

Refreshing woodwork – a winter project

Winter is a great time to clean up those bright finished wooden items that can be removed from the boat such as cabinet doors, washboards, hand rails, and so on. The stable, warm conditions in our houses are well suited for this purpose, while giving us all a good dose of boat therapy when our steeds lie shivering under their winter covers.

In removing the items for maintenance, take careful note of how they are installed, treat the fasteners with care to avoid damaging the wood substrate, and observe the condition of the mounting holes. Any looseness in the holding should be addressed prior to remounting. In solid timber, this can be done by drilling out the damaged hole and inserting a properly sized hardwood dowel with a dab of epoxy or cyanoacrylate (CA) glue, then cutting the plug flush with a sharp chisel once the adhesive has set. The mounting hole can then be re-drilled to renew the holding power of the screws.

Inspect the finished surface. Is the existing finish intact? Are there areas of peeling finish and/or exposed wood or is there moisture damage? Is there damage to the wood itself? Each of these will need to be treated before refinishing. If the surface is intact, you are in great shape: simply sand the surface until it is uniformly dull with 220 grit sandpaper, clean thoroughly and wipe down with white spirits or methyl hydrate (check for compatibility with the finish first!), then wipe with a tack rag before applying the new finish.

If there is peeling or flaking finish, it is best to strip the existing finish to get uniform, robust results. The application of heat (with a heat gun) and judicious use of a sharp scraper is an effective way of doing this, followed by chemical stripper and steel wool to remove the residue, and finally a good sanding to provide a smooth, even surface. Sanding should be done with a soft sanding pad flat on the surface to avoid creating unevenness in the underlying substrate, and avoiding excess pressure in any one area. Greying or water-stained areas can be rubbed with a Scotchbright pad. If this still does not clean the area, the application of oxalic acid is an effective way of bleaching out the stain without affecting the wood's natural colour. Be careful however to read and follow the safety and use instructions, and ensure that the acid is well neutralized when the bleaching is finished.

Dings and scratches should be repaired before refinishing. Minor dings can be simply ignored, providing a certain aged patina to the object, built up with varnish and sanded flush, or filled with a mixture of epoxy and wood flour. In the latter case, remember that the filler will not absorb the finish in the same way as the substrate – some experimentation may be required to get the match right. More significant dings are best addressed with a spline or a dutchman (patches of matching wood, carefully let into the surface with a router and a sharp chisel). Well done, these are less visible than the filler, and exude good craftsmanship to boot! Obviously, any repair must be carefully faired into the surrounding surface.

Once the surface has been restored, a final sanding with 150 grit paper, followed by vacuuming, wiping and a tack rag will prepare the surface for varnish. Choose a good quality marine, or spar, varnish. These products provide good moisture and UV protection, and are sufficiently flexible to accept the natural swelling and shrinking of the wood without cracking. A soft-bristled brush should be used to ensure a smooth finish. The use

of a quality foam brush also provides good results and has the added advantage of being disposable at the end of the work. In either case, maintain a wet edge, and stroke into the wet edge to eliminate the bridging at the joint. Apply sparingly to avoid drips and runs, especially around corners and edges. Follow the manufacturer's instructions to the letter. The first coat should be thinned up to 50% with the recommended thinner to ensure good penetration of the wood, enhancing the bond to the wood. Subsequent coats should be thinned progressively less, with the final coats applied full strength. The addition of a small amount of thinner or flow additive in the last coats may be required to ensure good flow and leveling qualities – some experimentation will help establish what works best for your situation. The surface should be lightly sanded to a uniform dullness with 320 paper between coats, with wet sanding used between the final coats and carefully wiped clean and dry before recoating. When sanding, take care not to burn through the previous coat, especially on the fragile edges and corners – a light touch is needed! When refinishing an existing varnish in good condition, two coats should be adequate. When re-finishing, eight coats should be considered a minimum; additional coats will give you a deeper, richer finish, and provide enhanced UV protection.

Finally, stand back and admire your handiwork. The appearance of clean, crisp well maintained bright work is worth the effort, reflects pride of ownership and enhances the appearance and value of your vessel.