

# Modern teak decks – the truth hurts

Shipwright Robin Benjamin explains that modern decks can have a few problems

**I**n the last 15 years I have worked on more teak decks than I care to remember. I think I've seen every problem that exists. What you have to know straight away is that, like anything, teak decks need looking after. If you take care of your decks they may last 20 years or more, if you don't you'll be appalled at how awful they look after only half a decade. Because solid teak decks have been the norm for hundreds of years they have understandably earned a serious reputation for longevity. Today's teak decks are not the same thing at all.

In most cases modern teak decks are little more than a quick way for the manufacturer to up the 'class' of their product. They are poorly fitted, the wood is too thin and the caulking gap is usually too

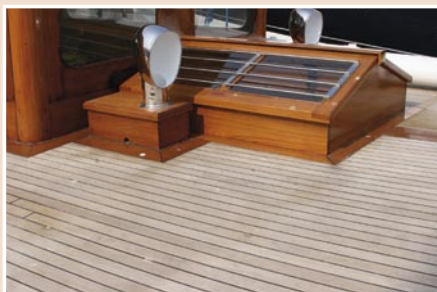
narrow. Because of the minimal amount of wood involved the best plug on the deck might only be 3mm deep. Likewise, the caulking, unless of adequate depth and width, will not remain glued as the wood moves. However, all these problems would amount to little if folk were advised on teak deck care. The most important advice is to wash the deck every week but few people can spare the time. It's quite simple however: if you don't wash your deck regularly it will soon go grey and dirty.

Do not scrub your deck. I've seen it done: the owner is standing there, his trouser legs rolled up, his knees red. True, his deck looks great... from the pontoon. If you look carefully you'll see grooves in the planks where the softer areas of grain have simply vanished. This is how it starts. Consider

that you began with a lovely smooth surface, like a CD if you like. After a scrubbing it looks more like an LP but worse. Much worse. Imagine now how quickly the 'peaks' will wear down as you walk on them. Of course it doesn't end here, this is only the beginning.

If you must have a clean deck then there is only one way, and that is a gentle wash with nothing more violent than a light detergent and a large sponge or very soft brush. If you do this regularly you will not wear down the teak, but you will wash off the dirt before it gets ingrained. Dirt contributes to the wear on a teak deck. If this approach doesn't work then you can try oxalic acid. Dissolve some crystals in warm water, do not breathe the vapours and make sure you wear gloves. It burns. ▶

## OLD TIMBER DECKS VERSUS THE MORE MODERN ONES



▲ Elegant teak decks have adorned high class yachts for hundreds of years – but they are very thick



▲ Even more modest pine decks have stood the test of time because they are made of quite thick planking



▲ This is what one modern teak deck looks like after only five years of regular cleaning and sanding



► Do not scrub. Rinse well. Oxalic acid should not harm anything on the boat except your skin. There are plenty of products that do the same thing but cost a lot more. If acid doesn't bring back the colour then there's only one thing left to do if you want a lovely looking teak deck, and that is to sand it. But if you want my advice: continue to wash it carefully and often, with soap, and live with the deck not looking its best.

For some reason no one listens to me. I gladly advise people on how to look after their decks for free, even if it means I don't get any work. It's better for everyone, except me, that you take my advice. Yet despite this I still see people scrubbing their teak. I shake my head in wonder. Did I not explain what would happen if they scrubbed? 'But it looks so great!' they say. 'So what's the problem?' The problem is that the next time they see their decks they will look grey and dirty again. The only difference will be that there is less teak than there was before. If your feet don't wear down the peaks then they'll fill up with dirt, making it look even worse. There's only one way to get it out – more scrubbing. This time you'll have to scrub harder to see a result. Can you see what's happening? There will come a point soon when you decide the decks are looking pretty rough and need a good sanding.

