

# S&S essentials



Peter K Poland salutes the S&S designs of Olin J Stephens, beautiful but enduringly robust boats that make desirable second-hand buys

Certain objects have a mythic allure, an intangible 'je ne sais quoi' that lifts them above the ordinary or the adequate and into the realms of the special. Quality is at the core of this magic pull, as are looks: but there's more to 'it' than that. It's indefinable and can't be planned or copied, so most things just don't 'have it'. But a few – just a very special few – do.

In the world of yachts and yacht design, there was one genius who sprinkled stardust on beautiful boats. As

a result, large numbers of his creations had 'it' in spades, and – luckily for today's sailors – several were series-produced in GRP, so owning and enjoying one of these beauties is still viable.

I hesitate to use the hackneyed adjectives 'iconic' or 'classic' when describing these boats because they rise above that. One of my friends has been the guardian of such a boat for 27 years, and he tells me: 'I'm still in love with the glassfibre wife, and wouldn't change her. I can sail single-handed, short-handed or with four friends: and above all, she gives me that go-anywhere confidence.'

His boat is as beautiful today as she was nearly 40 years ago – indeed more so when compared to the newer, short-ended, plumb-stemmed blobs that now surround her – and is just one among the many designed by the inimitable Olin J Stephens. The S&S (Sparkman and Stephens) tag is carried by more than 2,200 racing and cruising yacht designs including six successful America's Cup defenders.

## Six-decade domination

The Stephens brothers, Olin and Rod, made their mark in 1931 when they designed the 52ft yawl *Dorada* and raced her in the Transatlantic Race. As they passed the Scillies they signalled the coastguard station, asking: 'Which am I?' 'You are first,' came the reply – a message that was to be repeated ad nauseam down the years. It marked the start of an unprecedented six-decade

domination of offshore and inshore racing by S&S boats on both sides of the Atlantic.

Olin James Stephens II lived from 1908 to 2008. He studied naval architecture at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1926 then took an apprenticeship at the Henry Nevins boatyard on City Island. He was just 23 when he completed the lines of the divine *Dorada*, his Design No7. While Olin drew the yachts with his unique blend of artistry and science, brother Rod applied his seaman's eye to their layout, construction and fit-out.

In 1937, Starling Burgess invited Olin Stephens to help design the J Class yacht *Ranger*, the New York Yacht Club's America's Cup defender. *Ranger* walked all over Sir Tommy Sopwith's challenger *Endeavour II*. Although the design was a collaborative effort, *Ranger* benefited greatly from



Olin and Rod Stephens made their mark in 1931 when they designed the 52ft yawl *Dorada*, above, to compete in the Transatlantic Race – which she won



Yacht broker Drake Sparkman, left, and designer Olin Stephens, right

studies that Stephens carried out at the Stevens Institute in New Jersey, doing tank testing work that later became the norm for his America's Cup and offshore racing yachts.

When post-war America's Cup racing resumed in 1958, the 12 Metre Class replaced the J and Stephens ruled the roost. *Columbia* and *Constellation* defeated the 1958 and 1964 British challengers *Sceptre* and *Sovereign*. I remember the latter well because my grandfather Kenneth Poland – then Vice Commodore of the RTYC – was in charge of the challenge. He later told me he knew the game was up before the first race even started because the only compliment the NYAC committee could find to say about *Sovereign* was that she was 'beautifully built.'

Stephens then developed *Intrepid* for the 1967 match, and

Stephens modestly assured him he would find the GRP production S&S 34 Class 'satisfactory'. Heath went on to win pots galore – including the Sydney-Hobart – in this, his first S&S *Morning Cloud*.

## Joy to behold

Today's sailors tempted by S&S quality and class have a choice of GRP production cruiser-racers that range from the pretty *She* models up to the glorious *Swan 76*. Irrespective of size, they have two things in common: they look a million dollars and sail superbly.

In his autobiography *All This and Sailing Too*, Stephens wrote: 'I was lucky. I had a goal. As far back as I can remember all I wanted to do was to design fast boats.' To generalise, this meant cruiser-racers with relatively wide maximum beam, fine graceful overhangs, glorious sweeping sheer, topside tumblehome, displacement-producing bustles blending into rudder skegs and plenty of ballast packed into keels invariably made of lead. All of which adds up to superb balance, speed, stability and close-windedness under sail.

One key ingredient can be summed up in a single word: lead. When I started building the speedy *Hunter HB31*, I asked designer Cees van Tongeren if we could save money and fit an iron keel. 'No way,' he exclaimed in horror. 'This is not a caravan yacht. The keel must be lead. Iron floats.' What? 'It displaces far more than lead of the same weight,' Cees explained, 'so compared to lead it "floats". It also has extra surface area for the same weight, increasing drag.'

