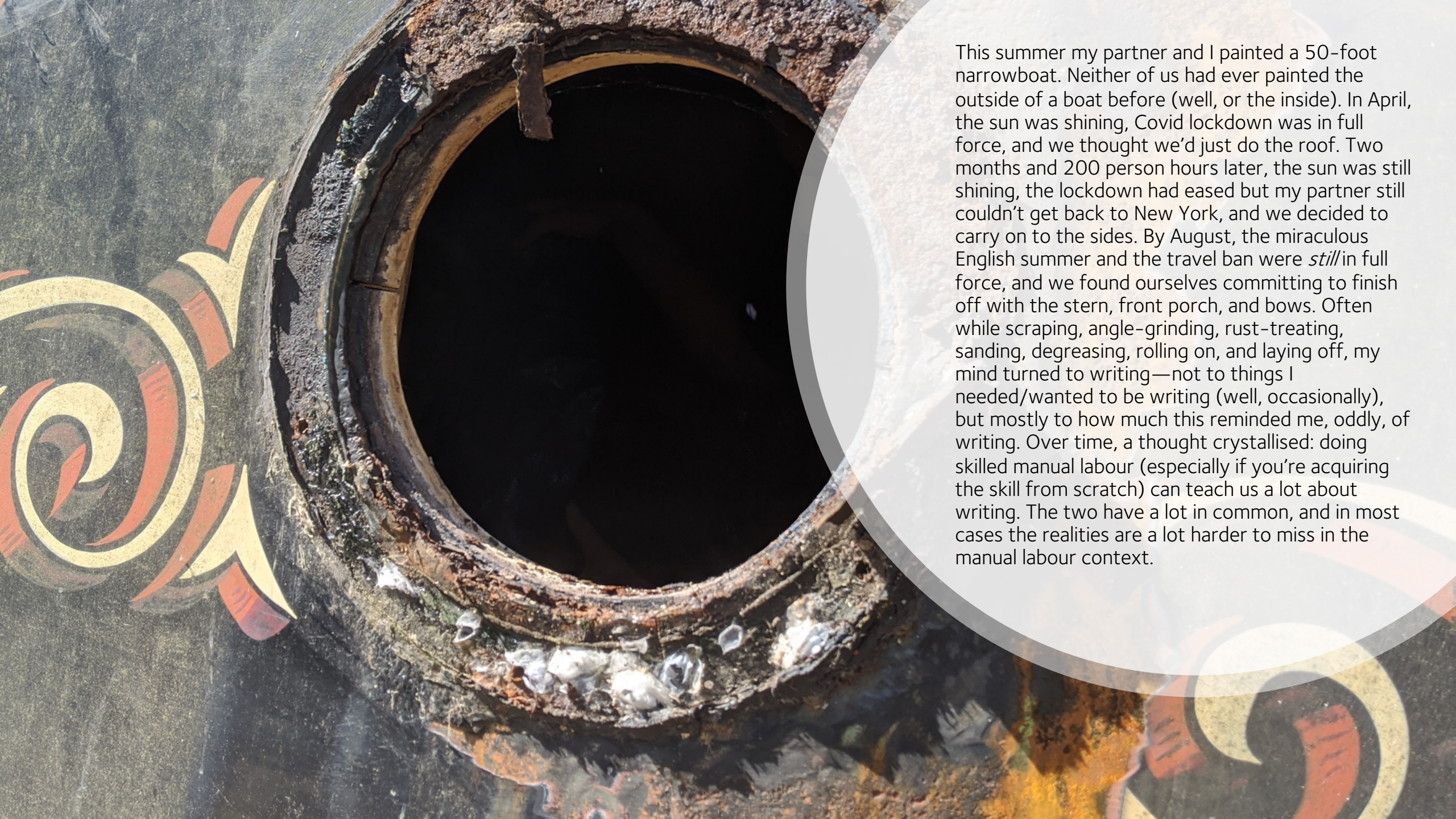


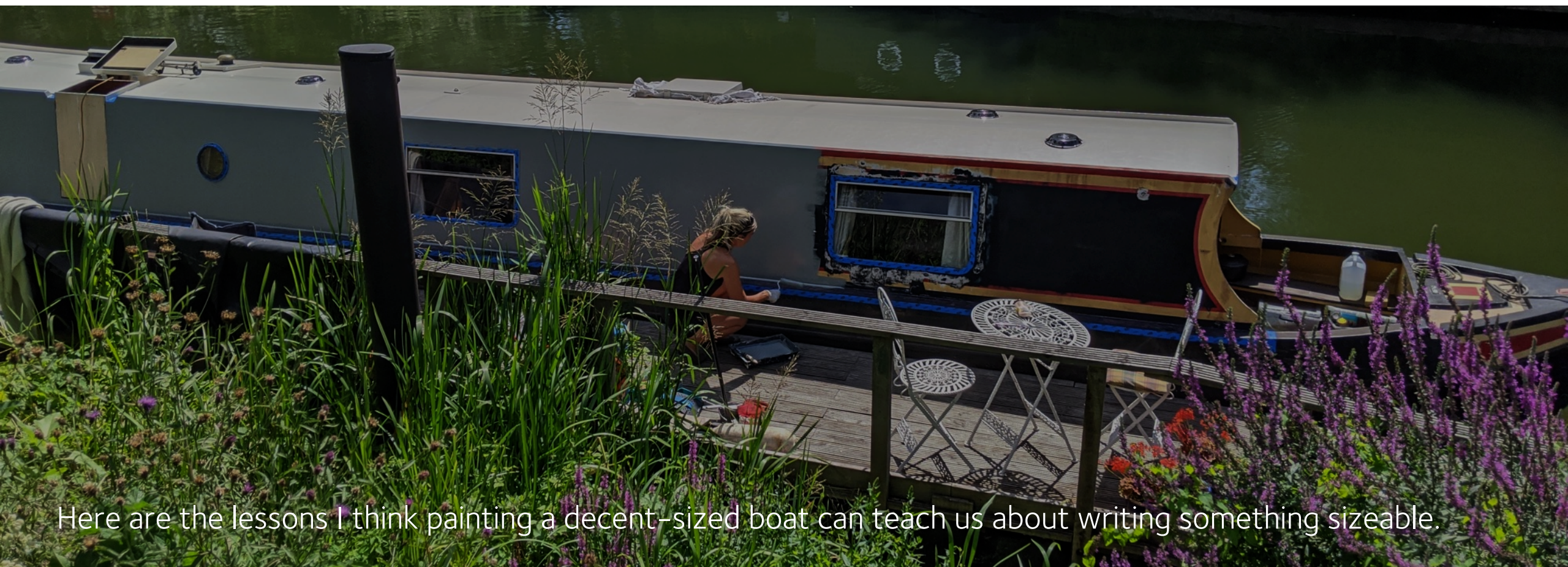
A narrowboat is docked on a canal, surrounded by lush green reeds and purple flowers in the foreground. A person is visible on the boat, painting a blue window frame. The boat has a white upper hull and a dark lower section. A wooden deck with a metal table and chairs is visible on the boat. The water is calm and reflects the surrounding greenery.

Writing boats and painting books

What skilled manual labour can teach us about how to write



This summer my partner and I painted a 50-foot narrowboat. Neither of us had ever painted the outside of a boat before (well, or the inside). In April, the sun was shining, Covid lockdown was in full force, and we thought we'd just do the roof. Two months and 200 person hours later, the sun was still shining, the lockdown had eased but my partner still couldn't get back to New York, and we decided to carry on to the sides. By August, the miraculous English summer and the travel ban were *still* in full force, and we found ourselves committing to finish off with the stern, front porch, and bows. Often while scraping, angle-grinding, rust-treating, sanding, degreasing, rolling on, and laying off, my mind turned to writing—not to things I needed/wanted to be writing (well, occasionally), but mostly to how much this reminded me, oddly, of writing. Over time, a thought crystallised: doing skilled manual labour (especially if you're acquiring the skill from scratch) can teach us a lot about writing. The two have a lot in common, and in most cases the realities are a lot harder to miss in the manual labour context.



Here are the lessons I think painting a decent-sized boat can teach us about writing something sizeable.

