

Golden Fleece Restored

Kiss Of Life For A Lovely Lady

By Andrew Lansdale



Now restored to her former glory - *Golden Fleece* was a household name in the 1970s.

Neglected and sinking into decline, a Sparkman & Stephens 41' ocean-racer is restored to its old glory. Andrew Lansdale describes how a modern-day Jason and the Argonauts recaptured the glory of the *Golden Fleece*.

'Class will out,' as the saying goes. And *Golden Fleece* has class by the locker-full. Despite being sadly neglected in South Africa, her grace, her lines and her balance scream Sparkman & Stephens. She was built in Durban to an S&S design in 1974 for Gordon Neil, the Commodore of the Royal Natal Yacht Club. She was constructed at his own boatyard and started to fulfil her racing pedigree immediately upon delivery. She competed in the annual Vasco da Gama race, 300 tough miles from Mozambique to Durban. In the same year she was entered for the Agulhas Race, a challenging 'there and back' course around the South African coast with the 4-knot Agulhas current providing a substantial wind-against-tide element of excitement.

The next year, she represented South Africa in the Admiral's Cup at Cowes and in the same year won the famous Rothmans Week competition in Cape Town. Many other ocean races such as the Mauritius/Durban contest and Durban/East London have also been notched up.

Golden Fleece's current owner, Michael Wheeler, spotted her in a very sorry state in a marina in Durban nine years ago. But as a classic beauty might in time lose her superficial looks, one can almost always see the structure of elegance under the surface.

Wheeler bought her against the advice of the surveyor. "There are other boats," he had confided. There may have been a number of times since then when Wheeler's thoughts might have reflected on those words: But not any more.

In challenging conditions, he sailed the boat to Cape Town in mid-December 1999 and frantically prepared her for the Cape to Rio race starting on 8 January 2000.

With five friends and family they breathlessly made the start line. But after a few days, the full extent of the neglect started to manifest itself. Water flowed into the boat, both through the decks and through the hull. Five days into the race, they lost the electrics - no bilge pumps, no radio, no chart plotter and no weatherfax and 3,000 miles to go.

So it was back to old-fashioned sailing. Buckets in a chain-gang to bail out the incoming water; flashlights to see the compass, hand-held GPS to plot positions on a paper chart, and even a sextant!

A lack of weather information led them to being knocked over on their beam ends

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twice in violent squalls. Then they were becalmed for two days in a South Atlantic high pressure system. They went swimming off the boat with 15,000 feet of water under their dangling legs. After 28 days, the race organisers were relieved to see them appear unheralded across the finish line in Rio de Janeiro, and encouragingly, towards the front of the field.

The boat might have been in a poor condition, but worse was to come. Wheeler had to fly back to England and left her in the hands of a marina whose management agreed to look after her on



The interior was revamped and the original mahogany beams retained.



Her restoration was a labour of love as much rotted timber had to be replaced.

of work on the boat to keep her going and he had without doubt encountered many problems. When Wheeler eventually discovered the extent of the damage to her he realised that it was a wonder he got her back at all.

Back in England, he had her surveyed and put tenders out to boatyards for the work to be done. Tom Richardson from the Elephant Boatyard at Bursledon in Hampshire undertook the work. It started in February 2004.

After drying out the hull, several components and layers had to be removed before the rebuild could start. Much rotted timber decking, hull panels and beams were cut out. But as is always the case, the more nasties that were revealed, the more nasties appeared. The hull and deck had been built of three layers of 6mm. cold-moulded marine plywood. Water had infiltrated these layers and compromised their grip on each other.

The original fitting out had been for that of an ocean racing boat with spartan living conditions. And for handicapping purposes, the engine was mounted amidships. Wheeler wanted a comfortable, fast cruising yacht to emerge from the rebuild. The engine was replaced with a new Yanmar and moved right aft under the cockpit. The swan that was to emerge from the sieve had started to take shape. The refurbished hull and deck were painstakingly prepared and covered with an epoxy sheathing.

The new interior design provided a




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spacious double fore-cabin, head and shower and a single sofa berth forward and to port in the main cabin. Opposite was a u-shaped sofa with table which could convert to a second double berth. To starboard aft there are two pilot berths and a fridge, while to port is the fitted galley, cool-box, chart table and navigation station.

The original mahogany beams were retained to maintain the traditional look. Some were found to have been drilled through from end to end and stainless steel rods inserted. Thereafter the beams were steamed and bent to an attractive bow shape.

The decks were then lovingly sheathed in teak and the topsides were finished in Awlgrip 'flag blue'.

Finally the original mast and boom were re-finished, standing rigging renewed and new sails provided by Gowen Ocean Sails from West Mersea in Essex.

The whole task had taken five years. The *Golden Fleece* of Mersea was relaunched at the end of May last year. From the pontoon she attracts sharp intakes of breath, she is so spectacular. Down below, you run out of sharp intakes. Seasoned yachtsmen shake their heads in wonder. The swan had at last emerged.

"I never met Gordon Neil, the original owner (I did not buy the boat from him) but I did speak to him on the telephone in Durban and he sent over to me the original set of the ship's crockery embossed with the name of 'Golden Fleece' and the crossed flags of the Royal Natal Yacht Club and the 'old' South African national flag. I still have them onboard," said Wheeler.

Sparkman and Stephens as a company was established in November 1929. Drake Sparkman and Olin Stephens have now 'crossed the bar'; Stephens only in 2008. But they are sure to be gazing down to cast an eye over the success of their creations. When the sun rose again over *Golden Fleece*, they would have nodded to each other in a satisfied sign of approval and given the little ship a 'thumbs-up'. ↴

Specifications

Golden Fleece of Mersea, formerly Golden Fleece.

Built	1974 Durban, South Africa
Designer	Sparkman & Stephens
Length overall	41 feet
Length waterline	31 feet
Beam	12 feet
Draught	6 feet 6 inches
Displacement	19,969 lbs
Sail Area	755.5 square feet
Engine	Yanmar 54hp Diesel
Propeller	3-bladed bronze
Berths	7 berths, 2 doubles 3 singles
Capacity Water	175 litres (46 US gallons)
Fuel	200 litres (53 US gallons)
Condition	Excellent



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