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SWAN 38



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DAVID HARDING has been testing boats for more than 25 years. He is also a marine photographer and runs an agency, Sailing Scenes.



One of the most distinctively graceful boats afloat, the Swan 38 is a fine all-round performer



OWNER

A Yachtmaster Ocean and lifelong cruising sailor, DONALD BEGG completed a global circumnavigation in his previous boat, a Bowman 48. He bought the Swan for more local sailing, but has continued to cruise extensively.

SWAN 38

Sparkman & Stephens' Swan 38 from the 1970s is known as one of the all-time classic cruiser-racers for good reason, as David Harding discovers



to sail the S&S 34 and Contessa 32. With some of these boats, you can take the approach that most of what has been written about them was written a long time ago, and that what applied then might not be seen as quite so relevant today. Reputations are reputations nonetheless, and the fashions of the day play no part in the way the sea treats the boats that sail on it.

To today's younger boat show visitors especially, a boat like the Swan 38 might seem irrelevant and outdated. Compared with a typical modern 38-footer, she's dark and cramped below decks. She's not as fast or even as steady downwind in a breeze, and that enormous foretriangle is going to call for some serious winching every time you tack. Then you have that high, up-and-over bridgedeck that means you have to – well, climb up and over it to go down below.

You can understand all this being quite perplexing to a newcomer, who might look at you blankly and ask: 'What's so special about the Swan?'

TRADITIONAL VALUES

Your answer might be that if anyone has to ask, they're not ready for a Swan 38. This is a boat that's unlikely to be bought by someone new to sailing and planning to go marina-hopping around the coast. That might be seen as a waste of the Swan and,

Fine forward sections, a narrow waterline and deep canoe body all help to give the Swan 38 an easy motion in a seaway



Some boats' reputation is such that you might feel almost daunted by the prospect of sailing them, let alone writing about them.

If they're as good as they're cracked up to be, you might simply find yourself repeating things that have been said before, over years or even decades. And if they're not? Do you risk invoking the wrath of diehard enthusiasts who won't hear a word said against them?

Thankfully, any concerns I might have had on this score didn't stop me accepting an invitation to sail with Donald Begg on his Swan 38. After all, the Swan 38 is one of those boats that you just have to sail during your lifetime, in the same way that you have

All photos David Harding / sailingscenes.com

besides, there are plenty of alternatives better suited to that sort of use.

Boats such as the Swan 38 tend to be bought by people with hard-earned sea miles under their belts, who want to be able to go anywhere and who appreciate that the Swan is the type of boat that will look after them come what may.

In that respect, Donald Begg fits the 'owner profile' perfectly. Donald's previous boat was a Bowman 48, in which he sailed around the world between 2014 and 2020. He joined the World ARC for some legs, sailed independently on others, and left the boat periodically to come home in-between.

Earlier in his sailing career, Donald sailed a Condor 37, designed (like the Swan) by Sparkman & Stephens, built in Penryn and remarkably similar to the Swan 38. That's not why he bought the Swan, however.

'After the circumnavigation, I sold the Bowman, thinking I had completed my long-distance sailing,' he told me. His plan was to buy a smaller boat 'to keep me entertained in local waters'.

At the top of his list was the Rustler 36, but this was shortly after Covid and both examples he had his eye on were snapped up. Then his attention was drawn to a Sweden Yachts 42, before he found the



Wide side decks make for easy access forward. Note the genoa tracks, protected by bevelled wedges of teak

Swan advertised on the Hamble. As he explained: 'My criterion was a boat that would have survived the 1979 Fastnet.'

As it happens, a Swan 38 did survive the 1979 Fastnet, and that very boat is still winning races today. So Donald's faith in the design was well placed. 'I spent some money on *Ellida*, took her sailing, and enjoyed it so much that I kept going.'

Over the past four years he has sailed her from his base in Lymington to the Faroes, the Shetlands, Norway, the Dutch canals,

Brittany, Portugal and the Azores.