It takes a long time. This should be obvious, but underestimation of time needed is a standard fact about writing, and many writing problems are caused by giving it too little time. We started by washing down the roof on 11 April, and finished sanding and adding a final coat to the raised section of the stern deck on 29 September. When getting quotes to have the boat professionally repainted, as we intended before the pandemic hit, I hadn't been able to understand why they were saying it takes six weeks: how could a few coats of paint take that long? Admittedly we were doing our paid jobs alongside this, but I would never have predicted anything close to 5.5 months start to finish. Underestimates of the scope of writing projects tend to scale with overall project size, which is why book manuscripts are often submitted years late and blog posts only days late. ...

Spring...

... As I'll expand on later, gathering data about what is actually involved in a project (rather more than "a few" coats of paint, in this case) and about how long those things actually take us is the only way to come to a better appreciation of timescales and therefore to get better at planning. Also in relation to the time commitment question, one of the most important things this process taught me is that I don't feel good when I spend all day at my laptop, and that I get to choose (within limits) how much time to spend at it. If I want to spend a few hours every weekday doing something else, I can. I did, for much of this year. Many people speak of having something like this realization after having kids: suddenly priorities and time investments are revolutionized. For me, painting this boat was what finally helped me understand that things will take however much time we decide to give them, and that how we spend our days is truly up to us. Working mostly freelance lets this knowledge be very readily implemented, but it can be lived by anywhere where we control our time and are judged on our outputs.

