

Hire purchase

Words & Pictures by Mark Langley

FAR FROM BEING USED AND ABUSED BOATS TO AVOID, EX-HIRE FLEET CRAFT ACTUALLY OFFER VERY GOOD OPPORTUNITIES FOR ANYONE LOOKING FOR A VERSATILE FAMILY NARROWBOAT

In the used boat market, a constant presence is that of the ex-hire boat. A high proportion of boats afloat have, at some point, been in a hire fleet. Many of the hire fleet companies in England and Wales retire some of their boats every year. Bigger fleets may dispose of many boats, while smaller family companies might only sell every few years.

A good ex-hire boat will probably be worth more in the future than a comparative private boat of similar age. What makes hire boats a generally good

used buy is based on the standards of construction and maintenance.

A typical used private boat of 15 years old would have passed through several owners. Its maintenance may have been sporadic, as the owners either lost interest or did less cruising. Many private boats are only serviced once a year – sometimes once every two years, with an oil change in between.

The interior may have had a thorough cleaning every few months, while additions to the electrical system and

other alterations are unlikely to have been professional. Very few boats are young enough to avoid “improvements” being made by their owners, assuming that they were professionally fitted-out in the first place.

The engines are often run off-load, just to charge batteries or heat water, which leads to oil sludging and cylinder glazing. The only time a gas system sees any form of testing is usually during the Boat Safety Examination, which occurs every four years – at which point gas faults are often found. Minor repairs are often overlooked. Many surveyors have horror stories of private boats that they have seen. At this point, a prospective buyer might cast an eye towards the hire fleets.

Compare then, a typical hire boat. The engine is serviced every week, with oil and filter changes carried out on schedule. It is unlikely that it will have been used off-load much and more likely to have been worked quite hard.

The gearbox is likely to be heavy duty, to cope with sudden gear changes, while the ancillary systems (cooling, mounts, etc.) are more robust than fitted to private craft. Gas systems are checked

regularly for soundness and the boat’s electrical fittings likely to be higher rated than those found on most private craft.

The interior is likely to be functional, but pleasing, with hard-wearing finishes. The toilet is often a pump-out, freshwater flushing unit with a shower or hip-bath and vanity unit. The galley will have a domestic-sized cooker, decent fridge (usually electric, but possibly gas powered) and stainless steel sink/drainer.

Berth layouts will be more suited to family cruising than living aboard couples, with a mixture of fixed doubles, singles and bunks, depending on layout. Most ex-hire craft also have dinettes as their main seating, which can then convert to further berths. Storage will also be geared more towards holiday cruising than residential or long term use, often with open-fronted lockers and wardrobes.

The majority of hire craft currently being retired are cruiser stern, although traditional and semi-traditional sterns are gaining ground – these will filter through as they become of an age for companies to retire.

Cruiser sterns are often ideal for families and certainly more sociable;



ABOVE Hire boat layouts are sometimes more functional than pretty



ABOVE Who would know it was an ex-hire boat?



BELOW A selection of some of the ex-hire boats currently being sold

FOR SALE
ALVECHURCH BOAT CENTRE



Fulmar (above) 1989 Alvechurch 45ft, 2 berth cruiser, Isuzu LC38 engine new 2003, CD, dvd, 240v Mastervolt 2000. £34,950
Also: sister boat *Storm Petrel*, plus *Dipper & Robin* (top) 1989 33ft, 2+1 berth cruiser, £22,950

Our view: large, multi-base company, with high quality craft. Substantial fit outs with high specification equipment.

Contact: 0121 445 1133

FOR SALE
EMPRESS HOLIDAYS



Margaret 1996 S.W. Durham Steelcraft, 54ft, 6/8 berth cruiser Beta 1505, 1.5kW inverter, full inventory, £37,950.
Also: *Haley*, sister boat but with Lister engine

Our view: early boats basic but functional; later boats much better fitted. Unusual front galley layout, adjacent to the forward cockpit.

Contact: Herral Brokerage 01270 626098

FOR SALE
OXFORDSHIRE NARROWBOATS



Excalibur (above) 1997 Reeves/Kingsground 50ft, 2/4 berth, Beta 1503, new windows this year, immaculate interior, £43,000
Kelmscott 2003 Colecraft/Heyford Wharf 57ft, 4/6 berth, supersilenced Isuzu 42, Eberspacher ch, two w.c.s, CD, TV, oak & beech trim £48,000

Our view: older boats are ex-Black Prince, newer ones designed to extra high spec by company itself. Further boats available summer 2006

Contact: 01869 340348

FOR SALE
SELBY BOAT CENTRE



Andromeda 1989 TT Marine 50ft, 4/6 berth semi-trad New Isuzu engine and gearbox this year, immaculate interior £37,950
Also: *Pegasus*, as *Andromeda* except for new engine £33,500

Our view: well regarded small fleet in the North. Traditionally fitted boats with pine cabin sides, light laminate deckhead.

Contact: 0870 7490061



hence their popularity in fleets.

Many ex-hire craft have a lot of flexibility for new owners to make alterations, as layouts can suit additions such as solid fuel stoves, free standing chairs, etc., by removing some of the fixed furniture. A quick glance through some of the hire boat brochures will give a glimpse into the range of layouts available, with some companies having further photographs and information on their websites.

WHAT MIGHT YOU EXPECT?

We took a look through a typical, recently retired hire boat built in 1990. This is a sturdy cruiser-stern craft, although with traditional handrails along the cabin top, and is powered by a BL 1.8 diesel engine. The aft deck boards are showing signs of age, as is the paintwork. The boat was viewed during the season, so it had collected its share of bumps and scrapes along the way.

