

# Wood finish MED UPDATE



Continuing from last month, *Richard Hare* unveils the latest results and observations from our high-hazard Med test

Our Med test involves subjecting test rig 'pass' products to the corrosive environment of the waters off Ionian Greece. Furthermore, they have been applied to an iroko lower rubbing strake close to the waterline where they are splashed even in light to moderate conditions.

The Ionian has a particularly high salinity and for six months of the year there's penetrating UV to contend with, too. In the winter – if they can last that long – finishes have to endure prolonged rainfall. This region has more annual rainfall than the UK – it just falls in one half of the year.

The primary damage is done during the summer when strong sunlight and corrosive salt will prise and

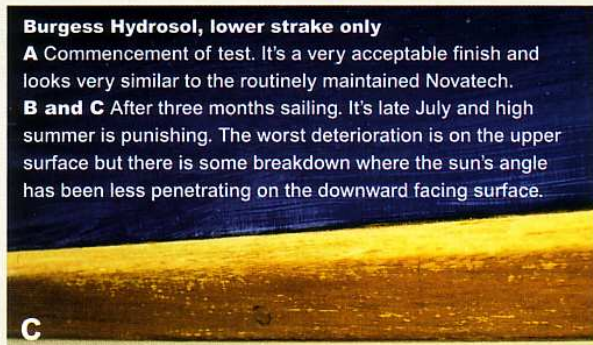
erode our finishes away from their substrates. This damage is then exploited by rainfall and damp during the winter. It's so extreme, it's cruel.

We don't expect our products to last anywhere near as long as they would in, say, the Baltic (low salinity and UV) – or even on the English east coast where our test rig is located. However, it has been interesting to see how three products have coped so far. One finding has been that, in some cases, it's the salt that causes the most damage, not the UV.

We've assessed the products after three months' sailing, then again after a further three months in the boatyard. In some cases we've been able to judge them for a full year.

## Do it in autumn

Woodfinishing is always best done at the end of the season when the wood is dry and the breezes warm and drying in the Med. This particularly applies to impervious systems like varnish and 2-pack. Otherwise, the job will be far worse the following spring when the wood is wet, the air damp and the wind chilly. A boat cover will help, but how often do we hear of boatfolk who don't make it into the water until June "because of the weather"?



**Burgess Hydrosol, lower strake only**

**A** Commencement of test. It's a very acceptable finish and looks very similar to the routinely maintained Novatech.

**B and C** After three months sailing. It's late July and high summer is punishing. The worst deterioration is on the upper surface but there is some breakdown where the sun's angle has been less penetrating on the downward facing surface.

## THE RESULTS

### WATER-BASED WOODSEALER Pass+\*

Despite the microporous Hydrosol being a test rig pass – and no doubt a good performer in a northern European sea environment (weak UV/low salinity and plenty of rain) – about 40 per cent of it had worn away after only a 2½-month trip around the Peloponnisos. Had we tested it on a lake or an inland waterway it would almost certainly have lasted longer. It would have lasted longer still in less exposed situations above the gunwales – on coamings, grabrails and hatches.

It's a product that appears to be more affected by salinity than UV. I have seen it used on a Maurice Griffiths boat in the South of France. The salinity here is not as corrosive as in the Ionian and the owner was happy to keep on top of the job during the season. With Hydrosol, this is very easy to do.

It's a very practical, useful and cost-effective product that offers ease of maintenance and an excellent shelf life – we just need to be mindful where we use it. A suitable place for

its application would be on classic workboats – smacks, bawleys, barges – none of which I imagine would have used high-gloss varnish traditionally.

### EXTERIOR WOODSTAIN (High solids) Pass+\*\*\*

It is above the gunwales that another microporous product, Novatech, continues to perform very well. Alas, it, too, didn't cut the mustard on the lower strake, although it performed better than Hydrosol. We did apply three coats, though, as opposed to Hydrosol's two. Although its outward and downward facing surfaces performed OK, the upper facing surface of the strake (the one that faces into strong sun and accumulates the most salt) broke up.

Away from the waterline it continues to perform well, delivering at least a year's maintenance freedom. Furthermore, the dregs of a four-year-old tin can perform as well as a freshly opened can. Shelf life is excellent, as is ease of maintenance.