...to autumn



It's tiring. There is no way of missing this fact when learning a new manual skill. You use muscles you didn't know you had to perform actions you didn't know existed with tools you hadn't realized humans had invented or made so cheap. I could never have imagined (even if it had occurred to me to try) how tiring on the forearms grinding nonslip grit off not one 50-foot gunwale but two could be until I tried it, or just how much core stabilization would be involved in painting the side of a boat in a long brush or roller sweep from gunwale up to handrail, hundreds of times over. If you tried to work at this flat out all day every day, you would burn out, make a serious mistake, injure yourself, and/or make yourself hate it. With writing, because the fatigue and the damage are slower and subtler, it's easier to ignore them and keep exacerbating them. The seizing-up of the back and hips, the wrist and eye strain, the dissolution of your capacity for basic concentration, let alone for creative, critical, or analytical thought—you can keep kidding yourself these aren't happening for a lot longer than you can pretend you don't need a break from wielding the paint scraper on hot steel.



Never-ending scraping

It's a skill that can be taught and learned. Painting and all the associated skills can be taught, learned, and practised at many levels of competence, just as writing and its accompanying skills can. The progression may be clearer when you're breaking drill bits on 4 mm roof steel than when you're crafting paragraphs that aren't coming together to form a journal paper, but the learning is happening in both contexts. Basic principles of all good learning apply for both, like heeding people more expert than you, starting small, and taking incubation time to let emerging skills solidify. Particularly when it comes to asking for help, the mystification of writing as a thing you're either "good at" or not is deeply counterproductive. Yes, you have to learn by doing, but there's a great difference between doing with instruction and without. We would never even have started, let alone finished, without the consistent, patient help of our next-door neighbour (and former car bodywork professional) who was also doing his boat, and the generous contributions of advice and assistance from several other marina people. ...

Hitting our stride (roller in the left, brush in the right)...



... Believing, when tackling a project unlike one you've tackled before, that you don't need help or that no one could help you is always wrong. Believing that will certainly make it take longer until you achieve the satisfyingly distinctive feeling of laying off rolled-on gloss with a 4" brush, or knowing how to create sentence structures that reliably work. There's also the question of task-specific learning. Although an interior decorator would have taken a lot more naturally to a lot of the boat painting than we did, they probably wouldn't have been much better at angle-grinding than us, because priming and painting steel boats is different from plastering and painting brick walls. With writing it's easy to think that because I can write academic articles I know how to write a blog post, or vice versa, but this is true only to a certain point—and in some respects, the context difference may actively mislead. You may still need help from someone who actually knows this thing.

...and finding our limits (a kindly neighbour jigsaws the roof)




It's all in the prep. "Painting" a boat is at least 50% not painting it, but preparing to paint it. It's the same with most kinds of writing—and even if the relative proportions are different, the same principle applies: if you don't prepare right, nothing will work. With painting, as with writing, the preparing and the doing flow into one another (is priming painting? is bullet-pointing writing?), and the preparing is repeated in between patches of doing (sanding between coats, returning to the high-level outline to orient yourself between drafts). For more than a tiny job, if you try to skip straight to slapping on the gloss, or to crafting a perfect first sentence, you'll probably waste a lot of time and at some point resort to what you thought you could do without.





