



Black Tie affair

A stormy delivery trip from Newport, Rhode Island, to Bermuda was a good shakedown for Gavin Howe's newly acquired Swan 47 *Black Tie*, which he bought in Jamestown and sailed back to the Hamble in the UK

New paint, new decks, new engine, the Swan 47 had a high spec even by US standards

The B&G display at the chart table has just shown 50 knots of true wind as we crawl slowly to windward with a storm trysail on *Black Tie*, our newly acquired Swan 47 centreboard. It is our second night out from Newport on our way to Bermuda, which will be our first stop on the voyage to the Hamble. Our crew for the first leg consists of myself, my 20-year-old daughter Emma and delivery professionals John Kitchen, Dean and Rob.

The wind is howling outside and every tenth wave is breaking over the boat. The motion is very uncomfortable and we have discovered a significant leak in the main hatch garage, which means that every green one brings a rush of water into the cabin. With so much breaking water outside, we have locked the helm and are doing the watch keeping inside.

I thought back to the 1979 Fastnet Race when most of the injuries happened when people stayed on deck. The conditions we faced were not so extreme but they did warrant careful handling. The North Atlantic in April is a lonely place. This certainly didn't match the forecast or our routing chart, which showed the aver-

age wind speed of 15 knots and a south-westerly wind.

The day that followed left us with a lumpy sea and a 20-knot headwind, which increased to 40 knots on the third night. Getting tired, we locked the helm and lay ahull until morning...

So how did we end up doing this early season passage? I suppose it all started when I talked with my wife Nicki about doing a major refit of our Swan 41, which after 14 years of both cruising and racing in our hands, was getting a little tired. I loved that boat and the Swan 37 that preceded it, but Nicki could see the attraction of a larger cabin space, larger fuel and water tanks, and suggested that we look for a bigger one.

Olin Stephens design

Having had two successful Sparkman & Stephens Swans, I was keen to stay with the designer's boats, and so the Swan 47 looked attractive. Olin Stephens retired in 1979 so the design of this boat was one of the last while he was in the firm. I also knew of the New York Yacht Club version called a NYYC 48 which has a centreboard keel, the interior moved two feet aft, bigger tanks and a shorter rig.





Above left and right: *Black Tie* at her launch party in Jamestown. Above: the crew arrive in Bermuda

One of the first of these models had been bought by Arthur Beiser, the author of *The Proper Yacht*. In that book he explains how he further increased the tank capacities for his long-distance cruising needs but enjoyed cruising Scandinavian harbours he hadn't been able to visit with his previous boat owing to her deep draught. With the keel up, the Swan 47 draws less than 6ft.

We looked at three 47s, one in the UK, one in the Netherlands and *Black Tie* in Jamestown near New-

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port. *Black Tie* has a high specification even by US standards, with most of the electronics you can think of plus air conditioning, heavy-duty refrigeration and electric toilets, and externally she was hard to fault. She had new paint, new decks, new engine, a big sail wardrobe, new toerails and deck gear, although there was still some work to do for the skilful craftsmen of the Jamestown Boatyard.

After two visits to the yard during the winter, and 175 emails back and forth across the Atlantic, the day came for us to take the boat sailing. She had been launched during the Easter week and Jamestown Boatyard had spent the time snagging the boat. Nicki, Adele, our youngest daughter, and I arrived to find her dressed overall and looking rather handsome on one of the Jamestown jetties.

Our plan was working well so far, and we spent the ▶▶



first two days doing a lot of shopping. We checked the systems and started to understand how they worked.

The New England coast in April is rather cold with the seawater temperature at 8°C. No one was out sailing and we made a passage to Martha's Vineyard and back and we were the only visiting yacht in Vineyard Haven. However, I was keen to get sailing and it was a useful part of the preparation process.

We learned that, rather like my Swan 41, she doesn't go backwards well as she kicks hard to starboard. However, going forward she steered well with no play in the steering and was slightly less nervous than the 41, a feature which was going to prove very useful during the two gales we experienced the following week.

Remote service

So was it all worth it? I have to say that running a project like this remotely is very rewarding. I found the Jamestown Boatyard very different from my UK experience – both in terms of service and in how they worked. The administrative processes are probably easier than those in the UK and if you don't want to have the boat sailed back, substantial discounts can be had on the Dockwise transporter which runs from Newport to Cherbourg. We opted to sail the boat back and ship many of the inventory of 26 sails, awnings, spare sheets and some spares back in a container.

After our tough sail to Bermuda, Emma and I left the boat to return to university and work respectively, and the delivery crew had a beautiful crossing to the Azores, taking ten days, where we imported the boat into the EU and paid VAT. Another eight days and they were back in the Hamble for the end of May.

We did a lot of pre-crossing preparation work, but the only failures were a chafed-through furling line and a compass light bulb. The leaking main hatch garage was easily fixed in Bermuda when we discovered that the sealing strips inside were missing.

One of my reasons for liking the Sparkman & Stephens-designed Swans is their ability to combine cruising and racing in a moderate design. *Black Tie* was heavy with equipment so an early priority when we got back was to measure her empty weight on a single-point crane. It is a big job to empty the boat, but with an RORC measurer on hand and some help lifting gear off the boat from the local Scouts, she came in at more than 39,000lb, compared with her design displacement of 34,000lb. In cruising mode she weighs perhaps another 4,000lb. The weight savings from the carbon spinnaker pole didn't make up for the weight of all the machinery on board.

I have done every Round the Island Race since 1977 and, once weighed, we were keen to see how *Black Tie* would sail in this large fleet. Sailing with our crew of family and friends, we decided to take a day to get to know the boat ahead of the race. At that point we



Above: *Black Tie* alongside in Bermuda, after her stormy crossing. Left: three S&S sisters in Jamestown

hadn't even hoisted the racing sails, which had arrived by container two weeks earlier.

With such a heavy boat, we don't like very light airs and conditions which allow our competitors to surf don't suit us too well either. The weather was good with wind speeds in the range 16 to 21 knots true. After a moderate start we had a close reach down to the Needles with another Swan 47, *Bolero*, in sight ahead. Our good-quality reaching spinnaker allowed us to creep up and gradually overtake the fixed-keel boat – a good sign for those of us worried about how a centreboard-

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er might sail, although the real test is upwind.

We took the inside passage at the Needles and wound the keel up as a precaution to go through. The long beat down to St Catherine's showed that she was quite stiff, and in our hands was sailing close to the speeds predicted on the polar diagrams. The rest of the race was uneventful and the salmon steaks were cooked and served with cold white Burgundy as we reached with the spinnaker up to the finish. The elapsed time was 6 hours 59 minutes and we came 3rd in our class of 65 boats – only one second on corrected time behind the 2nd placed boat.

In all, a good start to the season and we feel we are starting to get to know our 'new' 1981-vintage boat.