

What to look for when purchasing a second hand Drascombe by Tim Pettigrew

The following notes are based on my experience with a GRP Lugger but many of the checkpoints will apply to other boats in the Drascombe range. The checklist concentrates on the structure of the boat and ancillary equipment such as sails, trailer and outboard have been omitted.

What are the main options?

So you have set your heart on getting a Drascombe, have decided on which kind you want and that available finance excludes the possibility of purchasing a new boat. Drascombes are incredibly durable boats and hold their value well, but as with any other second hand commodity, the newer the boat the more expensive it will be. The options can be summarised as follows:

Option one - Look for a boat between about two and six years old

You will pay more for this option but significantly less than for a new boat. Both boat and trailer should be in good condition and require a minimum of annual maintenance to keep them in first rate sailing/running order.

Option two - Look for an older boat

The obvious advantages of this option are a cheaper asking price and a larger number of boats to choose from. The disadvantage is that it is more likely that the boat may need a considerable amount of maintenance/repair to bring it up to spec. You need to evaluate how much work is required and how much it will cost, as it is possible that it may be cheaper to purchase a newer boat or to wait until a boat of similar age but in better condition becomes available.

Are you able/willing to restore a Drascombe?

If the boat is cheap but needs a lot of restorative work, have you the resources and expertise to do this? Some prospective Drascombe owners are prepared to devote many happy hours and take infinite pride in restoring grossly neglected boats. I was most impressed by one owner who was restoring a Lugger that had suffered the unspeakable fate of being used as a garden pond and had to be drained and dug out before restoration could commence!

What you should be aware of with an older boat

- 1. Buoyancy** It should be noted that older boats (unless they have been modified), will not comply with the current European CE directive on buoyancy, and a swamped boat may be impossible to bale dry without beaching or calling on external assistance.
- 2. Gelcoat** Gelcoat is the shiny coloured top layer of protective polyester resin, which protects the underlying glass laminate of the decking and the hull. If the boat has been well looked after and kept under cover when not in use then the gelcoat can look immaculate - even on a 20 year old boat. However, if the boat has been kept outside with no protection from the sun over any length of time the gelcoat will have faded, lost its gloss, become 'chalky', and brittle. This will be particularly noticeable on exposed deck areas where even small impacts or flexing stresses will have caused the weakened gelcoat to have cracked and

crazed. As well as being unsightly, the cracks allow water to penetrate into the underlying laminate, which is one cause of the dreaded osmosis (gelcoat blistering). If trapped water is repeatedly frozen by winter frosts, disintegration of the laminate (de-lamination) can occur.

- 3. Painted GRP** On some boats the gelcoat may have become so weathered, cracked, scratched and faded that it is not an option to repair it. To restore something like the original finish the only course of action is to abrade the surface and then apply an Epoxy paint system. It should be fairly obvious if a boat has been painted in this way. Properly painted boats can look immaculate but need regular re-painting to maintain their good looks. The following notes are based on my experience with a GRP Lugger but many of the checkpoints will apply to other boats in the Drascombe range. The checklist concentrates on the structure of the boat and ancillary equipment such as sails, trailer and outboard have been omitted.

Sources of second hand boats

These fall into the categories of professional brokers and private vendors. One of the advantages of purchasing from a broker is that a refurbishment service may be offered. By mutual agreement, any noted defects can be professionally repaired with a corresponding adjustment in the purchase price. This is particularly useful for would be purchasers who are unwilling or who lack the necessary DIY skills to do the restorative work themselves.

Viewing a possible purchase

Get as much preliminary information as you can about the boat and its condition by phoning the vendor. You can then decide whether it is worth travelling to make an inspection. Enquire about the previous history of the boat and how the present vendor acquired it. On most, but not all Drascombes, a serial number is stamped on the bronze stem head from which the date of manufacture can be deduced. If there is no obvious number then the vendor should be asked if there is any other documentation which could verify the age of the boat. On the day of the visit arm yourself with a torch for exploring nooks and crannies and a small screwdriver for prodding suspect areas such as rotten wood, de-laminated GRP and loose fittings. Also take some heavy-duty polythene sheeting or similar which can be spread out on the ground beneath the trailer to provide personal protection when crawling beneath the boat to inspect its nether regions.