The roof vent holes from hell

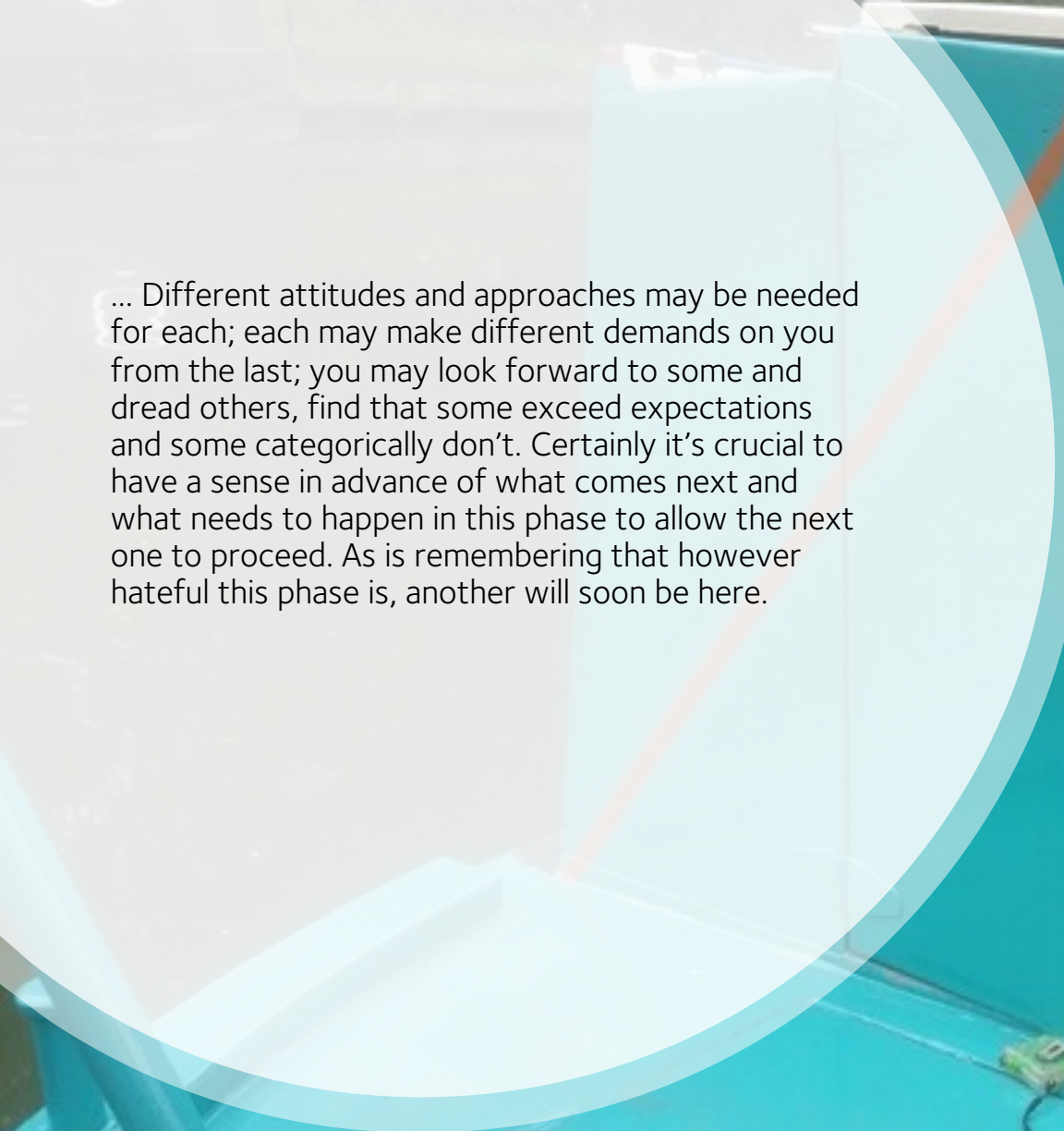
It's an emotional challenge as well as a cognitive and physical one. There were many practical difficulties in these 5.5 months, but the worst parts were emotionally as much as practically hard. The morning where I concluded we ought to find an implement to scrape off all the nonslip beads we'd just applied to the entire roof, without damaging the paint underneath, and specifically the moment where, armed with metal fish slices, we made slow and hesitant starts at different corners of the wide expanse of creamy roof—that was hard. The day when yet another attempt to line up the roof vents with the holes we'd painstakingly drilled in the steel failed, and we couldn't understand why, and couldn't bear to risk trying again and the same thing happening and another pointless hole be made in the steel, but also had no alternative—that was really hard. There were pragmatic difficulties in both cases, and tough decisions to make, but the thing that could have made it all feel unbearable was the agony at the wasted time and effort, the anger and frustration at not even knowing exactly how we'd messed up let alone how best to fix it—these were the things that really dragged us down. These are the things you have to learn how to get yourself through, just as with the chapter whose argument just keeps falling apart however many times you restructure it, or the chain of reasoning that keeps eluding you however much time and focus you give it, or anything else that makes you doubt your capacity to keep going. Learning the skills of emotional perseverance is a big part of learning how to write, work, and live well, and if you don't practise it in areas and at times where it can be readily practised, it won't be there for the big demanding things that need it.



It has distinct phases with their own distinct rhythms. The phases of the work are defined partly by the work itself, and partly by the emotional demands and fatigue of doing the work. Cleaning is not like hand sanding which isn't like machine sanding or painting the large open sections with a 6" roller versus the little fiddly bits with a 2" brush. And so brainstorming isn't much like outlining or drafting which isn't like revising or incorporating feedback. ...