The back deck has steep steps descending to the cabin, with an airing cupboard to starboard (which has the calorifier under), and the gas central heating boiler and wet locker to port. The aft cabin has a corridor to port, although the berth can be a fixed double, or split

by moving one section across the cabin to form two singles, or settees: useful for putting children to bed early. Light fittings throughout are a mixture of simple fluorescent tubes and tungsten lights.

The door across the corridor gives access to an averaged-sized toilet compartment, with a pump-out toilet on a large holding tank, vanity unit and 4ft shower-bath. Forward, a raised, fixed double berth is provided with curtains that can be drawn for privacy, and has considerable storage underneath. The bulkheads and hull-sides are in faced ply, which is quite dark, almost mahogany-like, but which contrasts well with the tongue and groove pine cabin sides and roof.

The galley is set to starboard, with a small work surface, shelves and useful space for a rubbish bin to port. The near-domestic size domestic cooker (the almost ubiquitous Valor Vanette model), sink and fridge, along with high level cupboards give more than adequate storage space. Work surfaces are in hardwearing tiles, although a few were showing the odd crack.

A dinette, with a sensible sized table on removable Desmo legs (which could

be stowed forward against the hull side) provides another double bed. The soft furnishings are looking a little tired, but are still serviceable. Unusually, two loose armchairs make another two single beds across the boat, as the forward 6ft of the saloon has no fixed furniture. Right against the forward bulkhead, there is a TV/stereo cabinet to port, with a storage unit opposite.

After the boat had been sold, the new owner, like many buyers of ex-hire craft, decided to fit a solid fuel stove. This replaced one of the corner cupboards, and also required the removal of one armchair for safety!

The pump-out toilet had been removed, the new owner preferring a flushing Porta-Potti toilet and a repaint had occurred to the outside. Otherwise the boat was much as we saw when it was a hire boat, giving the owner lots of pleasure for cruising.

FINDING A SUITABLE BOAT

Most hire companies retire craft at the end of the season (usually October onwards) and they may not advertise, relying on ex-hirers or word of mouth. Some companies will take reservations and deposits for boats at the beginning of

the season, with the owner collecting in the autumn. Others may not decide which craft to release until the summer. Big concerns like Evesham Marine, with many ex-hire and shared ownership boats to sell have special end of season open days for viewing.

It is worth contacting hire companies either in the spring or towards the end of August, in order to find a suitable craft. Although many will reply to email, a written letter or a phone call often gets a quicker response!

If you are able to choose a boat in the spring, it might be worth hiring it for a week or two, out of the main season, just to be sure that it is the boat for you! It may pick up little details that can be sorted before you take over the boat or that you could have the company alter for you.

A number of boats in fleets are sponsored boats – they are owned by individuals and leased back to the hire company in return for a share of the income. Many of these are on around five year contracts, making up most of the younger boats that are retired. This means you usually buy from the private owner, but with all the advantages of a company maintained boat.

BELOW LEFT A functional but still attractive hire boat interior

BELOW RIGHT Bunk beds, often with extending bottom bed are typical

BOTTOM LEFT Dinette seating converts to another double berth

BOTTOM RIGHT Expect to find a clean engine bay like this

CB

THINGS TO LOOK FOR

ENGINE

- n Clean, tidy bilge with very little oil in the drip tray
- n Open the weedhatch and try to wiggle the prop shaft. A loose shaft may indicate a worn bearing
- n While in the weedhatch, feel the propeller. Is it badly chipped or bent?
- n Is the rudder blade aligned? The rudder stock should not wobble in the bearings either
- n When the engine runs, does it start easily? Once up to temperature, is the exhaust relatively clear? (Blue or white smoke is not a good sign.)
- n Does oil pressure gauge show above 20psi? Below, when hot, is dubious!

INTERIOR

- n Are there any traces of water damage to the bulkheads around the shower
- n Unevenness in floors may suggest damage to the floorboards which can be difficult and expensive to replace.
- n The cooker and fridge should not show much damage and be clean.
- n Check inside lockers and under fixed berths. A musty smell may mean lack of ventilation and possible rot.
- n If there is an access hatch into the cabin bilge (often under the rear steps) check for water ingress (from shell condensation) or corrosion.
- n Don't forget that a professional, out-of-water survey is the only way to make sure that the boat is sound and free from major defects.

CONCLUSION:

Prospective buyers are often put off ex-hire boats, thinking they are run into the ground with a limited lifespan left. This may have been true of some companies 20 years ago but now boats are very well maintained, often retired younger and are built robustly from the start.

A good analogy would be ex-fleet cars, which, despite high mileages, are very well serviced and provide good value. Most hire companies are only too pleased to have enquiries from buyers – and remember that most also fit-out craft, to the same high standard, for sensible residential buyers.

If a company can build a craft which can take 25 novice crews a year, over many years, without suffering much wear, then the boats they produce can easily take the punishment of family

ABOVE A waterwheel supplies the canal at Lordings

FOR SALE
SHIRE CRUISERS



Buckingham 1991 Colecraft/Shire 48ft, 4/6 berth, cruiser Lister TS3 engine, gas c.h., pine & ash fit-out, £27,950

Our view: two base fleet, with very good record of return hirers. traditional fit outs, sturdy Lister air-cooled engines, bomb-proof equipment.

Contact: 01422 832712

FOR SALE
TEDDESLEY BOAT COMPANY



Katrina 1994 Canal Craft 47ft, 4 berth, 47ft trad Boxed-in Lister 3cyl engine, 1.5kW inverter, £43,500
Also: Natalie 1999 John Horton 6 berth trad, Lister 4cyl £59,000

Our view: Well regarded top-end family hire fleet. Hulls have great lines, engineering standards very high, 230V fitted, very quiet engines

Contact: 01785 714692

