

The Continuing Tales of Skipper Keith – the three ended rope conundrum

So it's 2021 and it's been a few years since I put pen to paper as it were but today I must share my yarn.

Unfortunately my current yacht a Hunter 232, Caramel Sutra, is still not ready to be launched after tipping over in the storms of Feb 2020. So having helped the club crane in the yachts last week I was itching for a sail. I persuaded George Henderson, Skipper of another Hunter called Mistoffolees, to go out for a spin so we could brush off the cobwebs and re learn the fundamentals and all the names of the various parts long since forgotten

We got off the mooring and started to head out the harbour. Having unzipped the lazy Jack cover and connected the mainsail halyard the sail went up but stuck about half way. This is where the communication got difficult as between us we could barely remember the names for the various lines and their functions. Shouting back to George "could you release the rope that's attached to the thingy" was met with a look of confusion; nonverbal communications in the form of finger pointing seemed on help though.

We got there and it turned out that the two reefing lines (the names eventually came to us) were too tight. Skipper advised that expert club racer George Scrivener had connected the lines up for him and had said they might need some adjustment! Problem overcome we loosened off both lines and the mainsail went up. Playing about with the boom halyard (also referred to as a 'thingummy' for a while) and the shock absorber shaped thing under the Boom Vang we eventually got a good shape to the mainsail.

Next we released the foresail without much fuss, engine off and we were sailing proper.

After a while I thought it only fair to give George the helm, it was his boat after all. A while later I was looking at both reefing lines and remarked that I thought they were set one notch too high. George said that even in high winds he hadn't actually used them. We agreed how much fun it was when the boat heeled over in strong winds. I pointed out that whilst I completely agreed with going for the thrill the purpose of reefing the sail down was to stabilise the boat, make it safer to sail and it would go faster being more upright instead of being blown sideways. I almost impressed myself with my apparent knowledge.

Having sailed about a bit the wind died down a little so I suggested I loosen the main and drop the two reefing lines down a notch and that would be a good job done.

Now I had been looking at the reefing lines and noted the set up was different from my own Hunter with the reefing lines going through eyes on the front and back (luff and the leech as I later remembered).

Now pay attention and stay with me here because this is where it gets difficult to explain what then unfolded. Please feel free to fetch a pen and pencil and draw this one out as I had to - but in my head.

I undid one end of the first reefing line which was tied on the underside of the Boom furthest from the mast. I pulled it through and dropped it down a notch and re secured it. The other end having gone through the sail came down and through the inside of the Boom and emerging mast side. I then went forward to the mast and followed the same reefing line from the Boom as it went round a block up the sail, through the eye and down the mast where the second end was tied off.

Now I have to say to many with the knowledge that this wouldn't have been an issue but it certainly confused me as both ends of the rope were tied off. I simply could not understand how this operated especially as I thought both reefing lines had been released from the clutches mounted on the coachroof.

I asked George how he released or tightened the lines to which he said he really didn't use them but they would have been one of the lines coming through the clutches. At that point I really was confused and asked George to acknowledge that one end of the line was tied at the foot of the sail at each end of the Boom. He agreed and we tested this by pulling them. I stated, as if it needed to be stated, that a rope can only have two ends, one at each end. George agreed. I then stated that he had apparently released the lines by releasing the clutches on the coachroof and he agreed. At this point, more to myself than for George's benefit, I said "but that's three ends and unless you are a magician you can't have a three ended rope".

George appeared less concerned by the three ended rope revelation than I did. "It'll no matter I don't use it much, it's always been like that. I can always look at it later." But no George, no, it absolutely does matter, you just can't have a three ended rope. I am not a creationist and I just cannot accept that it is just how it is. It was wrong, it had to be explained or my head would explode.

Baffled I followed the line from the tied end at the mast up the sail through the eye back down the sail round a block inside the Boom out

the far end up and through the sail eye and down to the Boom where the other end was tied off, two ends so how could this be released or tightened from the clutches that would mean a third end and that's not possible.

Fearing insanity I decided to trace the second reefing line. Luckily this line was bright red so was easier to follow. Tied off at the mast it also ran up the sail through the eye back down the other side round a block into a side slit in the Boom and away to the far end. But what witchery was going on as when it emerged at the far end it wasn't red it was white with a red and blue fleck. Surely a different line but when I pulled this the red line moved, why on earth would anybody splice two ropes together when there was no need. Anyway this line continued up the sail through the eye back down and as with the other reefing line was tied off underneath. Despite the colour change that's still two ends tied off each side.

It then dawned on me that the bright red line at mast side travelled back along the coach roof and through a clutch, a third end, but that just can't be!!!!. I followed it back towards the mast and noted it went into the rear of the Boom, I glanced up at the red line coming down from the sail and going into the side slit. What on earth was going on, this was genius or madness and it felt like the latter, three ended ropes like a three way tug of war it just wasn't possible.

I discussed my confusion with the Skipper who to be fair was content to just accept that it was what it was as long as it worked and indeed it did work. I however couldn't let it go I had to understand or sailing would never be the same. I don't have blind faith I was taught to challenge to gain understanding.

The clue had to be with the colour change of the rope, why would you splice a rope together when there was loads of it? Then with great relief the answer to the three ended rope conundrum was revealed when I peered into the inside of the Boom with my phone torch light. Hidden inside was a Block. It wasn't a single line with three ends, it was two different ropes connected to an internal block to allow pressure to be applied in both sides of the sail.

I know to some of you with greater sailing knowledge this was obvious but I cannot begin to describe the sense of relief this revelation brought.

Skipper George hadn't quite grasped the level of trauma this anomaly had caused me but he was chuffed the reefing lines were adjusted. At that and both content we dropped the sails and headed back to the mooring.

Definitely a voyage of discovery.