The first S&S yacht I sailed was a South Hants Engineering-built **She 31**. Like its rarer small sister (the 27), this yacht is a joy to behold. Some compare her to the *Contessa 32*, but the sleeker *She*

31 is 0.21m narrower (2.69m), 0.6m shorter on the waterline (6.71m) and weighs 750kg less (3,538kg). With a similar ballast ratio, around 45%, and a higher SA/displ ratio, the *She* promises sharper performance while offering less space below. In her day, she and the similar Swedish *IW31* were near unbeatable.

I recall a Round the Wight by night JOG race in the early '70s. After a high-speed *Force 5-6* whizz down to the *Needles* we set the spinnaker for a run into the dark, then I went off-watch to my bunk, as one did in those days. We were leading the fleet. Around an hour later I awoke as a voice in the cockpit uttered the chilling words: 'Are those breakers ahead?' Crash! The skipper had run onto the inshore edge of the *Atherfield Ledge* (a rocky reef) and we were surrounded by white water breaking over black rocks, most of it between us and safe deep water offshore. In short, we were in a pretty pickle.

Sheeting the sails flat, we heeled the *She 31* onto her side and bashed through the rocks until we reached the safety of open water. Then we reset the spinnaker and continued on our merry way. I wouldn't want to try the same trick on a modern flat-bottomed hull with a bolt-on cast iron fin: I doubt that either boat or crew would survive.

Sleek beauty and fine overhangs combined with 31ft LOA won't provide space for stern cabins or aft heads compartments, even in roomier near-sister ships the *She Traveller 9.5* (extra freeboard) or *Delta 94*. But how much time do you spend on the loo or under a shower? If these factors take priority over the joyous sensation of sailing a near-perfect yacht, a *She* is not for you. However, if practical



She 31: available second-hand from £9,950



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Peter K Poland crossed the Atlantic in a 7.6m (25ft) *Wind Elf* in 1968 and later spent 30 years as co-owner of *Hunter Boats*. He is now a freelance journalist.





She C32: available second-hand from £9,500



Richard Burnett's She 36 Albatross. Second-hand boats from £35,000



Deb 33: none available for price comparison

accommodation and amidships amenities suffice, this boat is a joy.

**'If she looks right...'**

Much the same applies to the **She C32**. The excellent S&S Association ([www.sparkmanstephensuk.info](http://www.sparkmanstephensuk.info)) put me in touch with several enthusiastic owners including Bob Turner, who told me: 'Why did we buy her? S&S needs no elaboration: French boats of the day had no aesthetic appeal, and we subscribed to the view that "if she looks right..."'

Bob and his son bought their She C32 in 1990, becoming her fourth owners. 'We had an extensive refitting programme,' Bob added, 'converting four of the eight berths to stowage space, fitting handholds on top and below the coachroof, grab handles inside and outside the hatch, rewiring etc. We changed from tiller to wheel, which has been a great success.'

'The steering is fine; just the right amount of weather helm. We replaced the Yanmar 8 single-cylinder with a Perkins 20hp 3-cylinder, then replaced this last winter with a Yanmar 3YM20. I am invariably single-handed and that, combined with my age - 90

next year! - restricts me to local cruising, Poole to Chichester. I manage to get across to Cherbourg once or twice a year. Not exactly memorable, but very rewarding for an old 'un. 'Shekinah' handles well in most conditions and, with the pronounced tumblehome, keeps her decks fairly dry. I only once had any serious amount of water in the cockpit. She heels fairly quickly for the first 10-15° but it takes a lot of puff to make her go much further: a lead keel with 5ft 6in draught is a contributory factor. Light airs are not her strong point.

'Other comments? They don't make 'em like this anymore!'

**Equally desirable**

If you like the S&S recipe but want to go a bit bigger, the elegant Tyler-built **Deb 33** centreboarder and the **She 36** are equally desirable. Richard Burnett told me: 'Back in 1987 I was looking

for a Contessa 32 until a broker told me that these attracted a premium and, for not much more, one could get a She 36. 'My then teenage son voted we spend Dad's dosh on a better boat rather than a bigger house, and told me, "Not only do you get a really good racing boat, but also a lifeboat!" He had in mind the '79 Fastnet when Alain Catherineau in his She 36 *Lorelei* rescued the crew of *Griffin*. Alain said you could ask the impossible of the boat, and he won the RCC Seamanship Medal that year.