So, it's a very useful, cost-effective product – we just need to be mindful where we use it. As with Hydrosol, a good application for it would



## ■ PRACTICAL WOOD FINISHES MED UPDATE

PRODUCT	Re-coating (1)	Application (2)	UV resistance (3)	Salt resistance (4)	Maintenance (5)
Alkyd varnish	Annual	Moderate duration/easy application/ low cost	Moderate	Superior/Good	Quite prolonged/low cost
Organic varnish	Annual	Moderate duration/easy application/ low cost	Moderate	Likely to be Good/Good	Quite prolonged/low cost
Water-based exterior woodsealer	Annual	Quick/very easy application/ very low cost	Moderate	Good/Poor	Very quick/very low cost
Oils	2-3 months	Can be prolonged/ sometimes fussy and complex/ costs vary from high to low	Virtually none	Not known	Very frequent/cost varies
Exterior woodstain (solvent-based)	Biannual	Fairly quick/ easy application/ very low cost	High	Good/Poor	Quick/very low cost
2-pack (Skippers)	Annual	Very quick/slightly complicated application/moderate cost	Moderate	Not known Likely to be Superior/Good	Very quick/high cost
PU (Coelan)	Biannual, possibly more	Quick/slightly complicated application/ high cost	Likely to be high	Likely to be Good/ not (yet) known	Infrequent/potentially expensive

### Criteria notes:

- (1) CB's 'real life' recommended maintenance cycle, based on temperate conditions, excluding damage touch-ups. Treat as a minimum. Without prejudice and for guidance only.  
 (2) This has a bearing if there are time constraints or if you're paying someone else. Profile based on: duration of application/ease of application/cost.  
 (3) Consider this if you use your boat in strong and persistent sunshine.  
 (4) This has a bearing if you use your boat in fresh (or low-salinity sea water) or high-salinity sea water. Profile based on: normal conditions/high salinity conditions.  
 Bear in mind that anything above the gunwales will have so little exposure to salt that it is virtually irrelevant, particularly if there's periodic rainfall.  
 (5) Profile based on speed of maintenance/cost of remedial work.



**D**



**E**



**G**



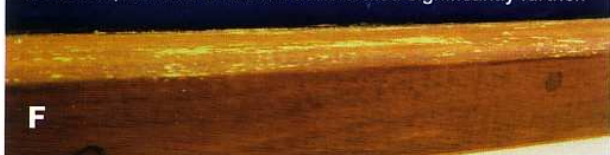
**H**

### Novatech, lower strake only

**D** Commencement of test.

**E** After three months sailing. Although deterioration has occurred to the heavily exposed upper surface (combined strong UV and salt), there is very little damage to the lower surfaces.

**F** After a further three months in the boatyard, taking the full brunt of the sun, the strake has not deteriorated significantly further.



**F**

### Brand new Hempel conventional varnish

**G** On commencement.

**H** After three months of sailing. There were very few incidents of damage and this was the worst. It was exacerbated by fender rub.

**I** After a further three months in the boatyard the damage had not deteriorated further.



**I**

be on classic workboats and it is certainly good enough, aesthetically, for all but the most refined wooden yachts. It comes down to personal taste. I use it extensively on my own Golden Hind 31, not least because she doesn't have a boat cover and she's left to fend for herself in whatever the elements throw at her for nine months a year.

We know that microporous (breathable) finishes (Novatech, Hydrosol) are superior in damp/wet climates and have a high degree of UV resistance, but they appear less effective in conditions of high salinity. So long as we don't tempt fate they will deliver years of cost-effective service and easy maintenance.

As with Hydrosol, we can't recommend it for below-gunwales use in the Med although we know it's fine in temperate zones.

### CONVENTIONAL ALKYD VARNISH Pass+\*\*

One of the test rig varnishes was applied to find out what happens when a tin of 'pass' product opened 2½ years previously is used periodically for a bit of tiller touching up. Although it had begun to go a bit gluggy when used, after being thinned with a splash of spirit it seemed usable.

For comparison, we bought a brand new tin of the Dutch Hempel conventional varnish. Hempel owns Blakes and we

have been assured that the product is the same as Blakes conventional varnish.

The difference in performance between the two was astonishing. The strake that had the old varnish on it became very degraded after three months at sea. Meanwhile, the Hempel-finished strake remained largely unaltered after three months at sea and three more months in the boatyard. Isolated damage – all minor – occurred mostly where the fenders rub, but not exclusively.

