

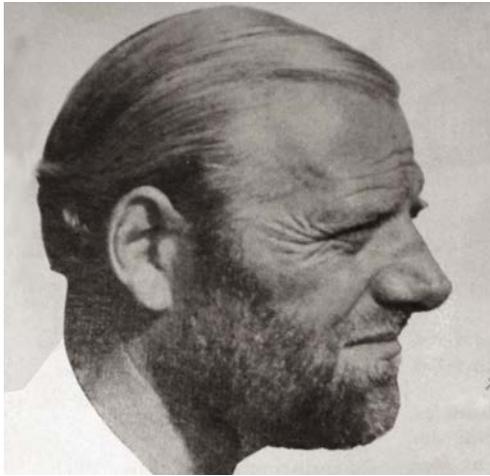
# THE PERFECT LINE

The S&S *Circe* was the toast of New England in the 1950s, but later hit the headlines for the wrong reasons. Now she's in good hands again and is sailing back to her Baltic roots



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## SWEDISH YAWL TRIUMPHS

### Circe Wins 630-Mile Fastnet Race, Beating British Yacht

PLYMOUTH, England, Aug. 16 (AP)—The Swedish yawl *Circe* outlasted a strong British challenge tonight to win the Royal Ocean Racing Club's 630-mile Fastnet race.

*Circe*, captained by C. Hardeberg, finished 11 minutes 15 seconds ahead of the British yawl *Bloodhound*. The two yachts had been close together throughout the race, which started last Saturday from Cowes, Isle of Wight.



Where do you take a Sparkman & Stephens yawl if you want to really test her against her kin? If you want to put her up against the best and most competitively sailed and also most immaculately looked after boats bearing S&S lineage, you go to the Med. There you'll find your pride and joy lined up on a quay somewhere alongside *Blitzen*, *Stormy Weather*, *Argyll*, *Manitou* and *Skylark* among others. Imposing company, given their long race histories and professional standard of maintenance today. They effectively form a class within a class, probably deserving of its own Sparkman & Stephens trophy.

Among the S&S royalty tied up stern-to at Cannes' Régates Royales last summer, there was a newcomer. Kind of a newcomer – she's been around since 1950 and has had a few victories to her name over the years, including Fastnet line honours in 1951 and class win in the 1954 Newport-Bermuda. *Circe* was designed by Olin Stephens in 1949 and built at the Plym yard in Sweden. Launched into Sweden's post-war yachting scene, she won the Gotland Runt (Round Gotland) race in 1950 and has led an international and colourful life since then, including being owned by a Hollywood star and almost being burned to ashes by a disillusioned lover – haven't all the great boats such tales to tell?

## STOCKHOLM ROOTS

*Circe*, the goddess of magic, an enchantress before whom men fall bewitched and helpless, is possibly the most apt name for a wooden yacht ever. The Greeks pronounce both c's in the word with hard k's, the Italians use a 'ch' sound and others say it with two soft s's. It's not recorded what particular consonant was uttered as the bottle smashed over her bow at Neglinge, in Saltsjöbaden near Stockholm, but her launch will have been quite a moment, even for the experienced builders of the Plym yard. August Plym, who founded the yard in the 1890s, died in 1924, but the high quality of work that he'd been known for had continued. Plym had developed new construction methods at the turn of the century and introduced strict quality control, employing the best men and often building to his own designs. After his death, his son Carl Plym took over, but six years later he died in an aircraft accident. Bengt Plym and his brother Gustav Plym then took on the business and became known for

Above left to right: *Circe's* first owner Carl Hardeberg, who skippered her to success in the 1951 Fastnet; race report in the *New York Times* August 1951; second owner Carl Hovgard

building yachts by well-known designers, including Knud H Reimers, Tore Holm and Olin Stephens.

Perhaps a dozen Sparkman & Stephens designs were built at the Plym yard, including *Refanut*, *Ballad* and *Barracuda II*. At the time, European yards, particularly Scandinavian yards, were favoured by some Americans who wanted to have a yacht built. The owners enjoyed an economic advantage, as well as the Scandinavian build quality and the sail home.

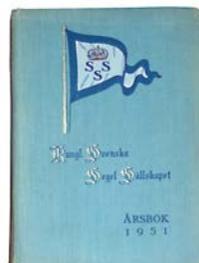
Despite the Plym yard's impeccable reputation, the ever fastidious Rod Stephens visited *Circe's* build to ensure things were being done as he'd want. Clearly, they were. *Circe* was said to be one of the strongest yachts of her time and Rod later wrote that boats built at the Plym yard didn't need bilge pumps.

It was an era when S&S could do no wrong. Their boats were fast, beautiful and seaworthy, proven time and again in race victories and long-distance cruises. *Circe* was every inch an S&S thoroughbred. Her full transom, carvel mahogany planking bent over 2½in (64mm) frames, teak deck, bronze fastenings and floors, gave her strength. Her wineglass bottom, masthead rig, powerful mainsail and what was reportedly the world's largest Dacron genoa, by Ratsey & Laphorn, over a narrower beam than some of Olin's designs of the period, gave her speed.

Her first owner was Carl Hardeberg, a pilot and aeroplane salesman who commissioned the boat in 1948. An enthusiastic yachtsman, he envisaged *Circe* as a fast offshore cruiser, but raced her widely in her first years afloat, including in the 1951 Fastnet, where she took line honours. Victory on corrected time went to Owen Aisher and *Yeoman III* by more than five hours, but *Circe* had shown her pace against a competitive fleet, and proved her seaworthiness in severe weather that caused many retirements and a dismasting.

