crew can adjust them one by one. If the lines start with the end on board and are then made up on a dock cleat to be brought back as spring lines, or even to their original cleat in some form of 'doubling', the boat is immediately compromised. When the crew want to ease the bow line, for example, they can't do it without first letting off the spring. This may allow the boat to move somewhere they don't want, or fall bows-in, and so on. Using a single rope for two or more tasks turns a simple job into a nightmare.

When I put the 'one-rope-one-job' set-up to Simon, he saw the logic but asked the right question, 'How come all these boats are doing it in other ways?'

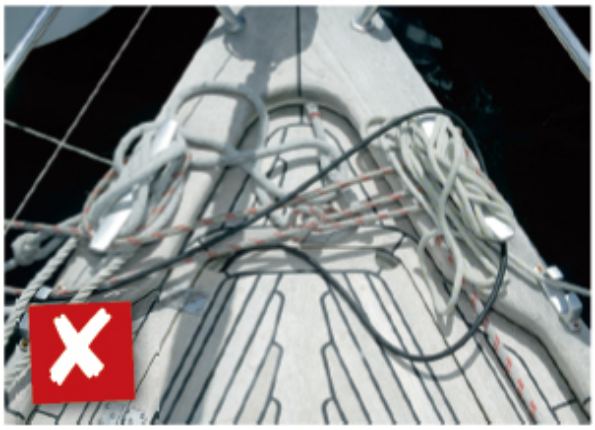
My answer is that I don't know. One thing is certain, it's far easier done like a ship, as well as being much safer. It's also a good bit quicker in the end.

Last season, I put my daughter ashore to shift a 30-footer a few feet so I could squeeze into a berth astern. It took her and her boyfriend 10 minutes to do a job that, had the boat been properly tied up, they'd have knocked off in two or three. She came back aboard breathing brimstone.

What if I haven't enough cleats?

This is the first fly in the smooth ointment of my ideal set-up. Simon and I found ourselves in this blighted situation with our Hallberg-Rassy. I was frankly amazed at this, because the Hallberg-Rassy is a thoroughly seamanlike vessel, but life is full of little disappointments. The yacht didn't even have fairleads. Instead, she had four large cleats, one on each corner, and another pair somewhere around amidships. We had no problem with bow and stern lines, but what were we to do with the springs?

How not to do it: several lines on each cleat and a mess on the foredeck



No doubt Mr H or Mr R imagined we'd use his stout midships cleat, but this would have involved piling two ropes onto it. A horror not to be countenanced, because by Sod's Law the one we wanted to ease or harden would be underneath every time. We'd get away with it in a calm marina, but never alongside a real wall. Furthermore, a spring line led from the quarter pulls the stern closer to the dock. A bow spring does the same for the sharp end, tidying up nicely. One led from amidships achieves far less. It stops her surging back and forth in a berth that's too short for the bow and stern lines to help, but that's about all.

Simon came up with the bright idea of using the cleats themselves as fairleads, then leading the springs across to the spare cleats on the other side. This actually worked quite well. I wasn't struck on the 'lash-up' feel of it, but needs must and at least the yacht didn't look like a cat's cradle.

Spare winches can often be pressed into service for shore lines, but the lack of fairleads on our boat made it a non-starter. Sometimes a stern line can be led from the dock to the outside quarter, but the HR's transom was too padded out with kit for so delightful an answer. Never mind. We did what we could and were satisfied.

Using the cleats as fairleads was the better of two evils

Securing alongside with two crew

The 'one-line-one-job' approach is easy to operate short-handed, but it does require some modification. Here's how Simon and I did it: Simon takes the helm. I prepare the lines and fenders. I measure the bow line in the usual way, but I make the bight fast on board so I can secure her temporarily from the dock. We lead the stern line exactly as though we were fully crewed. Simon keeps charge of it and is ready to pass it to me.

1 Simon brings her in and I step off with the bow line.

2 As he takes off the last of our way with the engine, I pull in the slack on the bow line and make the bight up on the dock. The bow is now secure.

3 Next, I walk smartly aft and Simon hands me the stern line.

4 I make the end fast on the dock and he tends it from on board, taking up the slack and securing the bight. Springs are run out in the usual way.

5 Last, we sort out the bow line. Simon stays on board and I tend the dock cleat. I let go the bight and quickly make up the end as Simon

pulls it in and secures. If it were blowing hard offshore we'd rig an extra line before letting off the temporary one.

Securing alongside pilings

This, as you might say, is the crunch! Having practised coming into a marina berth, we all decided to refresh ourselves in a likely pub on a commercial dock wall across the harbour. The wall is tidal and beset with ugly steel pilings. We couldn't afford to get it wrong, nor did we want the boat surging around in tugboat wash while we were ashore attending to the inner man. Here's how we managed:

1 We picked our spot and came in nice and slow

2 Fenders had been secured 'fore-andaft', with a line at both ends so they wouldn't pop out when we laid them on the pile of our choice.

3 We came in at the top of the tide and used very long bow and stern lines. These served two functions: The extra length helped check fore-

and-aft movement. It also allowed the tide to fall further without our having to adjust them while partaking of the pork pies.

4 The fenders were now in the right place, but the bow was tending to blow in, making the whole affair untidy and creating the risk of damage. A stern spring was therefore rigged and the lines adjusted to a nicety in a couple of minutes, leaving the boat no possibility of clobbering the pile.

This manoeuvre was only made possible by the 'one-rope-one-job, onecleat-one-rope' maxim. Had we been saddled with two ropes on a cleat, or one rope doing two jobs, settling her to the inch would have taken so long the beer would have gone flat.