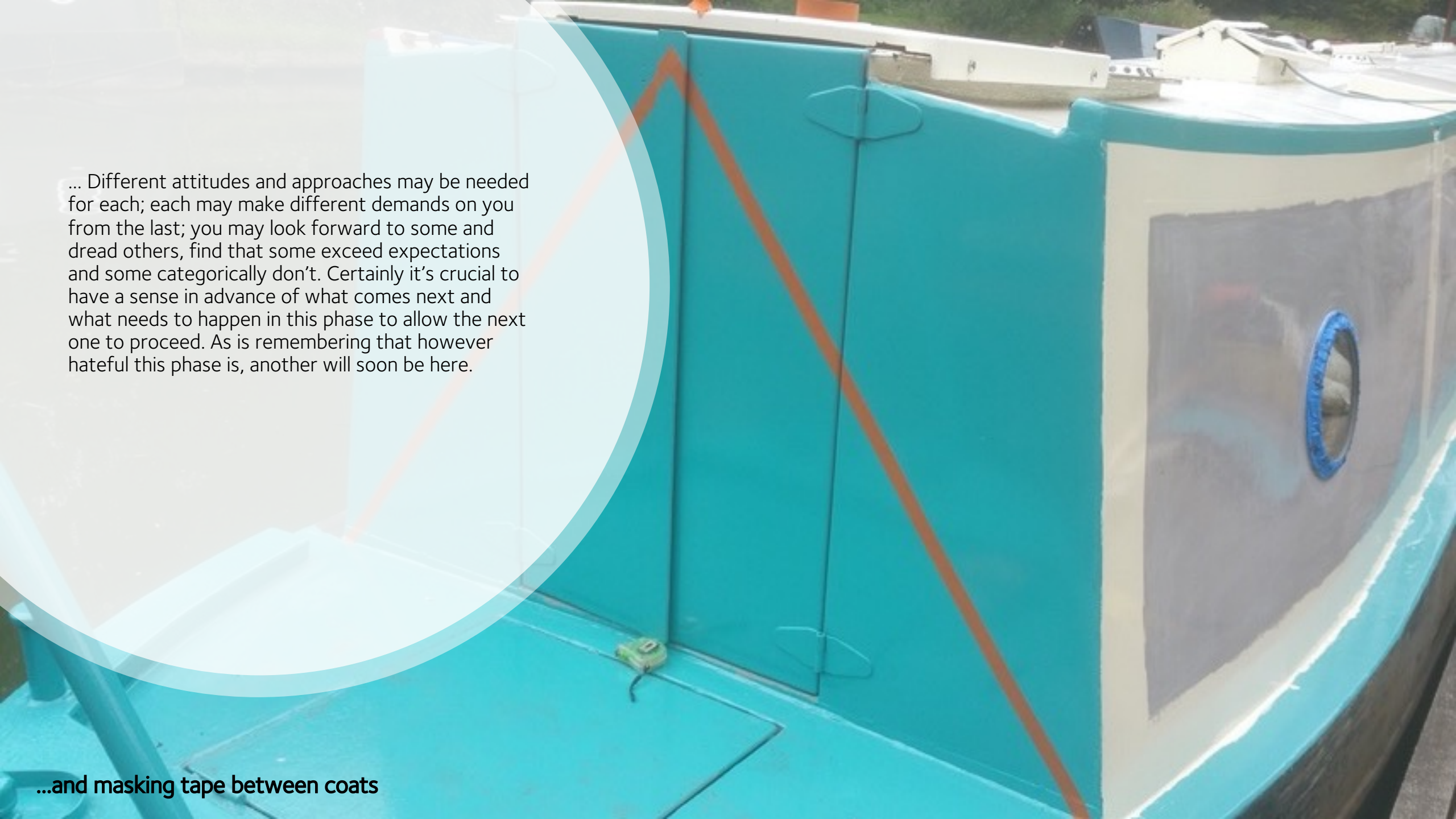
The detestable grinding-off of nonslip grit...