### Crosshead

Boatyards are very keen to do this work for you and why not? Next time you see the boat it will look great and they know you'll be back, because soon the caulking will start to roll out in long spaghetti-like strips and the plugs will fall out, exposing the screws and making water ingress all the more likely. Now you've really got a problem. The plugs are not too much trouble but there will be hundreds to do. The real problem is the caulking. Just because some of it comes out really easily does not mean that it will all be like that. No, some of it will be sticking just like the manufacturer intended. You can make a special scraper to remove it but inevitably you will slip, damage areas and, even worse, you will enlarge the groove. If you're really lucky you might be able to use a router for about 35% of the deck, but routers are vicious and it's all too easy to make a mistake. Even a small enlargement of the slot will look terrible. Not only that but you'll need a curved guide to run the router along for



New decks get sanded to get everything finished nice and flush – but it's not a good idea to repeat it too often

each slot. This takes ages. Bad enough if you're doing it yourself, but it's unbelievable if you're paying a yard. Specialist tools exist but they are hideously expensive and it's only the specialist yards that are likely to have such a tool. Unfortunately they will be charging by the hour and there's always a lot of work on any teak deck.

So what are the options now that your deck is worn out? You can't just remove it, because underneath it will be horrid. If it was laid properly in the first place they will have keyed in the surface and that means a grinder on a plastic boat. You'll still have to cover the decks to hide the mess. You can

use Treadmaster which is a very good surface and lasts as long as teak if it's glued down properly. It might be cheaper but it's not a teak deck. You can lay an artificial teak deck. The trouble is, it's not the same, is it? There is even a special decking you can buy that appears to be made of sand and crushed stone in a nice terracotta colour. You lay it like teak, with caulking and all, but it doesn't look like teak either.

Personally I would choose epoxy and cloth-coated decks covered in non-slip deck paint for a wooden boat and the standard non-slip pattern on a GRP boat. Both are easy to clean, practical, hard wearing and keep the boat cooler down below in the heat of

## THE GOOD THE BAD AND THE UGLY



▲ As the decking is very thin, the plugs over the fastenings are even thinner and can lift if the glue fails

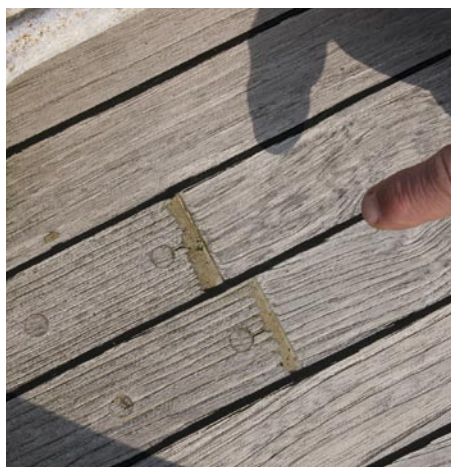


▲ This plug seems to have a problem. It could be loose and holding moisture, or the fastening is corroding



▲ Covers over vulnerable varnish work makes sense but a complete cover will protect more than just the deck





▲ Even old style decks can have their problems. Here, to avoid butt joints, the planks have been scarphed together and after many years the feathered edge started to lift. The owner simply fixed it with epoxy.



▲ This thin timber decking has lost its caulking compound and the corner is starting to deteriorate

summer. Also, I believe that laid decks on small craft can make them look a bit fussy. Other than painted decks there appears to be no realistic substitute, which is a real shame since teak is a tropical hard wood and that means it's taken decades to grow and is probably not being replaced.