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What you should expect from the vendor

The viewing should preferably be in an outdoor situation so that the boat can be examined in daylight without any access restrictions. The vendor should make every effort to comply with your request to look at the boat in detail, which might include, for example, the removal of the floorboards and the teak centreboard case capping. Ideally some sailing should also be included but if this is not practical, there should at least be a

demonstration of rigging the boat so you can see at first hand the state of the spars, running and standing rigging, the condition of the sails and how everything fits together.

Detailed Examination

The following checklist is not exhaustive but includes the most significant areas in terms of difficulty of repair/ refurbishment. After checking out all the features you should be in a position to weigh up the pros and cons in respect of the asking price, and make a reasonably informed decision whether to purchase or not.

GRP 1 General

Gelcoat condition has already been mentioned. Look out for impact damage (typically evident as cracks radiating out from the point of impact), bulging cracked areas, which may indicate de-lamination of the GRP or makeshift repairs using filler. Look at the bottom of the hull as far as is visible to see if there is any evidence of impact damage.

GRP 2 Mast steps

Movement of the masts under load when sailing can cause significant wear and tear of the GRP mast steps, particularly in the aft step supporting the mizzenmast. It would be embarrassing to say the least if, on your first sail, the mizzenmast suddenly subsided through the rear decking.

GRP 3 Centreplate trunk

The GRP centre-plate trunk takes a considerable amount of lateral stress from movement of the steel centre-plate, particularly when sailing close hauled. With the floorboards removed, look along the base of the trunk on both sides for evidence of stress crazing in the GRP. Likewise check the GRP trunk supports for stress cracking. Any cracking in these areas would count as a serious structural defect. Enthusiastic raising of the centre-plate can cause it to strike the top of the trunking with considerable force. With the Teak trunk capping removed, inspect the GRP top of the trunk, towards the back for cracking caused by plate impact.

Woodwork 1 Teak Fittings General

The teak may have weathered to a silvery grey colour. There is generally no problem with this as it is skin deep and sanding followed by coating will restore pristine appearance - if required. Much more serious are splits caused by impact damage; Teak is expensive to replace and, due to the oily nature of the wood, difficult to repair.

Woodwork 2 Rubbing strakes/gunwales

Check the rubbing strakes (gunwales), particularly if they consist of several lengths of teak scarfed together. The scarfed joints can exhibit failure along the glue joint. The strakes should also be firmly attached along all their length to the GRP of the hull.

Woodwork 3 Transom board

This most distinctive feature of the larger boats in the Drascombe range consists of curved laminated teak. Check for splits at each end of the board and for any sign of de-lamination. This is an expensive item to replace or repair.

Woodwork 4 Centreplate trunk cap

Usually secured by stainless self-tapping screws into the underlying GRP of the trunk. Check for damage caused by the steel centre-plate impacting into the back of the slot. If there is also impact damage from the shackle attached to the centre-plate arm then this could indicate a loose pivot allowing the arm of the plate to swing down at a lower level in the trunking (See centre-plate pivot check below).

Woodwork 5 Rudder Trunk Capping

Check for splitting of the teak along the grain induced by movement of the mizzenmast.

Woodwork 6 Outboard motor mounting board

Check for serious splitting of the teak. If the boat is in excess of about 15 years old then the bolts (two ring bolts at the top and two conventional bolts at the bottom) securing the teak outboard mounting board to the boat are suspect. If they are the original galvanised steel bolts then, although they may look fine on the outside, the combination of water interacting with the natural corrosive organic compounds in the wood will almost certainly have severely corroded and wasted the bolts within the board and they will need replacement. The consequences of failure of these bolts under power could be catastrophic. Although not practical to remove and inspect them, it is worth asking the vendor if they have been recently replaced. Many owners replace the galvanised bolts with A4 grade stainless steel bolts.

Woodwork 7 Spars

The spars are normally made of Sitka Spruce. If the varnish is in poor condition check the exposed wood for weathering (prod any dark coloured areas with a screwdriver for softness indicating wet rot). Check for obvious splits in the wood, which could cause the spar to fail under load. Particularly check the base of the main and mizzen as the mast steps or sockets tend to fill with water so that the spars are standing in water for prolonged periods. Without regular varnishing the water can enter the exposed end grain and cause wet rot and extensive splitting of the wood. The mainmast chafing against the teak mast support is another potential area of wear and weathering. Sight along the spars to see how straight and true they are. If the gaff jaws are wooden then check for splits or other damage. On newer boats the jaws may be made of galvanised or stainless steel which should be firmly screwed to the wood of the gaff. The bumpkin can get a lot of knocks, check its general condition and also the condition of the wooden socket (if applicable) to which it attaches on the after deck. This socket should be firmly bolted in place.

