About the Author
Duncan Wells is an RYA Instructor and Principal of Westview Sailing. When not on the water he's also a voiceover actor and an after dinner speaker.

Could you sail her in?

You turn the key in the ignition and all you hear is a click. The batteries are flat and with no crank handle you've no power. You could call for a tow or you could sail your boat back to the marina. Duncan Wells shows you how – with no engine, no outside help, just you, the crew and, of course, the sails.

1 The berth we used for the wind ahead of the beam manoeuvre

2 Well fendered

When we sail into a berth without a usable engine, we can't give her a handy burst of astern to stop her, so we need to be sailing into the tide to help us brake. We must then surge off any momentum with a line to the shore ***Pic 1***.

Preparation

The boat needs to be well fendered in case something goes wrong, so we'll need four fenders at pontoon height down one side and, assuming that there's another boat in the adjacent berth, another 3 or 4 fenders at gunwhale height on the other side ***Pic 2***. We had a look at the ways in which we might be able to stop the boat. As ever I'm looking for short-handed techniques – we're not racing boats with half a dozen testosterone-filled heavies who could each stop a boat with their bare hands – and looking at all the options, I came to the conclusion that the good old spring, which is usually favourite for any berthing exercise, was again the best choice.

How to make a spring

Take a line, slip a piece of plastic tube over one end and form a loop with a bowline ***Pic 3***. Take the other end and feed it through the centre of a centre cleat on your boat. No centre cleat? Move a genoa car on the sheet lead track to the midships position and feed the line through. Then run the line back up to a winch in the cockpit. Leave this line – the spring – with a couple of turns around the winch, but don't feed it into any self-tailing jaws at this point ***Pic 4***.

We'll use just one sail to effect the manoeuvre. If the wind is forward of the beam this will be the mainsail and if the wind is abaft the beam it'll be the headsail.

Wind forward of the beam – mainsail

Here it's a question of matching the power of the sail, which is a result of the amount of sail you use, and the strength of the wind with the strength of the tide. Ideally you want to be going just ½kn faster than the tide you're heading into, so for a 1kn tide you need to be going at 1½kn through the water. You also need to know that you can de-power the main when you need to lose way and stop. It's worth checking this in the river or more open water before committing to the run into your berth.

Line up your boat at the same angle to the wind as you estimate you will get in your berth and see if you can de-power the main. If the wind is strong it may be sensible to scandalise the main by raising the boom with the topping lift, which takes the power out of the sail ***Pic 5***.

Fully battened mains don't scandalise totally, because the battens prevent the boom from rising much above 40º from the horizontal. Again, you can try this out in open water where you'll have room to manoeuvre to see how much power you have and how much control. Then it's a question of briefing the crew and »

3 Plastic tubing tied into a bight for the spring line

4 Spring line with two turns around the winch

5 The main topped up and scandalised

Sailing in – wind forward of the beam


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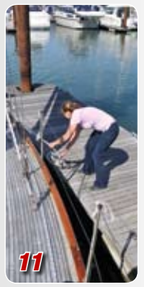
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Pic 6 **We turn in from the river up the fairway between the pontoons.**
Pic 7 **The wind is abaft the beam at this point and we must avoid getting too much way on.**
Pic 8 **Turning in.** ***Pic 9*** **Lined up for the berth.**
Pic 10 **Jacqui has stepped off with the spring.**
Pic 11 **The spring is on and we will stop.**

Pic 12 **The main is giving us drive, exactly as an engine would, and is holding us against the pontoon with just the spring in place.**

making the run in, remembering to keep your speed to no more than half a knot over the ground ***Pic 6, Pic 7, Pic 8, Pic 9, Pic 10, Pic 11.***

Once we're attached to the dock by the spring and the boat is stationary, we can power up the main to hold the boat in position against the tide. If we don't have any power in the main the tide will simply push us back out of the berth until we get the dock lines in place, but it is quite possible to hold the boat comfortably against the dock with the one spring and some drive in the mainsail ***Pic 12***. The main is doing exactly what an engine would be doing. We have control.

Briefing the crew

Whether we're coming in under main or headsail, we want a member of the crew to place the spring on the first cleat on the pontoon as we approach. This can be done with the crew on the boat or, as we did when the crew stepped off – no jumping off please – and placed the spring on the cleat. Another crew member needs to stand by to surge the spring and take the way off the boat without jerking her to a stop, which might take the cleat out of the pontoon. That's why we don't jam the spring in the self-tailing jaws of the winch. For wind forward of the beam, the main can be played by the helmsman. If the wind is strong, he may need a member of the crew to help, although with stronger winds we would scandalise the sail to reduce power, which might mean it could still be played by the helmsman. With wind abaft the beam, a crewman needs to handle the headsail furling line and the halyard for hanked on sails. The crew member who places the spring onto the pontoon cleat can handle the sheet, because the headsail will be furled before we arrive at the berth.

Sailing in – wind abaft the beam


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Pic 13 **We were able to glide for some distance without any sail power.**
Pic 14 **The berth we used for wind astern – our berth.** ***Pic 15*** **Turning in from the river and the run up the fairway.** ***Pic 16*** **Not too much speed now.** ***Pic 17*** **Headsail away, the final run in.** ***Pic 18*** **Jacqui steps off with the spring.** ***Pic 19*** **Jacqui places the spring round the cleat – we will stop.** ***Pic 20*** **Holding her against the tide and against the pontoon with the headsail and the spring. The wind angle pushed the bow in, kicking the stern out. Workable but not elegant.**


20

Wind abaft the beam

The key here is not to go too fast. A heavy displacement long keeled boat will glide forever. Flat bottomed, short fin keeled boats tend to lose way quicker. Whichever style of boat you have, you can always check how much overrun you get out in open water by furling or handing the headsail and seeing how quickly you slow down. We found that we could lose the headsail someway off ***Pic 13*** and still be going quite fast enough when we arrived at the berth ***Pic 14, Pic 15, Pic 16, Pic 17, Pic 18, Pic 19***.

I've never been a fan of having my lines handled by anyone on the shore, however well meaning they may be, because I invariably end up with them in control of my boat, which is not what I want. A couple of times while sailing into the berth under headsail, berth holders hurried to assist. I hope they weren't too offended when we refused their offers of help. After all we were conducting the exercise to show how we would do it without help. On the day we had a crew of three: Duncan Kent took the helm and Jacqui Wise and I crewed. In the conditions we had, one could have run this with a crew of two without too much difficulty. We tried to see if we could hold the boat against the pontoon with the headsail and, while it did hold us against the tide, just, most of the effort went into pushing the bow onto the pontoon ***Pic 20***. Unless the wind is practically astern, the headsail is not really going to hold you onto the pontoon in the same way that a main can with wind forward of the beam, so having arrived under headsail and stopped with the spring, we set the bow and stern lines up fairly promptly before attaching a back spring to stop us being pushed out of the berth by the tide. It's worth trying as an exercise and it's a tremendous boost to your confidence to know that you're not totally reliant on your engine and that you can get home without troubling anyone. Try it first with the engine switched on, just in case – and with plenty of fenders.

Don't forget that we're keen to look at some of the issues faced by our readers, so if you want to be involved, please contact our Production Editor, elizabeth.paine@sailingtoday.co.uk. We don't have all the answers, but you never know, we may be able to help.