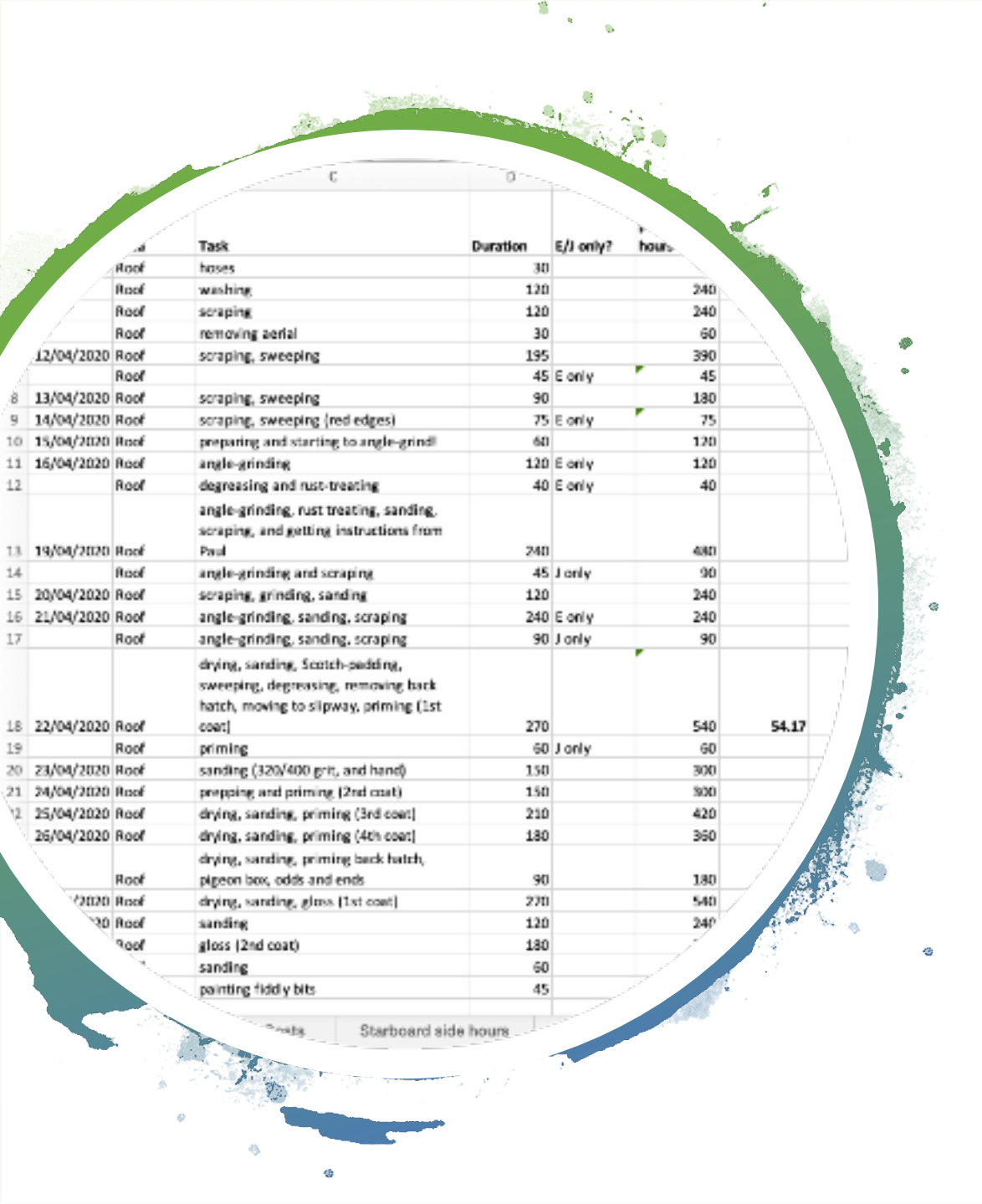




... Different attitudes and approaches may be needed for each; each may make different demands on you from the last; you may look forward to some and dread others, find that some exceed expectations and some categorically don't. Certainly it's crucial to have a sense in advance of what comes next and what needs to happen in this phase to allow the next one to proceed. As is remembering that however hateful this phase is, another will soon be here.

