

Boat-owner's diary

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



Stu Davies is reluctantly making a move, Tom Stevens spends time in the boatyard, Ben Meakins barely missed a beat all winter... and David Pugh still hasn't emerged from the shed!

Sailing through the winter



Unable to leave the wet stuff alone, Ben Meakins donned his thermals and stayed afloat

We came out of the water begrudgingly and very late this year. While most boat owners began to look to their winter lay-up period, we carried on sailing. From October to December the gales raged during the working week, but as weekends approached, the wind relented and our crew, a motley collection of sailors of all trades, from a warship designer to a journalist and everything in between, raced every Sunday in light airs.

To begin with it was sunny, and we sailed in shirt-sleeves. As the weeks went on, the decks in the morning got icier, the layers of clothing increased and the wind got colder.

On Hallowe'en we sailed in thermals, hats and fleeces. Our spinnaker trimmer wore two pairs of gloves upwind. The temperature reduced, and with it, the amount of slime we needed to scrub from the boat's bottom at 8am.

And so to the final race in early December, when a freezing winter fog descended and we couldn't even see the pin end of the start line. The committee started the race using radar and we had no idea of our position until the fog cleared and we found ourselves briefly in the lead. But the season wasn't over yet.

Later, as snow crippled the country, we kept on sailing, and spent a convivial family New Year huddled inside a snug cabin, with Polly and a handful of boats moored in Yarmouth.

And then, in February, there came the final sail on a clear, sunny winter's day. The boat needed to come out – we had to antifoul her, replace the stern gland from a warship designer to a journalist and everything in between, raced every Sunday in light airs.

seemed such a waste. At this time of year, the Solent was deserted, fellow hardy souls out for a sail exchanged cheery waves and the pubs and harbours that in summer are rammed to the gills were nicely empty.

Lift-out day beckoned, and it seemed a criminal shame as the boat was placed on her trailer on a beautiful early spring day that was just perfect for sailing. Now, four weeks later, we're racing the clock to get her back in again, newly polished and beautified. We don't want to miss a minute of this year's sailing season. After all, there's no such thing as bad weather – only inappropriate clothing.

■ PBO's features editor, Ben Meakins, co-owns Polly, a 32-year-old Impala 28, with two friends. They keep her in the Hamble on a sailing club river mooring



Despite the cold, Ben and friends hit the water every winter weekend



Red Dragon outside her winter home – an industrial unit in Somerset

Lamentation to a failed engine



David Pugh's diesel engine is defunct after only 250 hours – and he's not happy

I'm fed up. When we pulled Red Dragon out of the water in late October last year, we were quietly content that, for the first time since we bought her in 2003, the job list was relatively short and we could look forward to a timely launch in the spring.

Alas, it is not to be. The best laid plans of mice and men (or in this case my plans and those of my siblings and co-boat owners Ben and Frances) have gone a-gley. And it's all owing to a piece of equipment whose presence is only tolerated as a necessary evil on a sailing boat in any case – the engine.

After struggling with a tired old motor that was delivering significantly under its rated power, four years ago we decided to bite the bullet and buy a new engine. It was nearly 40kg lighter than the old one and delivered an extra nine horsepower, and we were delighted to find it could push Red Dragon at hull speed in ahead and stop her in astern – two things the old engine failed to achieve.

Imagine our disappointment then, when as we left Poole Harbour for a windless trip across Christchurch Bay prior to the Round the Island Race last year, the engine died and failed to restart. We missed the race, and

further investigation revealed that one of the injector return springs had broken. The dealer replaced the injector and all seemed well, until the engine lost all its oil towards the end of the season.

Back to the dealer, and it turns out that the cylinder bores are so badly glazed that the crankcase pressure pushed the oil out past the big end bearings. For a four year, 250 hour-old engine which has been carefully maintained that seems unreasonable, especially as the repair bill is quoted to be nearly the cost of a new engine. Worse still, we haven't worked out what caused the problem to start with, and no-one with any sense would

spend that kind of money without confidence that the problem won't occur again.

So, lamentably, Red Dragon sits on her trailer in the industrial unit in Somerset where a family friend kindly lets us store her in the winter. I don't know when she'll next go a-roving, but it seems unfair that a lady whose primary pleasure is spreading her wings to a stiff breeze should be imprisoned by a smelly diesel. Maybe we should repurpose it as a mooring weight.