That's what happens when you have a boat like the Swan: she likes sailing, and makes you want to carry on. Why? It's the S&S (Sparkman & Stephens) magic, which her designers certainly worked into the 38. She possesses qualities that make for a fast, stiff, powerful, smooth and comfortable boat. She has a hull of modest beam with moderate freeboard and a relatively small wetted area, paired with a lead keel that accounts for nearly 40% of her weight, and a good spread of sail.

Her fine forward sections are a soft elliptical shape, giving her a notably easy motion upwind in a seaway. The relatively narrow waterline and deep canoe body are further contributory factors.

Like all Swans of this era, she has a tree trunk for a mast and a tall masthead rig with a large foretriangle.

It's well-known that the Swan 38 is a wizard to windward, especially when the wind and sea pick up. She carries her canvas, points high and goes fast while boats all around are running out of power, shortening sail, slamming and banging and making life miserable for their crews. The price you pay on the Swan is getting wet. You can't have it all ways.



Narrow by modern standards, the cockpit is secure in heavy weather and works well for both cruising and racing crews



Sail-handling is carried out at the mast, forward of which is a moulding incorporating stowage and a ventilator



Massive double foot blocks are set well aft to handle the sheets of the original large overlapping genoas



Control lines for the traveller mounted just abaft the high bridgedeck are led aft each side to the helm

The keel-stepped mast is a heavy section with a single set of in-line spreaders



With roller-reefing systems now fitted to most Swan 38s, headsail changes on the narrow foredeck are less frequent than they used to be



Recesses alongside the coachroof accommodate the spinnaker pole(s) and the jackstays, keeping the decks clear

In common with many boats from this era, the Swan has a masthead rig and a large foretriangle



QUALITIES AND COMPROMISES

The other trade-off is downwind in a breeze, when the narrow stern – a common feature during the IOR (International Offshore Rule) era – means that she reaches displacement speed and then starts to dig a hole in the water. She will surf in the right conditions, of course. Otherwise, don't expect more than about 8 knots. This hull shape, combined with a large masthead spinnaker, can make for lively downwind sailing in a breeze, though she's less prone to misbehaving than many of the more extreme IOR designs.

S&S tended to shy away from extremes, giving their designs good stability and undistorted hull lines. They also gave the Swan 38 a full-length skeg in front of a barn-door rudder.

Such a configuration might be seen as rather cruisy, clunky and old-fashioned on a performance boat that's so refined in other respects but, together with all that weight in the keel, it gives you a fighting chance of keeping the hull under the rig when you're pushing the limits downwind.

Going upwind, while the Swan 38 is an exceptional performer even by today's standards, short-tacking is hard work for the



The narrow stern and fine bow help to keep the boat well balanced on all points of sail

crew. That large genoa takes a lot of winching, especially as it has to pass around a babystay as well as the mast. Because the rig is so generously proportioned and the hull so easily driven, however, Swans sail efficiently in most conditions with a headsail of around 125% as opposed to the full-size No1, the clew of which extended abaft the companionway. Donald often sails single-handed.

Younger readers won't remember the days when racing yachts sailed with a wardrobe of up to half-a-dozen headsails, keeping the foredeck crew more than busy in changeable conditions. All these sails had to live somewhere. In the forecabin of the Swan 38 were two hinge-up pipe cots, the

space beneath being devoted to sail stowage. Most 38s have since been fitted with headsail roller-reefing systems and permanent berths in the forecabin. Even so, the original forecabins were still beautifully fitted out in teak. This was a Swan after all. And, although she nominally rated as a One Tonner under the IOR and was (and is) highly competitive on the race course, she was very much a cruiser/racer (or racer/cruiser, depending on your perspective).