Woodwork 8 Floorboards

The floorboards should be removed for inspection top and bottom. There may be considerable variation as regards design and in the wood used in the construction. At the more expensive end they may be made of teak or mahogany. More typically they will be made of pine in which case they will be particularly prone to weathering and splitting unless well maintained and varnished. Check to see if the underlying crosspieces, holding the main planks together, are firmly attached and not split by screw or copper nail fastenings.

Woodwork 9 Keel Plank

Typically a keel-plank, made of Iroko hardwood, is screwed and bolted into a recess running along the bottom centreline of the hull. Two slots pierce the plank, providing access for the centre plate and rudder. The keelplank takes most of the weight of the boat when it is beached and also on the trailer so is therefore prone to wear and impact damage. If possible crawl beneath the boat to inspect the plank and also inspect the slots for the rudder and centre-plate. Is the plank loose (can you move it)?

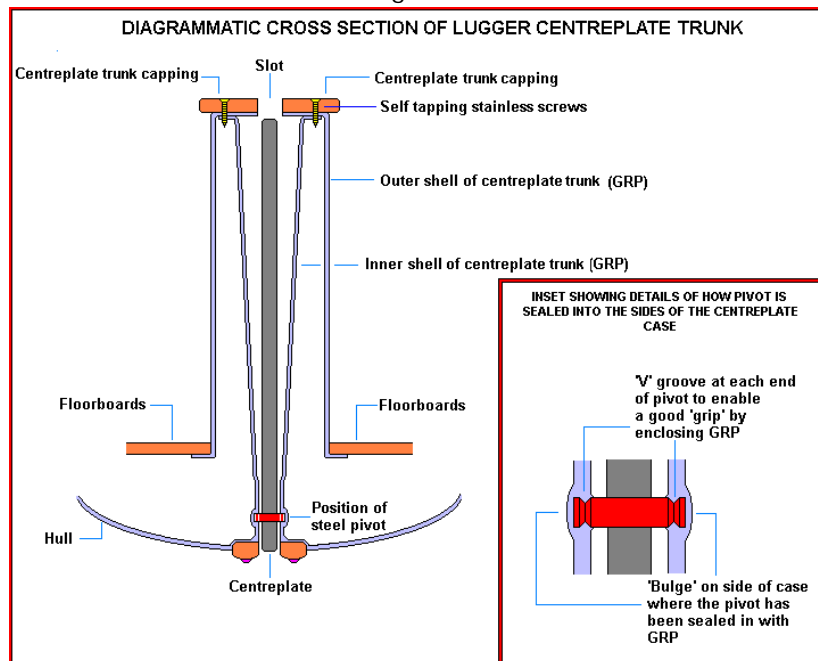
Metalwork 1 Centre-plate

If the boat is old it is likely that the galvanising on the centre-plate will have corroded away in places and the mild steel will have rusted. The crucial area to examine is the leading edge of the plate as this is constantly immersed in water when the plate is raised or

lowered. I have seen an example of one plate that looked immaculate along the top edge but was completely eaten away by rust along the lower edge.

Inspection is difficult but the easiest option is to crawl beneath the boat with a torch where, depending on the design of the trailer, it may be possible to see the edge of the plate by looking up into the slot in the keel plank. If the galvanising looks sound in this area then it is likely that the rest of the plate is OK.

Figure 1



Metalwork 2 Centreplate pivot

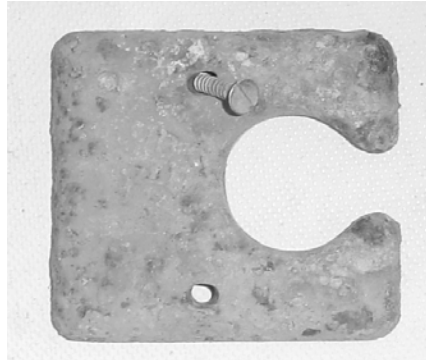
This is a crucial area of inspection but difficult of access. On some early Luggers the pivot consisted of a bolt passing right through the two sides of the centre-plate trunking. On later Dabbers, Luggers and Longboats, the bolt was superseded by a 12 mm diameter stainless steel pivot cemented within the GRP of the trunking. The condition of the pivot is usually not a cause for concern. It is much more important to check that it is still firmly cemented in place. Remember that the centre-plate is often inadvertently used as a 'depth sounder' and as such will almost certainly receive some hard knocks. These impacts are transmitted to the pivot and, in time, can loosen it so that each time the heavy steel plate is raised or lowered the pivot will move with it. In turn this will wear away the supporting GRP and allow the pivot to work down towards the bottom of the trunk. Eventually this will allow the loosened pivot to drop out of the trunking leaving the plate suspended solely by the up-haul tackle. Test for a loose pivot by:

- Removing the teak centre-plate trunk cover
- Slackening off the centre-plate up-haul rope
- One person shining a torch between the centre-plate and the side of the trunking so that the pivot is visible.
- A second person pulling up on the arm of the centre-plate
- The first person looking to see if there is any movement of the pivot when the arm of the centre-plate is moved.

Metalwork 3 Rudder bearings

There has been considerable variation in the design of these. On early boats the bearings consisted of long steel plates accommodating a rudder with a fixed blade. On later boats the bearings consist of two square pieces of cast iron with circular cut-outs for the rudder pivot. One of these squares is screwed to the top of the rudder trunk to form the top bearing, whilst the other one is screwed to the bottom of the boat above the keel plank to form the lower bearing. The same design is still in use but instead of cast iron the bearings are now made of cast bronze.

Figure 2 A corroded rudder bearing



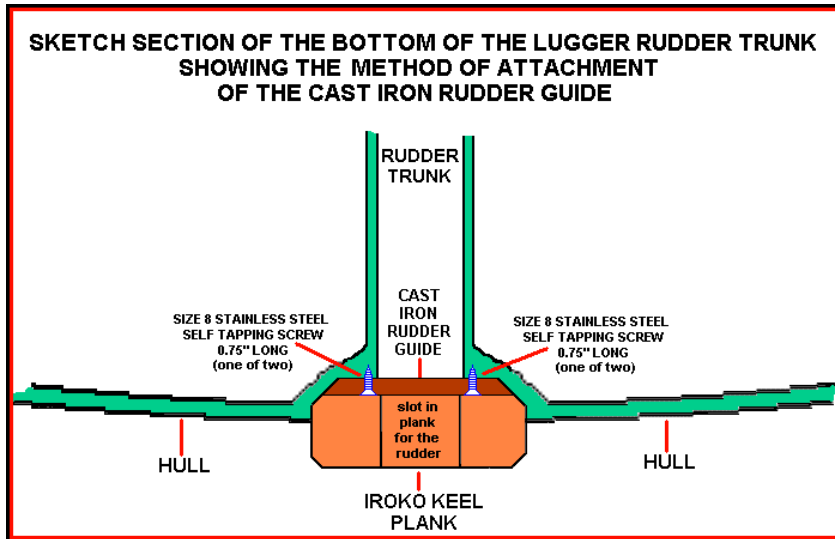
The potential problem area is the lower bearing, above the keel plank. On older boats the cast iron is likely to have badly corroded. If the boat has been used with a fixed rudder then the lower bearing will have taken the brunt of any impacts and it is likely to have become detached above the keel-plank. Test to see if this is the case by crawling beneath the boat and inserting a finger at the forward end of the rudder slot. You should be able to feel the metal of the bearing and it will be easily moved if loose. A loose lower bearing can result in the rudder pivot damaging the GRP of the trunking. It is an extremely difficult job either to re-attach or replace the lower rudder bearing, as the keel-plank has either to be displaced or removed completely.

Metalwork 4 Rudder

This may either have a fixed blade or, with later boats, a kick-up blade, which helps prevent the rudder bending if it encounters an obstruction. Check that the rudder is straight, as a bent one can be exceedingly difficult to insert/remove. Check the condition of the galvanising and that the attachment of the rudder stock to the rudder is secure. Older aluminium stocks can corrode with a risk of the rudder parting company with it whilst sailing.

Metalwork 5 Stem head

The stem-head consists of a substantial bronze casting and is likely to be in good condition. Check that no parts have been broken off or cracked through impact damage and also that the fitting is firmly attached to the GRP/Teak fabric of the boat.



Conclusion

The above checklist covers the principal features of the boat and should be sufficient to enable an evaluation to be made. The checkpoints for a trailer are outside the scope of these notes and deserve an article in their own right.

by Tim Pettigrew

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