'Additionally, I wanted a quick boat for club racing and cruising. The 36 met this very well. By modern standards the accommodation is a bit cramped, but it's comfortable. 'Over the years we have cruised to south-west Ireland, Brittany, the Channel Islands, the South Coast, the Scillies and recently northern Spain. The overnight passage from Santander

to La Rochelle was especially memorable - it was clear, with the moon racing the clouds in a Force 4-5 just forward of the beam. With one reef in the main and a few rolls in the genoa, she was very comfortable and cracked on at a steady 7-plus knots, steered by "the vicar" the whole way.' Richard concedes that IOR designs of the 1970s tended to broach when hard-pressed under spinnaker, adding: 'She's no exception and we've had some spectacular spills... But change down early to a boomed-out genoa, which reduces the centre of effort, and she's completely vice-free, trustworthy and predictable in heavy weather. She always inspires me with confidence in nasty conditions.'

When it comes to self-steering, *Albatross* has a Monitor windvane that works on the same principle as the *Aries*. Richard calls it 'the vicar' because it never drinks, smokes, swears, sleeps or eats while it 'guides our ship down the True Way'. And what about maintenance and replacements on a 37-year-old boat? There's bound to be wear and tear, but Richard - along with other owners of S&S beauties 'of an age' - knows the expense is justified. Everyone



A 1970s She 36 brochure, complete with a double entendre typical of its era



S&S 30: available second-hand from £9,500

to scratch? She's worth it. If you fancy a slightly smaller yacht along similar lines, the **S&S 30**, built by Aquafibre, is worth a look. Although slightly shorter than the She 31, the 30 has a longer LWL, more beam (9ft) and weighs more (9,000lb), so she also has a bit more room down below. And like the She, this attractive boat is a winner.

One owner, Martin Rush, told me: 'When retiring to south-west England I planned to spend as much time as possible cruising the nearby coasts, so we sought a yacht that would be fun to sail and had a good safety record. We selected *Thirisia*, an old S&S 30, which met our requirements perfectly - good pedigree, beautiful lines and the previous owner had maintained her immaculately. 'We had many wonderful cruises in *Thirisia*, perhaps the most memorable being the sail back from St Vaast to our home berth in July 2011. After rounding the Gavendest Rock outside St Vaast harbour we entered Portland harbour 12 hours later - 90 miles logged at 7.5 knots in a steady south-south-west Force 6.'

Martin's S&S 30 also participated in a couple of Round the Island races. In 2010, she finished second overall in the classic yacht class and would have won but for a short spell aground on Ryde Sands. Then in 2011 she finished 151st out of 1,908 starters in the ISC Open Class, completing the course in 10 hours 2 minutes - impressive for a 40-year-old.

Martin adds: '*Thirisia* handles extremely well in all sea/wind conditions encountered. If any criticism could be made, she's a tad sluggish in light winds. 'The only major refit we had to undertake was replacing the chain plates. These had started to show corrosion, evidenced by slight deck swelling above the built-in anchorages.'

**All-time great**

Stepping up four feet, the **S&S 34** is another all-time great with a big fan club. It was built in the UK, USA and Australia, and from the day Edward Heath became an owner the S&S 34's fame spread. Many examples built and based in Australia - distinguishable by their lower coachroof - have circled the globe, including *Ella's Pink Lady*, sailed by the remarkable Jessica Watson. When she finished her non-stop 23,000-mile solo circumnavigation in 210 days, Jessica was still only 16. You can read about it in her book *True Spirit*.

When I asked her 'why a 34?' she explained: 'The S&S 34 was the obvious choice for the voyage. I just couldn't ignore its amazing track record. I would have struggled sailing a bigger boat and I needed a boat that would comfortably handle multiple knockdowns. Also, it was really important to have a boat that could sail into above-30k wind and huge seas. Very few modern boats could do that. 'I have a huge amount of admiration for sailors who have undertaken similar voyages

super boat and I wouldn't change her - she sails like a witch, is a brilliant sea boat, comfortable below and a looker! She's just the right size - I single-hand with no qualms, but she has room for four which is easy and pleasant.' He'll never want to replace his beloved She 36, so why not keep her up to date and up

they don't make 'em like this any more,' and just for once I agree. Chucking cash at a boat this special doesn't fall into the category of 'good money after bad'. A year after buying *Albatross*, Richard changed from wheel to tiller steering, which doubled the lazarette size, made the cockpit bigger and life easier with windvane steering lines. He also altered the port-side saloon into a U-shaped dinette which folds down into a double bunk, with lockers, bookshelf, hi-fi etc onboard.

In 2005, replacement electronics went in, and in 2011 he fitted a new 30hp Beta engine and folding two-bladed prop. Over the years sheet winches were upgraded from 40s to 44s, replacement sails added (including a new-fangled FFR from One Sails that produces extra speed for less sweat than a spinnaker), an electric anchor winch and Eberspächer installed (in readiness for a prolonged campaign in Scotland) and new sprayhood, dodgers, tent and bimini fitted. Down below he has changed all 13 interior light bulbs to warm white LEDs... and so it goes on! But as Richard says, 'She's a



The S&S 34 *Ella's Pink Lady*, sailed solo around the world by the remarkable Jessica Watson



on much smaller budgets, but I only set off – and Mum and Dad only allowed me to go – because everything on *Ella's Pink Lady* was perfect. Without my amazing sponsors to buy the best equipment I wouldn't have left.