Much of the foregoing is either well documented, or clear from little more than a cursory glance at the Swan's lines and statistics. Also well-known is that she's strongly built. The hull is a solid laminate with a steel I-beam bonded in along the



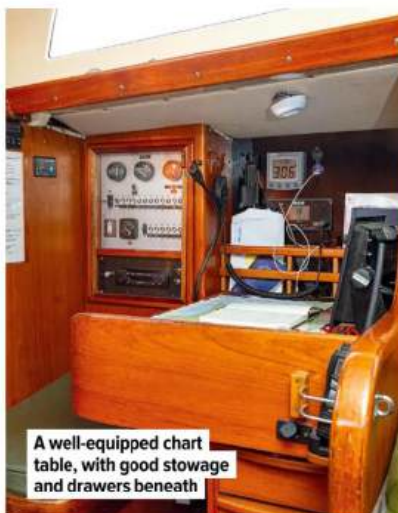
ABOVE: Space is well used in the compact galley. Note the opening in the bulkhead to the aft cabin

RIGHT: There are no wide-open spaces below decks, but a practical seagoing layout and beautifully finished joinery that has stood up well to thousands of sea-miles





centreline, taking the loads from the keel, mast and rigging. Combined with the skeg-hung rudder and the raked leading edge to the lead keel, it inspires confidence that the Swan 38 will be able to withstand encounters with rocks, storms and more besides, as she has ably demonstrated over the past 50 years.



A well-equipped chart table, with good stowage and drawers beneath

RELAXING SAILING

You wouldn't buy a Swan 38 if you didn't know what you were buying. If, like Donald, you do know, you will love her. Under sail she has the smooth motion, purposeful feel and long legs of an ocean-going thoroughbred. That much was obvious despite the benign conditions during our

sail around the Solent. She made upwind at a smidge under 6 knots in about 12 knots of wind, slicing her way through the short chop as though it wasn't there. The helm remained beautifully light, with just enough weight through the wheel to give a positive feel. The skeg precludes a balanced blade, so the steering could become heavy if more than minimal rudder angle were needed to keep her on track.

Donald says she will point to within 35° of the true wind in the right conditions, only needing to be sailed deeper when the sea builds up.

Unlike many modern designs, the Swan maintains a remarkably consistent balance upwind rather than needing helm adjustments in every gust and lull. She can readily be trimmed to sail herself.

It's easy to see that she's capable of maintaining good speeds on passage without demanding constant attention. Especially in short-handed sailing, the swiftest passages are often made by boats that keep going in any conditions while looking after the crew, rather than by those that achieve the highest speeds in short, energy-intensive bursts. Donald reckons he typically clocks 150-160 miles a day.

EXPERT OPINION

BEN SUTCLIFFE-DAVIES, Marine Surveyor and full member of the Yacht Brokers Designers & Surveyors Association (YDSA)
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It is hard not to gush about the quality of these extremely well-built yachts; I sail a 1979 S&S Alfa 42 ketch, so I may be biased.

The Swan Association and its very active membership regularly assist potential buyers. Many 38s will have had their topsides painted which may need work. If raced hard, get a trained surveyor to inspect any repairs; up to the mid-90s polyester was used, not epoxy, with shrinkage an issue.

The keel is lead, picked up on a stainless-steel structural beam glassed in to the bottom of her bilge; regularly check the hull-keel joint for movement. Out of the water, look for swelling of laminate around the keel recess. Likewise, lever the keel tip to check for any softening or laminate issues and look for water ingress or 'tea staining' around the fastenings.

Teak decks over 25 years old will be in need of replacing if not already done; the 38's foredeck is huge and will be costly to sort. Check the undersides of the deck for moisture in the core; most were reinforced with balsa, though later boats had foam. Either way, if it is wet it will need attention before any new deck is laid.

At the mast step, check for corrosion from the stainless shoe and alloy spar, where sometimes you will see a paste developing.

Look very closely at the chain plates and her stem cap fitting and fastenings. Over time damp can lead to crevice corrosion. If the engine is the original it will be over 40 years old. The Bukhs are virtually bombproof, but be realistic about when its time is up.





Most Swans now have headsails of a substantially smaller size than the original No1, which extended abaft the companionway

Something you have to accept on the Swan is going to the mast to tend halyards and reefing penants, because they're not led aft. As with multiple headsails, that's how it always used to be.

One benefit of this arrangement is that it avoids the risk of the cockpit turning into spaghetti city. And on the Swan, moving forward from the cockpit is made easy by the gentle motion, the wide sidedecks and the low, wedge-shaped coachroof with foot-braces in the form of two winches and horn cleats each side.

