



WILL STIRLING

## Thwarting confusion

Doesn't every rope prevent something, wonders *Nigel Sharp*?

**W**e probably all know what a preventer is, but let's just make sure. It is a piece of rope that is attached to the outboard end of the boom, taken outside the shrouds and forward to somewhere near the bow, in order to stop the boom accidentally gybing when running or broad-reaching.

But it is a strange name when you think that every piece of rope or wire on a boat is there to prevent something happening. A shroud, for instance, is there for no other reason than to prevent (we hope) the mast from going over the side. And the main purpose of mooring warps and anchor chains is to prevent a boat from being somewhere where we don't want her to be.

Admittedly, some ropes also have other purposes. A halyard, to pick one at random, is used to hoist and lower a sail, but it does spend the vast majority of its time (when it is doing anything at all) preventing the sail from coming down. And while you might think that a sheet is there to ease a sail out and pull it in again, let's be honest: unless we are super-keen racers, our sheets are nearly always cleated, and therefore just preventing the



**“Why is no piece of rope called the ‘Noah’?”**

sail from going out any farther than we want it to. And pole uphauls – which mostly prevent poles crashing to the deck – are just as beautifully named as the downhauls, which prevent them going skyward. There is an altogether different reason for the name given to the piece of rope that prevents the luff of the mainsail from being too baggy or wrinkly as it is named after the Mr Cunningham who ‘invented’ it, but that only makes one wonder why there is no piece of rope on a boat called, for instance, the ‘Noah’.

On the other hand, it could be that the preventer was named last. In other words, a questionable bunch of people thought up all those strange names (I'm sure many of us find them a nightmare to teach and explain to non-sailors – “how many times do I have to tell you the sheet is not the sail?”), probably culminating with the most bizarre: barber hauler (after a trip to the hairdresser, perhaps?). Then, perhaps, someone decided to get away from all the mumbo jumbo and simply name the very last bit of rope by what it actually does. 