...and masking tape between coats

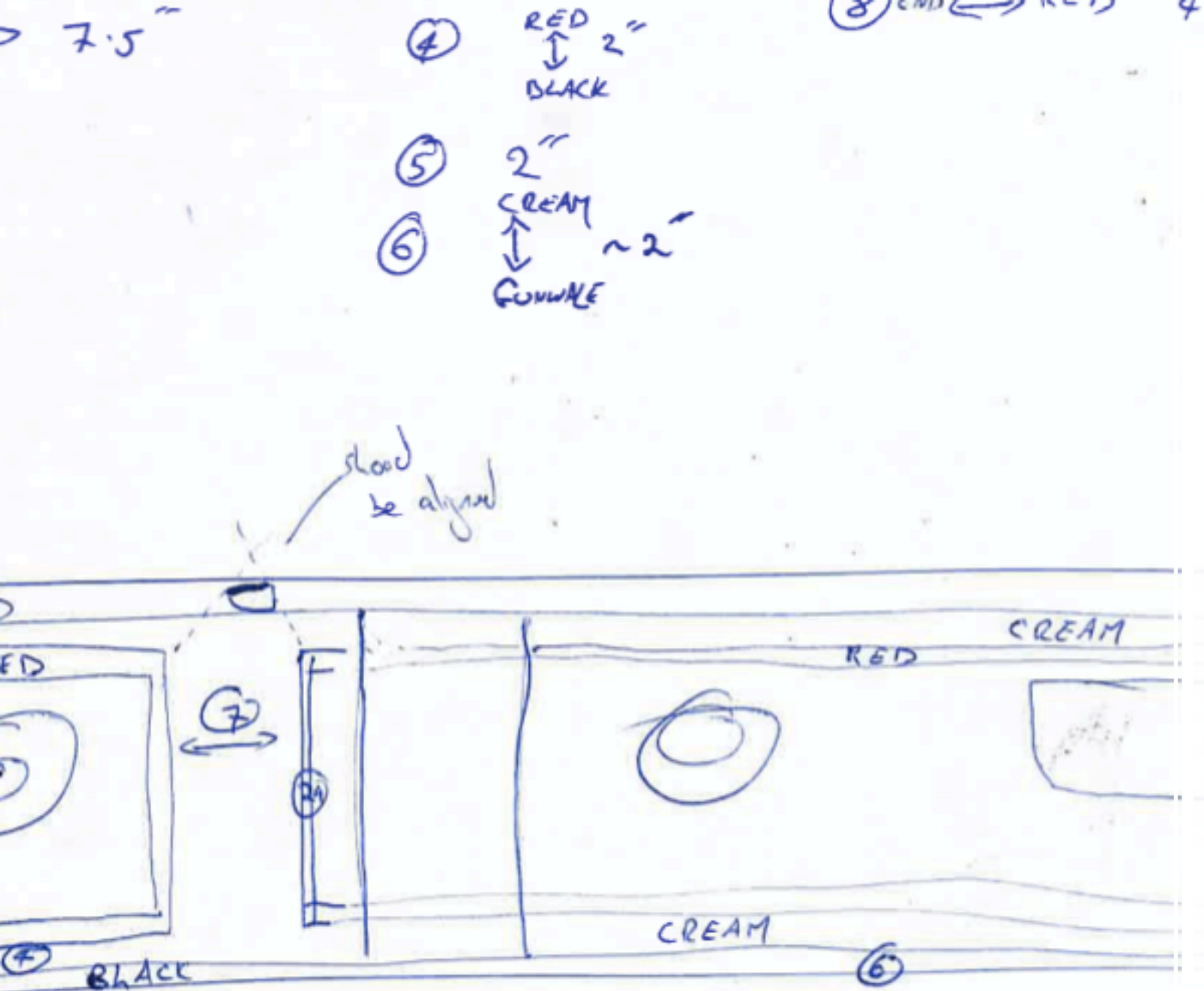




		C	D		
		Task	Duration	E/J only?	hours
		Roof hoses	30		
		Roof washing	120		240
		Roof scraping	120		240
		Roof removing aerial	30		60
	12/04/2020	Roof scraping, sweeping	195		390
		Roof	45	E only	45
8	13/04/2020	Roof scraping, sweeping	90		180
9	14/04/2020	Roof scraping, sweeping (red edges)	75	E only	75
10	15/04/2020	Roof preparing and starting to angle-grind	60		120
11	16/04/2020	Roof angle-grinding	120	E only	120
12		Roof degreasing and rust-treating	40	E only	40
		angle-grinding, rust treating, sanding, scraping, and getting instructions from Paul			
13	19/04/2020	Roof	240		480
14		Roof angle-grinding and scraping	45	J only	90
15	20/04/2020	Roof scraping, grinding, sanding	120		240
16	21/04/2020	Roof angle-grinding, sanding, scraping	240	E only	240
17		Roof angle-grinding, sanding, scraping	90	J only	90
		drying, sanding, Scotch-paddling, sweeping, degreasing, removing back hatch, moving to slipway, priming (1st coat)			
18	22/04/2020	Roof	270		540
19		Roof priming	60	J only	60
20	23/04/2020	Roof sanding (320/400 grit, and hand)	150		300
21	24/04/2020	Roof prepping and priming (2nd coat)	150		300
22	25/04/2020	Roof drying, sanding, priming (3rd coat)	210		420
	26/04/2020	Roof drying, sanding, priming (4th coat)	180		360
		Roof drying, sanding, priming back hatch, pigeon box, odds and ends	90		180
	2020	Roof drying, sanding, gloss (1st coat)	270		540
20		Roof sanding	120		240
		Roof gloss (2nd coat)	180		
		sanding	60		
		painting fiddly bits	45		
		Boats	Starboard side hours		

It benefits from planning and tracking. Having an overview is crucial, both for practical reasons and to prevent the project from feeling infinite, or progress so far from feeling inconsequential. I took scribbly notes while our neighbour first talked us through the entire process for the roof, and later for the sides, and we asked about some steps again because we forgot or didn't understand things. And then we rehearsed at many different scales the steps to come, so we could be confident of finishing a critical phase before a rainy patch, or order the supplies we needed to come in time. And I kept a record of our hours throughout, and the task we were doing for each session spent. I don't think I missed any significant time, and now we can look back now and see that 27% of the 200 total roof hours were spent before even applying the first coat of primer, that the roof took 4 coats of primer, 8 of gloss, and 2 of satin (for isolated panels), whereas the sides took 3 primer and 9 gloss; that the starboard side (the first we tackled, and the one with much worse rust) took nearly twice as long as the port side (80 hours versus 46); that it all cost just under £3,000 including new hatches and front benches, just under 1k of which was for paint.

...



... The timings and other details would never have been remotely accurate in unrecorded hindsight. Partly just because this would require superhuman feats of attention and recollection. But also because memory is always inclined to serve present purposes as much as past realities, so I might exaggerate the number of hours if I were looking for reasons not to repeat the project, say, or if I wanted sympathy or praise; or I might underestimate the total radically if I couldn't quite believe I could have taken this many hours out of my year without having remotely planned to. With writing, too, there's no substitute for the personal learning that gradually becomes your reliable guide to how long this type of thing under these conditions is likely to take you. As academic writing coach Cathy Mazak remarked in a webinar on writing sprints: "Track, reflect, rinse, repeat. Get your own data."




It benefits from breaking the project down into tasks. This happens with a natural beauty in the painting context, because paint takes time to dry, and the surface it's being applied to needs preparing for the application of the first and every subsequent coat. Unavoidable boundaries are built in, and many of them have to coincide with time away from the project, or at least this part of it. With writing it's often harder to see the divisions between tasks, and continuing straight on from one to the other is usually possible unless someone else is involved whose input takes time. (This is just one reason why collaborative writing is brilliant.) Merging several tasks into one (e.g. creating a first draft but also editing as you go along and trying to add in references as well) can also be tempting but usually backfires. Getting better at knowing what the most natural task divisions are, and honouring them in your writing practice, is one of the great tricks to sustaining commitment over a long project. Goals like "incorporate x into paragraph y", for instance, are much likelier to be doable and feel bearable and even make you want to get going than "write section z". Likewise letting each process be self-sufficient and not already try to pre-empt the next three—letting the first draft be shitty; letting gaps with question marks remain until you're next online—is often a lot more conducive to focus and momentum than cobbling it all into one.

