

# All tied up



What are the best knots to use when tying up a narrowboat? What's a spring line? We visit Willow Wren Training to 'learn the ropes'...

WORDS AND PICTURES BY **MARTIN LUDGATE**

**B**asically, there are only two knots you need to know for canal boating. Well, that's what Steve Vaughan at Willow Wren Training reckons. Okay, a couple more are useful at times but, when it comes to the basics of mooring, two will suffice.

Some boaters may be surprised to hear that neither the clove hitch nor the round turn and two half hitches feature in Steve's preferred duo. But he explains that those knots can tighten to the point that they can't be untied easily and quickly – unlike his favoured pair.

Both of his knots are used to tie the mooring lines back onto the boat. For security from being cast adrift, instead of tying off on the bank it's better to run the rope around the bollard or ring (take an extra turn around the bollard, if you're worried it might slip – or be lifted – off the top) and tie it back on the boat. That way, if anyone's going to untie you, they may need to get on the boat – and that can be a significant deterrent.

The first knot is what Steve calls the T-stud hitch. Most narrowboats have a T-stud at the bows, so this is the knot for mooring the front of the boat.

Run the rope round the T-stud, take a complete turn around it, make a loop with a half-twist in it, and slip it over one end of the 'T' (see pictures). And if you're worried it isn't secure enough, put another loop around the other end of the 'T' – but as Steve demonstrates (and on his courses he'll use a boat with its engine in gear to make his point convincingly), even with just a single loop, it isn't going to slip.

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And (unlike a clove hitch), however tightly the boat's movement might pull it, the loose end remains free, so it can be untied easily. And if necessary, (say if the water level has risen, pulling it really tight) it can be let off gradually.

The second knot is the boatman's (or lighterman's or canalman's) hitch. It's the one you use when you're tying to a dolly rather than a T-stud – so typically ▶



Mooring with a spring line

**T-STUD HITCH**



1. Take a turn around the T-stud



3. Put the loop on one end of the 'T'



2. Form a loop with a half-twist



4. A loop on the other end is even safer

'A trick to help prevent pins pulling out is to use two, at opposing angles, with one pin through the loop of the other'

it's what you'll use for the stern line. It starts the same: you take a complete turn around the dolly – but then you take a loop, pass it underneath the rope, put a half twist in it, slip it onto the top of the dolly, and turn the loose end of the rope round the dolly. It may sound a bit complicated, but see our diagram. It has the same virtues as the T-stud hitch – it will hold, it won't pull too tight to untie, and you can slacken it gradually. Now, we mentioned earlier that the clove hitch isn't one of the top two – but it's one of two other knots that can be useful. Steve recommends it for tying a spring line – and before we go any further, we'll explain what that is. Simply tying a boat up with bow and stern lines leaves it with a tendency to move back and forth when craft pass. This will not only rock the boat but, in time (especially if you've had to tie on mooring pins), can work the ropes loose. Sure, in an ideal world every passing

effect) and it wouldn't be an issue but, in the real world, a spring line can control the fore-and-aft movement. The idea is that, as well as running the bow line forwards from the T-stud to the bank, you also run a line backwards – in fact, it'll probably be the end of the same rope (and for belt-and-braces security, you can do the same at the stern). Unless you're really spoilt with lots of bollards, you'll probably need to secure it on a mooring pin – and if it's an old-fashioned one without a loop, this is where the clove hitch's tendency to pull