It's worth noting that the damaged area of Hempel did not worsen in the intense 'full-on' sunlight while in the boatyard.

This type of finish appears to have both good resistance to UV and a much better resistance to salt than either Hydrosol and Novatech, but repair was inevitable at the end of the six-month season. This view is supported by the performance of the varnish-coated tiller.

The thing about varnish is that we have to repair it as soon as it begins to break down – and if we do that, it isn't too difficult to maintain. It is not as tolerant of complacency as the microporous systems. Maintenance at the six-month juncture was minimal.

We recommend the varnish for use below gunwales, even in the Med.





*"We put on the top coats when we are at anchor"*



## THEY WEAR IT WELL

The unforgiving sun of the Mediterranean is both the bane and the boon of classic-boat skippers and owners who look after boats with acres of brightwork. Keeping the varnish looking good requires constant vigilance... then again, varnishing in a climate like that, where you can often apply two coats a day, is less of a challenge.

The standard varnish used for many classics is Epifanes, with the high-gloss UV filter version being cited as good.

"It's a constant job really," Mat Barker, owner of *The Blue Peter* (CB152), says. "I probably do it five times a year. The main three or four coats go on during the winter, then during the

*"It's amazing when you think of the work that goes into it"*

## PRACTICAL WOOD FINISHES ■

season we'll put another three on. You get used to it; whenever you stop you varnish something like a hatch or a rail. And we go out and put on the top coats at anchor, to avoid getting dust in the varnish.

Peter Woodd, of *Cometa* (CB197), agrees: "It's amazing when you think of the amount of work that goes into keeping the varnish looking good, and it does look brilliant, especially with all the boats together. But it does take hours and hours every year. And you can't get it wrong... you prepare, then you wash down, then you use a rag and spirit. And you learn stuff, like to put your plastic pot for varnish inside another pot, so you don't get any drips on the deck. And you wear rubber gloves for the same reasons. You can't really varnish



west of St Tropez; it's too dusty and there's too much wind coming down from the mountains in the hinterland. We varnish in Cannes, which is good, and quite dust free."

## Varnish for Nereis

Apropos of nothing (to do with the Mediterranean) we bring readers' attention to a polyurethane clearcoat varnish that we were pleased to find in our store cupboard last November. With work cracking on apace on *Nereis* (right) we needed to attend to her brightwork, but the weather, in late autumn, was hardly conducive to varnishing. The season may be all about mists and mellow fruitfulness but too much moisture in the air can make varnish cloudy... and we were going to a boat show. But Uroxsys Marine Aliphatic, from Auckland, New Zealand, is moisture curing, which gets around that problem.

With surfaces clean and back to bare wood it was a pleasure to apply the four coats that we deemed necessary for a good level of finish. One of the aspects of the coating

*"One apparent aspect of the coating was its elasticity"*

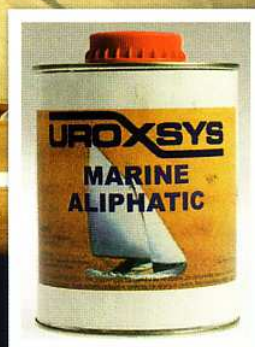


that became apparent was its elasticity. The little left in the cup (or whatever we were using) can be picked out when dry and it feels like polythene. It's malleable and has some degree of stretch. Uroxsys say that it will stretch

some 50%, which is nowhere as good as Coelan's avowed 300%, but it does bode well for timber boats where there is some movement of the wood. Cited coverage rates are 8m<sup>2</sup>

and drying time is an initial one hour (you have to decant enough varnish for a 30-minute application). This means that multiple coats can be put on in a day. The final cure time, though, is set at seven days.

Well, we were chirruping with joy at the idea that we could get a half-decent, nay snazzy, finish in the depths of winter. The shed would have had temperatures around 4° and 5°C. And we are pleased with the results so far. The boat was comprehensively climbed on at the show, and



With just four coats the Uroxsys Marine Aliphatic sets off the teak well

has been moved twice; so far there is not a scuff mark to be seen on her brightwork.

It's early days for the development and manufacture of the varnish and so far the company does not have a European distributor. David Waddingham, for Uroxsys, says he expects the product to retail at £30 a litre, giving a coverage of £12.50 per square metre at a recommended six coats. We will report on how the stuff fares after its first season.