So I hope you can see that I'm advocating care and prevention for your lovely teak deck. To just leave it uncared for is an outrageous waste of a precious resource. If that isn't enough to make you care for your deck, then consider the cost of replacement. Teak costs approx £3000 a cubic metre. But you'll need a lot more than you think, because just cutting down a big plank to

size wastes a hideous amount of wood. The cost of the teak is a large part of the final bill. Basically you can quadruple the price of the teak to take into account the cost of first measuring and photographing the original deck to insure everything fits properly, the cleaning up of the surface underneath and finally replacing the wood. To do the job properly you may have to remove the chain plates and that means dropping the mast and completely readjusting it afterwards. Not only that, but all those deck fittings that haven't been touched for years will need to be removed and in the process, don't be surprised if many of the bolts are hell to remove or break in the process. It's possible that some of the bolts were made specially or have been glassed over. You'll need somewhere to do all this, perhaps it's possible to make a good cover but even this adds to the cost. The alternative is to put the boat in a shed somewhere. Anything is possible but it always costs. Replacing a teak deck is a massive job. To replace the decks on a 30ft (9m) boat is six weeks work. Three months for a 50 footer. We are talking about many thousands of pounds and your boat out of action for a while.

There are other considerations before you decide on a teak deck. They weigh more, the caulking is surprisingly heavy, not to mention the wood and the thousands of screws. Perhaps what worries me most about laid decks on glassfibre boats is that you have to make thousands of holes in an otherwise perfectly waterproof surface to hold the deck down. Many fibreglass boats' decks are balsa cored, that is to say, the deck is made of two layers of fibreglass with a layer of balsa wood in between. Balsa wood will not last long if it gets wet, yet this strikes me as very likely. The law of averages suggests that, the chances of making 2000 holes in a deck and all of them staying waterproof for years on end is pretty slim. What happens when the balsa has rotted away? I don't think making thousands of holes in a deck is wise, and it's possible to lay a deck without screws – but it takes

longer and therefore costs more.

So let's sum up. Teak decks are nice to live with and they look good. On the down side they are expensive, add weight where you don't want it, soon look dirty, are vulnerable to red wine and sun tan oil and can get so hot in the summer, down here in the Med, that you cannot walk on them. So what can you do about it? For my money I'd choose the standard non-slip deck that comes with a fibreglass boat, or an epoxy cloth coating on a wooden yacht. I might have teak in the cockpit, but basically I do not consider a teak deck to be a sensible thing these days. In days gone by teak was the obvious choice, but things have changed. Teak comes from tropical rain forests and we all know that deforestation is contributing to global warming – but still yachts are sold with teak decks.

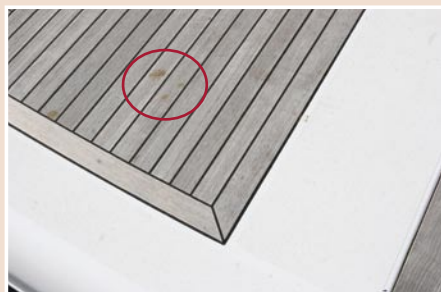
Sadly the whole yachting world is convinced that teak decks last forever and need nothing more than a good scrub once in a while to 'keep 'em looking good'. This is simply not true.

On the one hand I am thankful for owners and teak decks since they allow me the life I lead, but on the other I am angry at the waste of it all. People could save themselves a lot of time, inconvenience and money if they just took care of their

**I can only do my bit. I can't change the world and I can't change fashion, but I can tell you the truth**

decks. And for some reason no one wants to spend money on 'posh' covers to protect their boat. Covers are 'initially' expensive but they will repay their cost several times over. Not only will you not be required to replace your decks but you'll be able to sell your boat for more because it has obviously been well looked after. It's not just teak decks that will benefit from protection, plastic windows, instruments and gel coat will all last longer if kept out of the sun, wind and rain. The Grand Canyon was created by erosion from the elements. When you think like that, surely you can understand why I recommend covering up.

I can only do my bit. I can't change the world and I can't change fashion, but I hope I can slow down the damage by telling the truth. So now you know.



▲ Stains from oil and ferrous metal can be very awkward to remove – try oxalic acid



▲ Teak decking certainly looks good when it has been looked after – but keeping like that is the problem



▲ Artificial teak is not the same as the real thing but it is very easy to lay and can just be cut with a knife