**BOATMAN'S HITCH**



1. Take a turn around the dolly



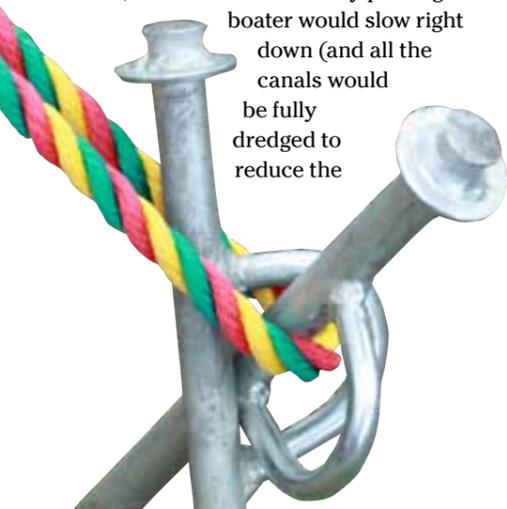
2. Push a loop under the rope



3. A half twist and slip it on the top



4. Turn the loose end round the dolly



boater would slow right down (and all the canals would be fully dredged to reduce the

tight is a virtue. Even if the pin pulls out and falls in the canal, the rope probably won't slip off it. And getting it undone is no problem – just slide it off the pin. By the way, a trick to help prevent pins pulling out is to use two, hammered in at opposing angles – with one pin through the loop of the other – and the rope through both (see picture, bottom left). A fourth knot that Steve uses is the bowline – that's the one where (in the time-honoured description that many will remember from Scouts and other youth groups) the bunny comes out of the hole, runs around the tree, and goes back down the hole. It's a good knot for

**BOWLINE**

'Steve reckons, when it comes to synthetic fibres, polypropylene has one advantage over polyester – it floats'

tying a loop around your waist – and, therefore, for throwing to a person who's fallen in. Steve recommends that you tie it loosely around your own waist, to make sure the loop's big enough. But that isn't its only use. Steve also recommends it for single-handing through locks (especially wide ones). You wouldn't use your usual mooring knots which are intended for tying up tightly against the bank, but you don't want to risk losing the boat by not tying up – so drop a bowline over a bollard. So much for the knots – what about the rope? Steve reckons it's a personal choice, but when it comes to synthetic fibres, polypropylene has one advantage over polyester – it floats. And regarding thickness, again it's the boater's choice – but under 14mm could cut your hands, while over 16mm gets heavy to throw. And how long? For a typical narrowboat Steve favours 10m at bow and stern, and 12m for the centre line. The trouble is, the centre line is then long enough that if it trails in the water it could foul the propeller. On the other

**CLOVE HITCH**



1. Make a loop



2. Make a second loop, same way up



3. Put one loop over the other



4. Slip them both over the pin



1. Put it round your waist, make a loop



2. Bring the loose end up the loop



3. Run it round the back of the rope



4. Push it back down through the loop

hand, holding it on a bollard in a wide lock will often need something like that length. In fact, to get round that problem, he suggests two different-length lines. He also suggests two bow ropes – but for a different reason: if your boat has a cratch, it's sometimes tricky to reach the rope from the bank if it was last used on the opposite side of the boat. And if you have just a single rope, lay it out so that you can grab it from either side. We finally come to a few 'don'ts', and the first thing he warns against is stopping a boat using the centre line. Firstly, being attached to the roof, it will rock the boat; secondly, it's not usually as

well anchored as the bow and stern lines. Next on the list is coiling the rope the wrong way – if you coil it loosely in your hands and it forms figure-of-eights instead of nice flat coils, you're doing it wrong. Always coil it clockwise. Next, Steve describes three ways of risking getting into trouble if there's an unexpected tug on a rope while you're holding it on the bank: firstly running the rope around your arm; secondly putting it around your waist; thirdly holding the coil in the same hand as the rope. Finally he warns against what he calls the 'Titanic Hitch'. Yes, it can be a good idea to run the loose end across to the far dolly and tie it off again (so that it's harder to cast adrift), but some boaters seem to believe the boat isn't tied up unless you've used up all the rope! It sounds a lighthearted note to end on, but Steve finishes with a word of caution – if the next boat was on fire, how quickly could you untie and get away? 

**WILLOW WREN**

Steve Vaughan is Chief Instructor at Willow Wren Training, a long-established business which now operates out of a newly-built training centre at Nelson's Arm on the Grand Union at Stockton in Warwickshire, using its own purpose-built training boats. See [willowwrentraining.co.uk](http://willowwrentraining.co.uk)