

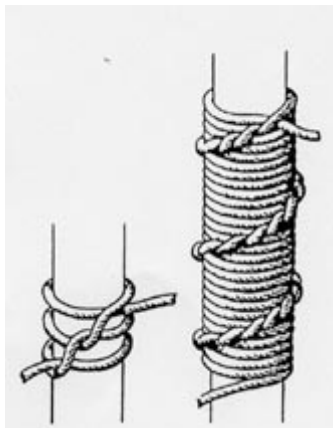
Decorative Ropework - Making a Start

1. **INTRODUCTION.** Why not acquire some of the basic skills of the old sailors and seamen of a bygone age? Several generations of sailors, particularly in the days of the large square-rig sailing ships, acquired remarkable skills in using rope and cord to provide decorative work on board ship. There are some good books available on the art of making decorative ropework and one of the most inspiring of these is *Marlinspike Sailor* by Hervey Garrett Smith.

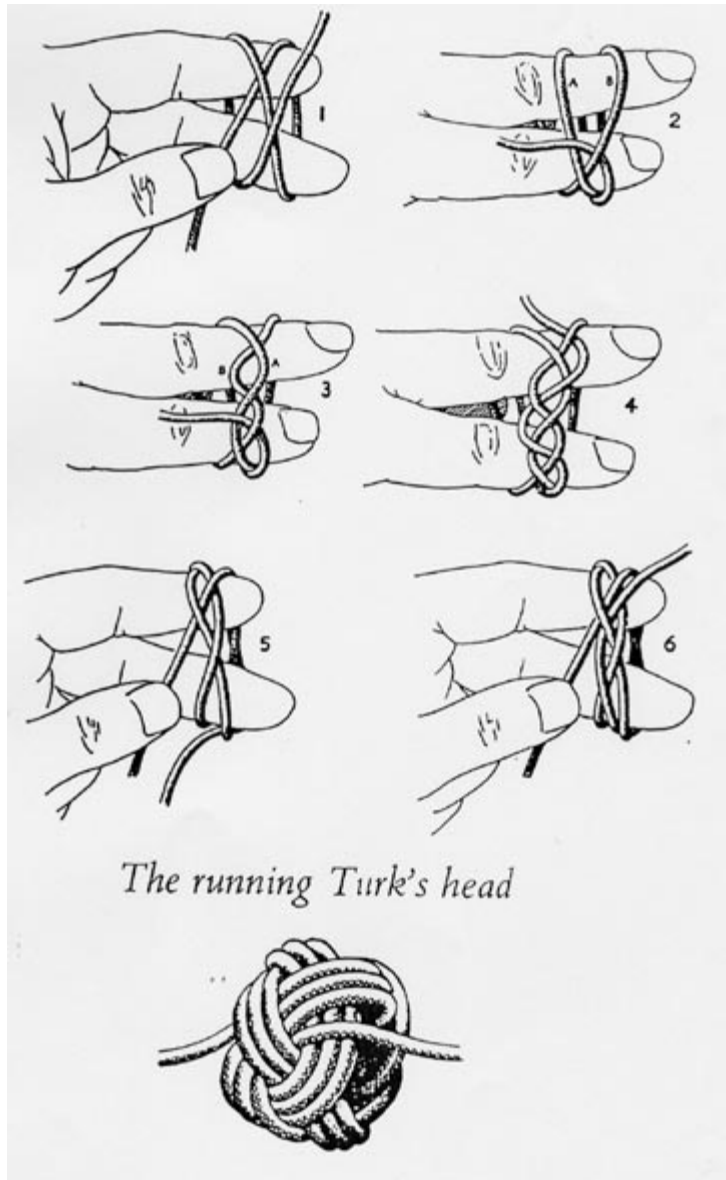
There are many opportunities on a yacht to display French whipping (or spiral hitching) and also Turks Heads, which are both simple forms of this decorative ropework. It looks professional and the technique is easily learned, so lay your hands on a piece of braided polyester cord and a round object, such as a tiller or boat hook. By the end of this article, you will have acquired the skill to give a real touch of individuality to your boat and the opportunity to display your grasp of a worthwhile tradition.

2 **APPLICATIONS ON BOARD YOUR BOAT.** There are many round pieces of equipment on the boat, which could benefit from some decorative ropework.