Using a bowline

Bowline – So long as the bight is made fast aboard so that it can be eased no matter what, there is no harm in securing the end ashore in such a way that it can't be let off under load. One favourite is simply to tie a bowline in the end and drop it over the cleat. In my experience, this absolutely never comes off so long as the lines remain reasonably tight. Ships do it this way (except that they have huge spliced loops) and I favour it myself because it's so easy to let go when the time comes. Slack away, lift off and you're on your way! The bowline is also good for a bollard or post, but do make sure that your crew don't use their initiative and put a bowline on each end of a loaded rope – the thought brings me out in a cold sweat!

If everyone used bowlines, sharing cleats with other yachts would be simple.

Sometimes only a round turn and two half hitches will do

A cow-hitched bowline

Other methods – So long as the line can be let off when you want it (taken care of by making it up on board) and won't come undone until you're ready, I don't think it much matters how you secure the shore lines.

› Some folk like to tie a round turn and two half hitches on a cleat. Seems like a lot of trouble to me, but it certainly won't fall off! If you are stuck with a ring, this is a good option.

› Actually cleating the line makes sense, too. After all, if God gives you a perfectly good cleat, why not use it as he may have intended?

› Cow-hitching a bowline or a spliced loop to a cleat will certainly make sure it can't fall off.

Cleating

The important thing about cleating is not how you do it. What matters is that it remains secure until you want to take it off, that it can be eased under load, and can never jam. A bad lead like this one (Pic 1) can get caught when the load comes on, but the fair lead (Pic 2) will never snag. A round turn (or half a turn), followed by a couple of figures of eight and a further turn to tidy up will hold the Queen Mary without a locking hitch, but if you haven't enough rope, or the cleat's too small, I see no reason not to turn the last figure of eight over on itself to make sure it can't fall or be washed off – always assuming the locking hitch is made after at least one figure of eight so it can't jam up. (Pic 3)


1


2


3

Springing off

Working a boat into and out of a tricky berth doesn't have to be difficult. In fact, all you need is a length of rope and a fender and, even with big boats, tricky manoeuvres can be made simple

In my youth I served as mate on a coastal merchant ship. She carried bulk cargo and was powered by a single screw. Working her in and out of one tricky berth after another was as much an everyday event as tucking in to the cook's world-class breakfasts, yet neither the skipper nor our pilots ever called for a tug. They moved her around

using ropes. Subsequently, I've sailed on a number of large, well-run yachts, power and sail, and I've noticed that the same rules hold good. You can shove a 25-footer off a wall on a windy day most of the time, but sooner or later it blows so hard that you can't. For a 40-footer, the crunch comes more often, and so on up the scale.

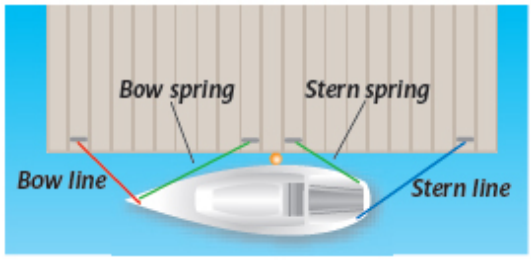
Working on this book, I've met a wide variety of yacht owners and charter operators. Talking to John 'Arnie' Arnold recently, who operates a charter business, I asked him how his clients manage to handle bigger boats.

'Generally not much problem at sea,' he replied. 'In harbour, it can be a different story.'

This rang true with my own experience, so I asked him if he'd mind lending me a big Jeanneau to talk through how to use spring lines. He was all for it and, as luck would have it, we turned up on a windy day. Thirty-five knots was on the clock at times and the boat weighed in at over ten tons. So, I spat on my hands, rigged warps and fenders, and squared away for a handy pontoon.

Terminology

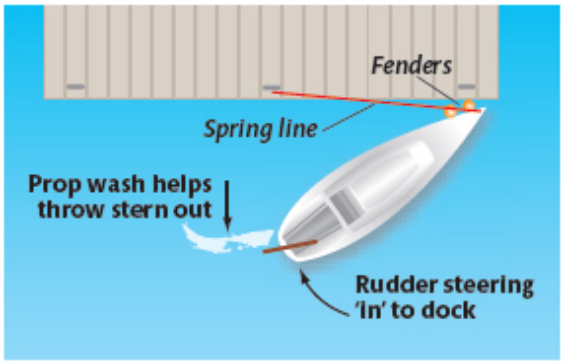
Terminology is always a vexed area when it comes to spring lines. Throughout my own experience – yachting and merchant – the 'stern spring' is run forward from the stern and the 'bow spring' or 'head spring' is led aft from the bow. However, some authorities equally correctly refer to a 'fore spring' and a 'back spring'. I have no quarrel with this, but for the purposes of this book we must adopt one convention or the other, so we're going for 'stern' and 'bow'.



What does a spring line do?

A spring line is rigged from the bow or stern of the boat and led ashore towards amidships – aft from the bow or forward from the stern.

It has two effects. If lead at a sufficiently narrow angle, it helps stop the boat from surging ahead and astern, but perhaps more importantly, it also works as a lever. If the boat tries to move astern against the stern spring it will force her stern in and her bow out. Vice versa with a bow spring. This gives you a number of important options for manoeuvring as well as securing alongside. If you're wondering about rigging spring lines from those cleats or fairleads you find amidships on many larger yachts today, see page 9!



Bringing the boat close-in alongside

Think 'spring-line manoeuvres,' and ten-to-one you'll be conjuring up an image of a yacht springing herself off a tricky dock. Bigger vessels,