Then, when you reach the mast, you find the halyard winches and the babystay to hold on to.

En route, you'll notice recesses along the inboard sides of the decks to accommodate the spinnaker pole(s). The lazyjacks run through these too, making them less of a hazard underfoot than on many boats. Stubbing your toes on the genoa tracks is an almost non-existent hazard because they're protected each side by chamfered strips of teak.

In the cockpit, we find the high bridgedeck – good security against water going below decks if you're pooped, though some might not appreciate the climbing. The mainsheet traveller is immediately abaft the bridgedeck, its control lines on *Ellida* led to the helm. The aft cabin precludes much in the way of cockpit stowage: there's just a half-depth liferaft locker to port.

Down below you find the sort of finish for which Swans are famous. The detailing and use of space are exceptional. Pilot berths each side in the saloon – a rarity these days – are perfect for stowing kit bags. The small galley is functional, engine access excellent, the chart table given the priority you would expect, and the aft cabin small but useful in providing a degree of privacy.

VERDICT

You don't buy a Swan 38 without accepting that she's very different from a modern 38-footer – not that you would be likely to weigh her up against modern 38-footers. Compared with other boats of similar size and age, she's expensive because she's a Swan, and Swans have always been expensive because of the way they're built.

She looks gorgeous and sails beautifully. She cossets you at sea, with good manners and a proper seagoing layout. Finish and attention to detail below decks are of the highest order.

Any boat of this age will need maintenance, and probably some upgrading too. You can't expect to run a Swan on a tight budget. They're not that sort of boat. They deserve to be looked after, and offer rewards in return that few other boats can.

With thanks to the Royal Lymington Yacht Club for its help with this test.

ALTERNATIVES TO CONSIDER

BALTIC 38

Boats that can realistically be considered worthy of with the Swan 38 are surprisingly few and far between.

While plenty of IOR One Tonners and competitive boats of similar size were built at around the same time, few could compete in terms of build quality, finish or fit-out below decks – and that's one of the principal reasons for buying a Swan.

Most that can compete in the quality stakes are less performance-orientated – certainly less race-bred – including other Scandinavian designs. X-Yachts of similar size are much newer. The Sigma 38 is an example of a more recent racer/cruiser that's fast, tough and capable, but without the joinery to drool over.

In many ways, one of the closest equivalents is another Finnish boat designed by an American: Doug Peterson's Baltic 38. Dating from the days when Baltic Yachts built boats of this size (they now range from around 65ft upwards), she too has the narrow ends inspired by the IOR, together with a lead keel (as most Finnish boats do), a masthead rig with a large foretriangle and relatively small main, and an up-and-over bridgedeck. She also shows that Baltic is one of the few yards capable of rivalling Swan when it comes to below-decks finish – not surprisingly, perhaps, given that the

Built in Finland, like the Swan, the Baltic 38 is a pedigree performer



SWAN 38
DESIGNER Sparkman & Stephens
BUILT 1973-1979
PRICE £65,000-£85,000
LOA 11.60m/38ft 3in
LWL 8.70m/28ft 8in
BEAM 3.50m/11ft 6in
DRAUGHT 1.90m/6ft 4in
DISPLACEMENT 8,300kg/18,250 lb
BALLAST 3,200kg/7,055 lb
SAIL AREA 63.45m ² /683sq ft

BALTIC 38
DESIGNER Doug Peterson
BUILT 1982-1989
PRICE £59,000-£97,000
LOA 11.60/38ft 1in
LWL 9.60m/31ft 6in
BEAM 3.76m/12ft 4in
DRAUGHT 2.21m/7ft 3in
DISPLACEMENT 6,500kg/14,330 lb
BALLAST 2,950kg/6,504 lb
SAIL AREA 67.91m ² /731sq ft

OHLSON 38
DESIGNER Einar Ohlson
BUILT 1968-1980
PRICE £25,000-£40,000
LOA 11.30/37ft 1in
LWL 8.41m/27ft 7in
BEAM 3.06m/10ft 0in
DRAUGHT 1.71m/5ft 7in
DISPLACEMENT 6,759kg/14,900 lb
BALLAST 2,722kg/6,000 lb
SAIL AREA 45.00m ² /484sq ft