- **Tiller & ensign staff** ~ give it a few coats of varnish first, so that it will become an object worthy of your efforts
- **Boathook** ~ ideal for spiral hitching and Turk's Heads
- **Pushpit** ~ makes it more comfortable to hold in cold weather, and stylish!
- **Bilge pump handle** ~ generally sits tucked away out of sight. Place it more prominently in the boat, clipped into place on a bulkhead with some ropework to make it look attractive
- **Wheel steering** ~ fit French spiral hitching and Turk's Heads on the upright spoke, when the rudder is in fore-and-aft alignment
- **Riggers knife and splicing fid** ~ fashion a Turk's Head so that yours is always recognised



3 **FRENCH SPIRAL HITCHING.** This is the simplest form of covering a round item. Assuming that you wish to cover about 6" length of a boat hook, say 30mm diameter, select some 6m of braided line, about 3mm to 4mm diameter. Fix the one end with a Clove Hitch drawn up tight (or use a Constrictor Knot, which will hold better) and then take successive turns around the boat hook, but form a half-hitch at every turn. To maintain a consistent spiral, it is important to draw up each half-hitch with the same tautness. This rope cladding will provide a handy grip on the boat hook, with a spiral shape styled down the outside of it. The effect can be seen in the adjacent picture. Having covered the boat hook to the length required, finish off with another Clove Hitch, or a Constrictor Knot, drawn up tight. All that now remains is to make a Turks Head to cover the clove hitches, so as to finish off both ends of your French Hitching.



4 MAKING A RUNNING TURKS HEAD. The various descriptions for how to make a simple Turks Head do vary in the different text books. The simplest one to remember is that shown in the Marlinspike Sailor and I have photocopied his diagrams, which are better than a whole page of written instruction.

We will make a "5 bight, 3 turn" Turks Head to cover each end of the spiral hitching. Take a short length of the same diameter braided cord (about one metre) and fashion the initial turns on two fingers of the left hand, as shown. You will form it slightly larger than the diameter ultimately required. First step is shown in diagram '1' and then follow through with steps '2' to '6' until you end up where you started. You have now completed **one** turn. There should be 5 'bights' or loops now evident, which will suit the 30mm diameter boat-hook. Having got the shape for the **first turn**, follow the working end around a second time, always keeping to the right, until you have completed the **second turn**. Then do the same for a **third turn**. Your completed Turks Head should be of such a diameter that you can just slide it on to your boat hook, over the end of the French whipping. Now patiently work around the Turks Head from the beginning, carefully drawing it up "fairly taut", to fit the diameter required - you will find a small pair of long nosed pointed pliers helpful for this job. Then tighten further by going round a second time, ensuring a consistent tension. Cut both ends off close and seal with a gas lighter. The final result will be (with a little practice) as the drawings and you can view your careful crafted work of art every time you step aboard!

5 GETTING GOING WITH A NEEDLE. Give a well finished effect to the ends of sheets and halyards with a proper sailmakers whipping. This will look neat and will never come off. You can shape up the end of the halyard with a gas flame, which is so much better than with a hot knife, which leaves hard edges.

The equipment you need is a medium size sailmakers needle, a leather palm and a reel of medium size waxed twine.

Knot the end of your twine and then pass the needle through the middle of the rope and put on however many turns you need. The next step is to make a pass through the thickness of the rope, then pass the twine up the length of the whipping, then back through the thickness of the rope. Do this four times so that the passes are equally spaced. Finally, pass the needle through the centre, cut off and heat seal.

The result is wonderfully neat and a further opportunity to exercise some traditional skills.

6 THREADING NEW HALYARDS. To replace an old halyard with a new one is simply a question of attaching a light messenger line to the rope tail end, hauling the halyard out and leaving the messenger behind. Then the new halyard can be threaded through, using the messenger.

You will need a reliable attachment between the end of the messenger line and the end of the halyard tail. It is this attachment of the messenger to the tail end, which causes the trouble, in that if you knot it with say a clove hitch or a rolling hitch and then tape over the top, the chances are that this binding will not pass through some of the small apertures, as it passes through the mast. Once a jam occurs and greater strain is put on the messenger, there is a danger that the joint will part. Should this happen, then you will end up with neither the messenger line, nor halyard in the mast and there is great difficulty re-threading.

A better method is to sew a small loop in the end of the rope tail. You do this by using the needle and thread and make a loop large enough to put your little finger in, with about 10 passes of twine. Now secure the 10 passes of twine by en-circling the passes with thread to make a strong loop. These are "frapping" turns and will provide a secure loop, to which the messenger line can be attached with a round turn and two half hitches.

The above method is used by riggers and will provide you with a reliable method for changing over halyards. Do this on all your halyards, so that you are fully prepared for removing halyards for winter check, cleaning or repair when required.

7 FURTHER READING. I have many books on decorative ropework and sailors arts. Without reservation, I can recommend to you the Marlinspike Sailor, being the book that has given me much inspiration over the years.

Des Pawson has recently completed an excellent book about knots (called "Handbook of Knots"). Diagrams and explanations are easy to follow. Des was a co-founder of the International Guild of Knot Tyers and is one of the UK leading authorities on practical knotting. Give him a call on 01473 690090.

Other books I can recommend are Knots, the Rigger's Apprentice and Rigger's Locker, all by Brian Toss and for the serious knotter, Ashley's Book of Knots is indispensable, with nearly 4,000 examples covered.

Finally, for those who become interested in knots and knotting as a spare time pursuit and hobby, why not join the International Guild of Knot Tyers? There are some 700 members world wide, with a wealth of experience and there is a regular journal on knotting matters. Secretary is Nigel Harding (01449 711121).

Happy knotting and good sailing.

Mike