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Media Briefing

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1. Warning over 'wet' gas lockers

Owners of older steel narrowboats with heavily-rusted gas cylinder lockers, where the drain allows canal water to wash in, are being warned to keep the gas locker in a sound condition, says the Boat Safety Scheme (BSS).

Work by both of its support committees on the risk of LPG entering the interior boat through the heavily-rusted gas locker has coincidentally found that narrowboats with what is known as 'wet' lockers are at greater risk of sinking, as well the potential for gas to escape into the interior of the boat.

The warning follows information from insurance companies suggesting that in 2007 around 10 narrowboats sank due to water flowing into the vessel hull through deeply rusty and holed locker sides or bottoms.

Graham Watts, BSS Manager said;
 'Whilst searching for gas incidents, the information we were given brought into focus the increased risks on older narrowboats with gas lockers that flood through the drain when the boat is at rest or underway. These are not unusual on narrowboats built in the 1970's and 80's.

'Whilst there were no records of gas escaping into boats through rusty gas lockers, the potential is still very real as leaks at the cylinder joint are not uncommon,' he added.

The reports identified two common sinking scenarios;

- Very rusty or holed locker steelwork where the rust and holes were hidden from view, for example where timber plinths had been inserted in the bases of 'wet' cylinder lockers;

- poorly repaired locker steelwork, where ‘wet’ lockers had obviously previously been identified as being in very poor condition, but where the inadequate repairs failed to stop water flooding the vessel’s interior. For example, where a thin layer of glass reinforced plastic (GRP) over the holed locker had fallen away.

It may also follow that rusting gas lockers may indicate more problems linked to the age of the boat such as a poor general hull condition, especially at the waterline and around weed hatches. The BSS advises owners to pay attention to this during routine maintenance and survey opportunities in particular.

Note for editors: The approach taken by BSS examiners when making the four-yearly assessment of the condition of gas lockers is to check that, at the time of examination, the potential for leaked LPG to enter the interior of the boat through holes or cracks in the locker does not exist. Ensuring the gas locker continues to be sound remains a requirement after the boat has been issued a certificate. Owners need to keep on top of maintenance schedules particularly in places where there is greater potential for problems.

2. Selecting refrigeration appliances for boats

Anyone who is selecting a new fridge or considering installing a caravan LPG fridge is advised by the Boat Safety Scheme (BSS) to avoid a gas appliance and to select an electric fridge instead.

The advice is prompted by the withdrawal of Dometic (Electrolux) from the LPG fridge market for inland boats and the BSS has not been able to find any other LPG fridges manufacturers providing a product sold as suitable for boat installation.

Current LPG caravan fridge models are designed to be installed within a purpose-built enclosure in a caravan or motor home, sealed from the accommodation space and accessible only from outside of the vehicle, thus helping to reduce the potential for carbon monoxide (CO) poisoning or gas explosions.

The BSS recently found a brand new LPG caravan fridge at risk of causing a fire because the non-standard installation placed the burner flame very close to the boat’s carpet fibres. And because of the home-made extended flue, there was a medium term risk of CO poisoning once rust or other deposits fell onto the burner potentially leading to incomplete combustion and resulting CO.

The manufacturer was also concerned to learn about this installation as it believed that the fridge presented a further risk of CO poisoning because the appliance was not room-sealed from the accommodation space as required by the product instructions.

It is now unlikely that a registered gas installer will now agree to fit a gas fridge in a boat, because there are no LPG fridges sold as suitable for boat installation. Competent

appliance installation is a key safety consideration and DIY gas appliance installation should be avoided.

When selecting a fridge, boaters are advised to follow boat builders and hire operators who have moved exclusively to electric powered refrigeration and there is no doubt that electric units should be regarded as 'the norm' on boats. Anyone buying a new fridge should get the best advice from suppliers so owners select the most suitable electric refrigeration appliances for their needs.

For owners of boats with existing, old LPG absorption fridges, Graham Watts, BSS manager had this advice;

'It's crucial to keep up with servicing and maintenance in order to remain safe from the risk of CO. If the flame on your fridge's burner looks yellow, or appears to be abnormal in any way, you need to have competent advice and not use the appliance until it has been checked over and repaired if necessary.

He added;

'If you have an old LPG absorption fridge to dispose of, please do so responsibly because the potential environmental impact. Usually fridge disposal can be arranged with the manufacturers of the product or the new appliance supplier for a fee. Alternatively try contacting your local authority recycling department for information on fridge disposal in your area.'

3. Solid fuel stoves - a warning to watch out for 'over-firing'

As the cooler evenings set in the Boat Safety Scheme (BSS) and the Solid Fuel Association (SFA) are warning boaters using solid fuel stoves to keep a close eye on lit appliances in order to prevent accidental 'over-firing' incidents.

'Over-firing' is the name given to the stove 'racing away' usually because of an increased draw up the chimney. As the intensity of the fire increases, the flue gasses heat up and get less dense thus increasing the speed of gasses exiting the chimney. When this happens the fire can get hotter and hotter until the appliance glows red and if there is a build up of soot and tar in the chimney, this can catch fire.