OYSTER 37
DESIGNER Holman & Pye
BUILT 1978-1980
PRICE £25,000-£40,000
LOA 11.28/37ft 0in
LWL 9.50m/31ft 2in
BEAM 3.68m/12ft 1in
DRAUGHT 1.91m/6ft 3in
DISPLACEMENT 7,498kg/16,530 lb
BALLAST 3,298kg/7,270 lb
SAIL AREA 59.92m ² /645sq ft



The Baltic's design reflects the racing-rule influences of the day



A fine performer, with relatively narrow beam and an encapsulated long fin keel



Oyster 37s are well-behaved boats and still competitive on the race course

yards are near neighbours in Pietarsaari.

Where the Baltic does differ from the Swan is in being roomier down below, thanks to her greater beam and freeboard in a hull that's the same length to within a few inches. The greater volume is principally a reflection of the fact that she was built almost exactly 10 years later.

Being nearly a foot broader in the beam, she has a roomier saloon and galley, and an aft cabin that's much more useable in harbour. The Swan has a single berth to port of the cockpit well and a double to starboard with an aperture through the bulkhead to the galley. By contrast, the Baltic has a semi-island double berth beneath the cockpit, with seating either side – less practical at sea, perhaps, but likely to find wider appeal.

OHLSON 38

If you are drawn to the Swan 38 because you prefer the sailing and seakeeping qualities of performance boats that are relatively deep and narrow rather than beamy and shallow, you might like to have a look at older alternatives in preference to newer ones.

One that stands out is the Ohlson 38. A fine seaboat, with many race wins and ocean crossings to her credit, she was designed in Sweden in the late 1960s by Einar Ohlson, who made his name with a series of multi-Olympic-medal-winning 5.5 Metres.

The Ohlson 38 was moulded by Tylers in Kent and fitted out by a number of yards in the UK and Europe including Bröderna Ölssonner, which later became Malö Yachts.

Some German and Swedish-built boats had wooden decks, but most were GRP, including the best-known Ohlson 38 of all, *Robertson's Golly*, sailed by Clare Frances in the 1975 OSTAR (Observer Singlehanded TransAtlantic Race).

Robertson's Golly was sponsored by the well-known jam manufacturers and, coincidentally, fitted out by Alexander Robertson of Argyll, a prominent Scottish boatbuilder that also built the Piper (now the Rustler 24) and the Etchells 22.

As befits her age and pedigree, the Ohlson has a more traditional feel than more recent designs. She's only just over 10ft (3.06m) in the beam, with an encapsulated long fin keel that runs into a skeg supporting the rudder (though later boats built entirely by Tylers as the Tuffglass 38 had bolt-on keels).

A number of Ohlson 38s were rigged as yawls, and nearly 130 were built in total.

OYSTER 37

In terms of reputation, Britain's equivalent to Swan – if there is one – is undoubtedly Oyster. The Oyster name has long been associated with high-quality boatbuilding, while many of the earlier models in particular were derived from racing yachts.

The boat that started it all for Oyster's founder, Richard Matthews, was the UFO 34, designed by Holman & Pye and based on a successful three-quarter tonner. Holman & Pye went on to design a good number of the early Oysters, including the 37, before Stephen Jones added several more, most of them also designed to race under the IOR.

Despite the IOR influences, builders such as Swan, Baltic and Oyster avoided extremes, working with designers who created fast and competitive boats that were also well-behaved and able to look after themselves and their crew when the going got tough. Holman and Pye drew capable, good-looking boats, and the Oyster 37 is no exception.

First launched five years after the Swan, she has the characteristic narrow ends and fine bow sections of the era, together with a masthead rig, large foretriangle and a keel (in lead) that's longer in the chord at the root than at the tip.

Below decks, the Oyster's race breeding shows in the pilot berths in the saloon. Aft of the chart table to starboard is an aft cabin – only extending to the centreline – with up to three further berths including a pipe cot.

The Oyster 37 should not be confused with Holman & Pye's later and much more cruisy Oyster Heritage 37.

