

The Intermediate Powerboat course is a structured learning programme incorporating theory and practical sections designed to revise and build on what you already know, with a strong emphasis on skills out on the water.

When work began in the classroom on day one the first point the instructor made was that the theory knowledge required for this course was similar to that required for a coastal cruising course. So in addition to boat handling we'd be looking at pilotage, passage planning and the knowledge-based work which forms a large part of both the RYA Day Skipper and Yachtmaster courses.

The powerboating scheme is different from the motor and sail boat scheme, but powerboat courses do still share a lot in common with the courses specifically aimed at sailing craft. An understanding of weather, tides, lights, shapes, collision regulations and navigation will generally be required whatever boat you're in.

To start with we discussed that most basic of safety items – the lifejacket. We looked at correct donning, buoyancy requirements, inflation systems and service dates – all things which you might know, or think you know, but it never hurts to recap on.

We also had a look at some flares and watched a video about their use along with another about cold water shock and immersion hypothermia.

Next it was time to revise tides including tidal curves and secondary ports – something which would come in handy later when undertaking our passage planning. Considering what the weekend had in store for us, the weather forecast and interpreting it was certainly a topic to focus our attention.

Slow speed manoeuvring

Later in the morning it was down to the RIB and here we went through the equipment on board such as the anchor,



Before going onboard, essential safety equipment is discussed in the classroom



INSET LEFT The IALA A and IALA B buoyage systems were revised with large graphics of cardinal and lateral marks displayed on the training chart

MAIN Coming alongside a pontoon and learning how the boat feels were part of the syllabus



flares, spare warps and first aid kit. The battery, the bilge pump, the engine controls and of course the engine itself also came in for inspection.

Being an open boat the electrical instruments were all centrally mounted on the steering console and consisted of a DSC VHF, touch screen chart plotter with the switch panel underneath. Again, even though today we were on a RIB, boat systems share a good deal in common so these are checks that should be carried out on any craft. One of our group hadn't had any experience of modern electronic navigation aids, so for him the experience of using a chartplotter was another valuable benefit of going on the course.

Once underway we took turns at the helm concentrating on getting familiar with the boat by coming alongside, picking up buoys, mooring and departing from berths.

Seeing what the boat wanted to do, paying attention to wind and tide and watching your speed were key factors in successful close quarters manoeuvring.

As someone used to conventional throttle levers and cable controls I found the electronic throttle on this RIB very tender. It was also hard to get into the habit of keeping one hand on it all the time, particularly when instinctively wanting to use two hands in tight steering situations. However the instructor insisted that we did this so here was another message to log from the course – namely that if you change your boat be prepared to change your habits too.

DAY TWO

The weather front moves in

Overnight the forecast wind built up with squall upon squall of rain sheeting down. The next day was certainly going to be interesting. The morning started again with some classroom work. Traditional navigation skills are very much the priority and each of us was given a passage plan to prepare. Whether the weather would let us carry out our plans would be another matter, so we also had to factor in points of refuge. Our instructor also showed us some useful open boat navigation

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techniques and this time electronic navigation was included. One was the 'spider's web' drawn on a small scale chart. This is a pre-drawn array of bearing lines drawn on a chart from a common point, with distance rings centred around the same point. Using a chartplotter you are then able to establish your position with just one known reference point.

After studying the charts and almanacs it was time for us to head back down to the boat, this time with our prepared plans – now laminated to keep them waterproof.

Following those plans in an open boat in those conditions was memorable, to say the least. By the time we were doing MOB drills back at the mouth of the river a few hours later my old waterproofs were leaking, my soggy woolly hat was about my ears and my hands were seizing up in the cold. Handling in rougher weather is all part of more advanced training and this was a course about developing boating skills come rain or shine.

Gaining experience

The conditions also helped highlight why the RYA courses are structured as they are: they're designed to build up skills gradually, so you should know your

limitations before skipping any stages. As instructor Sean Vinicombe pointed out: "This course is not just a stepping stone to get another certificate. It is about increasing your knowledge and by the time you get to the Intermediate level you need to have had a bit more boating knowledge to use those drills and skills that you've built up since Power Boat Level 2. It's a bit like when you've just passed a driving test. You don't then think I'm now going to take my advanced driving test – you need to gain experience as a driver before doing that."

One of the things I found is how much you can forget, even if you have done the preliminary courses such as the Day Skipper and Yachtmaster theory. I'd planned to do some revision beforehand but that didn't happen, so when it came to remembering lights and shapes on the course the next day I found the trickier ones just that – tricky.

So the Intermediate Powerboat course is a very useful way to assess your level of competence generally before going straight for the Advanced Powerboat Level.

"For that you need to get a very high level of theory knowledge, particularly as navigating at night is required," Sean explained. "It is much the same as doing your Yachtmaster where you will talk about shapes and lights then all of a sudden everything you've done during the day is going to disappear."

The school had previously told me that people who had done Powerboat Level



Brushing up on the correct use of the boat's VHF radio



Electronic throttle controls were a new experience for David



Checking the ground tackle and learning how to deploy the anchor were also covered

Two then went straight on to an Advanced Course were disappointed when they weren't passed.

"It's all about doing the correct preparation first to get the most out of any course," added Sean. For the experienced mariner or someone who works all the time on the water perhaps you can skip a stage, but the school believes that the Intermediate Course really offers students the opportunity to find out their weak points. I'd agree with that because over time it is just too easy to get into the habit of letting the chartplotter do the work.

Paul Ballington, an engineer who came on the course with me, is also an experienced power boater but said he found the course a very beneficial learning tool. "Part of the reason I came is because

I've not used modern navigation aids. I was brought up in the time of fathoms and Decca." He added that there were two things in particular that stuck out for him. "One was learning about using a 'Spider's Web' on a chart to navigate. That almost seems like an essential skill where marks and nav aids are scarce. The other thing was when we were out near the Bramble Bank deciding whether to go to Cowes or not. Stopping and turning around to see what it would be like on the way back was a great piece of advice. I think it's been a very valuable two days."

NEXT TIME we look at the Advanced Powerboat course learning to handle a powerboat by day and by night