'There were certainly some pretty hairy days out there and after the worst knockdown I didn't think *Ella's Pink Lady* could still be structurally sound, but she was. The only damage was to a few of the solar panels and torn sails.'

When I asked Jessica (who told me she loves reading PBO) what's next, she replied: 'Who knows what the future will bring, but for now I'm happy finishing my degree and sailing on weekends.'

But you don't have to sail so far to appreciate the S&S 34. In an email to me about the 2014 Sydney-Hobart Race, Shane Kearns wrote: 'The run down the Derwent was some of the best sailing ever, with the Code 0 in 25 knots of breeze and us doing 10 to 11 knots. We finished eight minutes inside four days, which must be the fastest trip ever for an S&S 34. The highest speed we hit was 16.6 knots on a surf, but 11 to 14 was easily achieved with the spinnaker and staysail set.'

Experienced delivery skipper David Thompson is another owner to sing the S&S 34's praises, saying: 'The owner before me did four Transatlantics in her, including the OSTAR. She's what I call an offshore boat – very stiff, seaworthy and goes like a train to windward if it's blowing hard.'

'The raised sheer at the bow makes her a dry boat for her

size. She has a big skeg rudder that's unbalanced, as on many boats of that era. The pinched stern makes her a bit of a handful going downwind at speed, but the big rudder would always haul her back. With the powerful keel and strong construction one could hang onto lots of sail if the wind got up a bit. I have always disliked boats that you have to reef and then unreef if a squall comes through: too much work!'

### Consider a Swan

If you want to join a blue-chip S&S club, consider a Swan. Every year there are rallies and regattas in different parts of the world, and these are open to the oldest and smallest Swans as well as to the largest and latest. Swans still enjoy the highest quality and kudos of any GRP production yacht brand.

When Nautor started the Swan range in 1967, it stood to reason it would commission the leading designer in the world to draw the lines and guarantee top performance and handling. And to this day, the first Swan – the 36 – remains one of the most beautiful GRP production boats ever built. Similar in line to famous S&S one-offs such as *Roundabout*, *Clarionet*, *Rumbuster*, *Hestia* et al, Swan 36s won races galore as well as giving their lucky owners easy, fast and comfortable cruising.

The Swan 38 is equally desirable. Angus and Annette Newton (the first lady Commodore of the Royal Southern YC) admired the 38 but reckoned she was out of their price range until they spotted a



*Clarionet*, built in 1966, is one of the famous S&S one-offs

Sailing Scenes

'75 model for sale second-hand in 1981. Since then they've enjoyed 33 years of cruises to the West Country, north and south Brittany and occasional races, including an overall win in the Cowes-Deauville race. They also took part in all the North European Swan regattas until recently and now enjoy the Swan Rendezvous in Guernsey.

And what about 33 years worth of maintenance? Annette says: 'We replaced the Bukh 20hp with the 24hp version when she was

20 years old, and the teak deck after 25 years. The mast is original. Electronics were installed or replaced over the past 10 years.'

'*Kuutar*'s layout is "traditional Swan" with central table, settee and pilot berths either side, an early version of an aft cabin with a single and cosy double berth – but without much headroom – and long and comfortable pipe cots in the fo'c's'le, providing six sea berths and dining for eight when at rest.

'Much of the varnish work below is original and looks good,

except – on closer inspection – some edges! *Kuutar* was painted a stunning mid blue just before we bought her and we have had her painted twice since, the first time after some minor rub damage suffered during the 1987 storm, and again in 2008/9.

'She suits us well although she isn't as easy to manoeuvre as a more modern boat: going astern can be interesting! She's excellent in light and heavy weather, a good sea boat, and gives confidence in any conditions.' To prove the point, another 38 *Gweneven* has just taken third in the Panerai Transat Classique 2015.

Other popular S&S Swans include the 37, 40, 41, 43, 48, 55 and mighty 65. They are all beauties and much in demand: they are also robustly built and stand the test of time. Of course, like other S&S designs they made their mark before sterns got fat, ballast ratios got thin and interiors became cavernous. However, many sailors – myself included – love them for that. You'll never see their like again, and – as countless current owners prove – an S&S boat often becomes a boat for life.

**NEXT MONTH**  
The Sir Robin Knox-Johnston story



Sailing Scenes

Swan 38: available second-hand from £77,000