If this happens the heat could easily ignite any combustible material around the stove and this could spell disaster if the fire catches. BSS records suggest that this may have been a possible cause of several serious incidents.

The SFA provided several examples that have led to over-firing:

- Whilst taking the ash pan out with the stove still lit and the ash-pan door open, in the brief time it takes to have a chat with a neighbour, the fire can take off causing the heat to build and build. This is because the open ash pan door can quickly allow the draw up the chimney to escalate dramatically;
- Burning logs and wood on an unattended, banked-up fire, can quickly lead to over-firing because the burning behaviour is more volatile than coal especially if

you are used to a particular brand. The unpredictability and related caution also applies for coal or pellets that you are unfamiliar with;

- When the weather is stormy or gusty, a boat in an exposed location is at risk from the wind whipping across the top of the chimney causing the flue gases to be sucked out, dramatically increasing the draw by perhaps two or three times normal, leading to an ever hotter fire and an over-firing event.

The BSS and SFA say that, having understood how easily over-firing can happen, there are just a few straightforward, but really essential steps to help avoid such incidents:

- never leave the solid fuel stove unattended for long periods especially if you are unfamiliar with the fuel being used;
- always use the appliance with the doors closed, including when taking the ash out;
- closely regulate the draw of the appliance by using the air inlet control, and if your appliance has damaged or cracked glass or missing, damaged or inefficient seals get them fixed to add to your ability to control the draw;
- be very cautious about banking up the stove when it's windy outside or strong winds are forecast. If in doubt, feed the fire little and often and don't leave the fire unattended;
- keep the flue swept to avoid a chimney fire in case over-firing happens to you.

Visit www.boatsafetyscheme.com/fire for more information about how to safe using solid fuel stoves.

4. Solid fuel stoves – progress on standards

There is progress at the British Standards Institution (BSI) committee responsible for delivering the proposed standard on the installation of solid fuel stoves on boats. It met in mid-August to consider the preliminary draft of the standard.

The meeting reviewed the draft standards for the design and construction of appliance hearths, flues and the method of securing stoves to cabin floors. Some testing to determine the separation of combustible materials from hot appliances was agreed and is to take place before the standard can progressed to a final draft stage.

Attendees included the Boat Safety Scheme manager and the technical manager of the British Marine Federation (BMF), solid fuel industry representatives and boaters were represented by the Association of Waterways Cruising Clubs (AWCC) nominee.

5. Carbon Monoxide alarm recall

The Boat Safety Scheme (BSS) is alerting anyone with a Jo-El carbon monoxide alarm to check the article and model numbers. The UK supplier is recalling its Carbon

Monoxide Detector Model COA – 001 Article 822611 due to a possible malfunction.

The supplier has issued a recall statement saying it may not alarm in the presence of concentrations of Carbon Monoxide. The possible problem, relates to this model reference only and no other Jo-EI branded goods are affected.

Anyone owning such a unit is strongly urged to remove the unit from service immediately and return it to where the item was purchased, where a full refund will be given according to the Jo-EI Electric Ltd. Further information is available on <http://www.tradingstandards.gov.uk/cgi-bin/newslist.cgi?area=safe> or <http://www.io-el.co.uk/images/JoEI-Recall.pdf> .

The Boat Safety Scheme believes that carbon monoxide alarms can give a degree of reassurance, but boat owners should try to reduce the risk of the toxic gas being produced and use carbon monoxide alarms in a back-up role.

There is further information on carbon monoxide in the BSS leaflet, Avoiding the Silent Threat which is available from the BSS Office (01923 201278) and website http://www.boatsafetyscheme.com/site/Downloads_174.asp

Product: Jo-EI Carbon Monoxide Detector, Article No: 822611, Model COA - 001



Image reproduced from the Jo-EI website.

6. New BSS logo being introduced

The Boat Safety Scheme (BSS) has introduced a new logo incorporating its strap-line and name around the now familiar propeller. The new design was first used for emailing information to BSS examiners, before being used in its general designs.



The new logo offers advantages of space and dynamics in designs and layouts.

Changes to the BSS materials incorporating the new logo will be gradual as reprints and new products appear. It has already been used on a new batch of BSS Certificates, so boat owners should not be surprised if they see it on their craft's new certificate.

Notes for editors

The BSS is a public safety project owned jointly by British Waterways and the Environment Agency. At least 12 other navigation and harbour authorities have also adopted it. The navigation authorities' purposes for the Scheme are to help reduce the risks of fire, explosion and pollution on small craft. This is done by promoting fire safety and pollution avoidance advice to help boat owners keep themselves and their crews' safe as well as regular examination of fuel systems, gas systems, electrical systems and appliances.

Contact at the BSS

For technical and other information about the Boat Safety Scheme, the BSS examination and certificate please visit www.boatsafetyscheme.com , email bss.enquiries@boatsafetyscheme.com or call 01923 201278.