Beautiful fresh turquoise taking its time to dry while we do something else



Perfection is impossible, and aiming for it would ruin everything. It is utterly clear at every point in a major manual project that is a first-time effort, and I assume a major manual project that isn't, that perfection is unattainable. That has to be OK, right from the outset. This fact has to exist in constant tension with the desire for the project to be done as well as possible. Our starkest "right from the outset" moment was when we went ahead and applied the first primer coat to the roof, but had spent so long that morning getting ready that even though we moved the boat into the slipway under the cover of trees, the sun had already heated up the bare metal so much that the primer went on thick and lumpy and we spent the next three coats (and all the increased sanding in between) trying to make up for it. We could (and maybe should) have realised what had happened, stopped as soon as possible, removed and restarted and lost a day. We could also have given up at that point, decided this was beyond us, asked someone else to step in and help. Many times later on, the clarity with which this job was not going to be perfect—messy crinkles in paint around hatch hinges, masking lines only as straight as we could get them, some drips below the portholes however hard we tried to avoid them—could at any point have made us despair. ...

Blissfully unaware of our primer error...



... “What’s the point if someone else could have done it better?” is a seductive angle, because it frees you from the discomfort of working hard at something inevitably imperfect. But with writing, as with painting, perfection is a beastly mirage. In writing, the distinction between good and bad is usually clear (though subjective) but often harder to pin down than in painting: what precisely makes this essay “better” than that one, or than an earlier draft, can be harder to articulate than “yes, I see we didn’t match that tape perfectly with the last lot”. This can be a reason to lose heart, but it can also be part of the fun. Knowing that criteria for better and worse are malleable; knowing that others may well love this even if you’re acutely aware of the flaws; knowing that in the end, whatever you create is, for you, as much about the creative process and the learning process as the output—this can all be liberating. So can reminding yourself what you’re doing here: you’re protecting a boat’s metal superstructure from the ravages of iron oxide. The aesthetics are just nice to have. You are writing about something that matters because you want the world to understand it better. Doing it stylishly, beautifully, entertainingly is also just nice to have—if what you’re writing about does matter to begin with.

...and inevitably unstraight masking lines



Lancer before...

There is an output. And that output means as much as the process. With the painting, you end up with a boat protected from the elements by a painstaking built up layering of paint (who'd have thought 14 coats would be needed on the roof, or 13 on the sides!). With the writing, you end up with something written, something shareable, something copiable, something citeable, something that encapsulates some of what you think about something you chose to give time to thinking about, through writing. The writing is an integral part of the thinking: a lot or most of the time, we don't really know quite what we think, or know, until we try to put words to it. ...



... And with the painting, too, we learnt a vast amount about the boat by poring over its every inch for all those months: where the seams in the steel are, how the water travels, why the roof vents had been letting water in for years (wrong sized holes!). Doing this yourself is an irreplaceable form of learning—and it makes you care a lot more about the results, too, and protecting them. In the boat case, this means heading out with some car wash&wax every month over the autumn and winter to help the paint stay good. In the writing case, it means doing what you can with the ideas you nurtured into existence, to help people find them and read them and make use of them.

...and after (but still awaiting signwriting!)

You are never definitively done. As I write, two months after the kind-of-final end, and one month since we took the boat up the canal to be dry-docked and the hull cleaned and blacked and surveyed, the “finishing touches” are still ongoing, with a couple of brass labels finally fitted only days ago, and varnishing of new wooden frames for the inside of the hatches in process. (As I edit, it’s now nearly three months after, and I’ve finished the varnishing and have screwed on the inside bolts, but still have the headlight whose bracket I’ve been derusting and painting to reattach.) And because in a bit of wintry boating excitement the river was flowing fast when we got back to the mooring, and pulling in was tricky and created some damage of our gunwale against the neighbouring boat’s, there’s a repair job to be done, so I have a little can of primer out and am taking a few minutes each day to get that layered up. (And now, at the editing stage, I think I’m done with that, but I’ve noticed some little chips on a couple of other edges.) (And now, at the final reread stage, a flooded Thames has resulted in another deep scratch on the stern turquoise, so I’m out with the primer again later.) And next summer’s project will perhaps be brushing off my signwriting skills to redo Lancer’s name, and adding playing-card club decorations to the hatches. And so creation continues, and slides into maintenance, just as in writing, drafting slides into editing and from editing into revising after feedback, and the article needs the blog post writing to publicize it, or the thesis is reshaped into a monograph, or the blog post gets updated thanks to a reader’s comment... And yet here is a thing, and it was crucial that you did, at some point, call time and call it done.

Out of the water for hull blacking: the same project or a separate one?



It is manual. In the end, I realize that mostly what I'm saying is that writing is manual labour. It's about doing something skilful over a long time and getting tired and needing to plan and prepare and break it down, and losing faith and carrying on, and ending up with something that could have been better but is, in the end, this. This thing that didn't exist before you did it. Your manual skill was your fingers on the keyboard and the sander, your hand clasping the various biro and brushes you got through, and from it, the distinctly human beauty of this achievement has flowed.