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

Trapper engine trouble, again



Tom Stevens' big project this year has been tackling the legacy of a previous year's project!

All through the winter Oystercatcher, my Trapper 500, was safely laid up in Aldeburgh boatyard.

We are obliged to lay up in November and can't go back in again until April, as the swinging moorings on the Alde are lifted each year for maintenance. This long period gives me excuse to delay the routine jobs such as antifouling until the weather gets better. This results in everything being left until the last minute, when I have a mad scramble to finish before the boatyard lifts her for

re-stepping the mast and then launching – I do mean to be more organised this season.

I try to complete one major project each winter. The previous year saw a facelift for the interior which included making a new saloon table, re-varnishing the bulkheads and finally fitting the oil lamps that I had been given for my 50th birthday, some years ago! My wife, Caroline, also spent an inordinately large sum of money on new crockery, cutlery, glasses, scatter cushions, floor mats and duvets, none of which help keep the weight down for racing.

Two years ago the major project was to re-engine her which, unfortunately, led into this year's big job, as the saildrive unit has

developed a weeping seal. I was horrified to discover, when checking the fluid level in the gearbox, that it was full of emulsified oil. The only way to get the saildrive leg out for repair is to remove the whole lot, as access is very restricted. The engine now sits forlornly in the middle of the saloon waiting to be reunited with its – hopefully – leakproof leg. The only good thing has been the chance to clean the engine space.

I've ordered my antifouling, bought a new handheld VHF and my kids gave me a new CD player for

Christmas, so I am ahead of the game and ready to work – once the weather improves, of course.

But the main excitement has been going on around me rather than on the boat. Aldeburgh Boatyard, which tragically burnt down last Easter, is now well into the rebuilding process. It has been a difficult time for the owner, Peter Wilson, and I'm so pleased that he had the determination to keep the yard, where I have laid my boats up for years, in business. I look forward to all the chatting in the new building!

■ 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



Oystercatcher in Aldeburgh Boatyard, which is being rebuilt after a fire



Stu Davies plans to move Sacha from Pwllheli to Milford Haven

Losing my berth



After a cold winter of fettling, Stu Davies is ready to hit the water. But there's a problem

At last, after one of the coldest winters I have seen in Pwllheli, the sun is peeping through the clouds and it is almost lift-in time.

However, there's still a gloomy outlook for Pwllheli. A few weeks ago one of the PBO forumites, Savage Seadog, tried my pile

regular annual dredging the harbour and marina in recent years – but it may be too little too late as, despite making

profits of more than £700,000, little, comparatively speaking, has been spent on the infrastructure.

Because of the concerns raised by Savage Seadog, a friend and I did a survey of the area with a 2.5m boat hook. We did it at low water, a 1m tide, halfway between Springs and Neaps. As we approached the area, there was a Jeanneau 34 on its side in the supposed deep-water channel. There was only 1m where he was, he drew 1.4m, and he had run aground two hours before low water – in what should be a 24-hour access port of refuge!

My berth was found to be 1m shallower than last October and basically is untenable. The entrance to the harbour has narrowed and there is no longer enough room for two large boats to pass. The tide is now running at

about 4 knots-plus and when the training wall is starting to cover or uncover the tide rushes over it, giving rise to the possibility of a boat being dragged on to it. So, I am now moving to Milford Haven, having tried to get in to other local marinas and failing.

The council had, it seems, left it too late doing the dredging, and the port of refuge is no more. Access is now limited to three hours before and after high water on mid tides, from my measurements. Heavens knows what it will be like on Springs.

Myself and three other boats are moving, because we either can't go on to our moorings or can't

get to the marina at all times due to the lack of depth in the channel. It means a loss to the council of approx £15,000 in mooring fees, and of course the spending that we do on our food etc will be lost to the local economy. On the Bank Holiday weekend, with its big tides, there will be a real danger of accidents caused by the narrowness and lack of water in the main channel. People will not be aware of the dangers facing them.

We are going to attempt a fast passage to Milford Haven at the end of March, and hopefully the weather will be kind to us.

■ Stu Davies has written many practical articles for PBO. He and his wife Laura kept their Bénéteau Oceanis 381, Sacha, on a pile mooring at Pwllheli in North Wales – until now