Hardeberg was forced to sell due to financial difficulties in 1951 and she passed into the hands of Carl Hovgard, a prominent Wall Street financier. In 1954, Hovgard made headlines when he rescued the Nevins yard in New York from closure, buying it for \$900,000 to run as a "break-even hobby," according to *Time* magazine, and because he wanted a suitable berth for *Circe*.

The boat took part in various New York Yacht Club events and in the biennial Newport-Bermuda Race of 1954, where she won her class against other S&S designs





*Main picture: Circe in her offshore racing prime in 1955.  
Insert: The Cowes start of the 1951 Fastnet Race, with  
Circe, far right, on her way to line honours*

BERKELEY-COWES



*Stormy Weather, Bolero and Argyll.* A year after that, she headed back to Swedish waters in the Transatlantic Race from Newport to Marstrand. Seven yachts took part, all with amateur crews. A *Sports Illustrated* photo caption showing *Circe* before the race says: “She is a dangerous competitor on a spinnaker run or on a beat to windward. Her fast hull and efficient yawl rig give her relatively high handicap. Nevertheless, she is considered the boat to beat.”

A *New York Times* preview of the race calls *Circe* “as slick a yacht as you are ever likely to see”. The article also mentions *Circe*’s cook: “He has canned chicken, canned turkeys, canned hams, steaks and such things aboard. He also has two weeks’ supply of iron rations, but hopes he does not have to use them.”

He didn’t. *Circe* came home in second place.

Her racing career continued in style on both sides of the Atlantic, with Hovgard, who became Commodore of the American Yacht Club in the late 1950s, sailing her to victory in many southern New England events.

By the 1960s, however, she was getting on for a race yacht and *Circe*’s suitability as a capacious and fast cruiser came to the fore. She changed hands more than once and was moved to the US west coast by an Italian physicist, Giannini, in the 1970s, to be used as family cruiser out of San Diego YC, later going up for auction and becoming a liveaboard boat, pampered by her owners but covering relatively few sea miles.

## FIRE AND REBIRTH

“I was coming across from Catalina on a Rhodes yawl and this other boat was coming up, catching us. Nobody ever caught us! What was this boat?” Marvin Buurman never forgot his first sight of *Circe*. When his attention was taken some years later by an online news story about a serious boat fire in California, he didn’t have to look twice to know it was her again.

*Circe* had spent time ashore and at one point was almost bought by naval architect Doug Peterson. Instead she went to someone who planned to sail her around the world. The trip never happened, but he undertook a major restoration, carried out by Taylor and Snediker in Mystic Seaport, Connecticut. This was an extensive 15-month job, starting in December 2000, that took the boat back to her bare essentials and built her up again for the kind of offshore voyaging she’d been built for.

It was shortly after this work, in 2002, that Olin Stephens attended a winter meeting of the Sparkman & Stephens Association at Mystic Seaport, where he and

*Above l-r:* Marvin Buurman owned her in California; current owner Theo Danel will race her in the Gotland Runt again. *Opposite top:* an attractive interior. *Opposite below:* racing at Cannes. *Below:* 1950s illustration with her sail number

guests saw four S&S designs – *Circe, Bolero, Comet* and *Brilliant*. A report of the day records: “When pressed later at lunch, Olin offered that of the four yachts toured that day, *Circe* is the one he would choose to have as his personal yacht.”

His chosen one she may have been, but the ups and downs of a classic yacht are many. She changed hands again, selling to a Hollywood actress, and it was on one unhappy night in 2007 that a ‘domestic fire’ broke out and *Circe* was almost reduced to ashes.

Marvin Buurman recalls: “I read a story about this boat fire. It showed a photo of the bow, but I just knew it was the same boat that had sailed right past us all those years ago. I called the boatyard and they said it was totalled. When I walked on board, she was black, but not destroyed. It just looked bad.”

She went up for auction and Buurman put in a bid. “Six whole months went by and they emailed me. ‘Your bid’s been accepted.’ I went: ‘Oh no!’”

But *Circe* had gone to the right man. An amateur woodworker, Buurman took on much of the job himself. “I cared more than anyone I could hire!” All fire damage was repaired, much woodwork was replaced and everything was repainted.

“I relaunched her within a year and a half,” says Buurman. “The interior still had burn marks, but we went and raced her right away. We picked up a scratch crew, took her out and won.

“Three months later I was reading the paper and there was an obituary of one of the crew from that day. The obituary mentioned that he’d sailed on *Circe*. That’s the thing about these boats. It’s an honour to sail on them.

“I raced her on the west coast, in the McNish Classic, and we won three times. But then I wanted to go cruising again. It’s sacrilegious to take one of these boats and put a generator in. It’s a race yacht. Sure, you can take this boat places, but cruising to isolated areas is hard on a wooden boat.”

## TO THE MED

At the helm off Cannes sits Theo Danel. Cigar in mouth, sunglasses on, barefoot and in a light blue collarless shirt bearing a *Circe* moniker, he eyes the other S&Ss jockeying for position on the start line.

Danel has an artistic background – “I paint and I write,” he says – and he has lived the itinerant life of the skipper, helming yachts in and around the Med circuit, for 25 years. He’s also a naval architect, having enrolled in the respected Westlawn Insititute correspondence course for naval architecture and graduated after four years of evening study aged 36.

“At a certain point you’re doing the varnish but your mind is not developing!” he says. “When you understand the maths behind the designs it gets much more interesting.”

Danel put his new-found knowledge into practice, drawing a 48ft (12.8m) Spirit of Tradition gaff sloop – a foam-core composite hull with inverse bow that rates well under both IRC and CIM. “It was radical when we launched it and it still is,” he says.

Meanwhile he restored the Fife *Iona*, a delightful 25ft (7.6m) Belfast Lough One Design also on the water at Cannes, and he carried on skippering, among his charges





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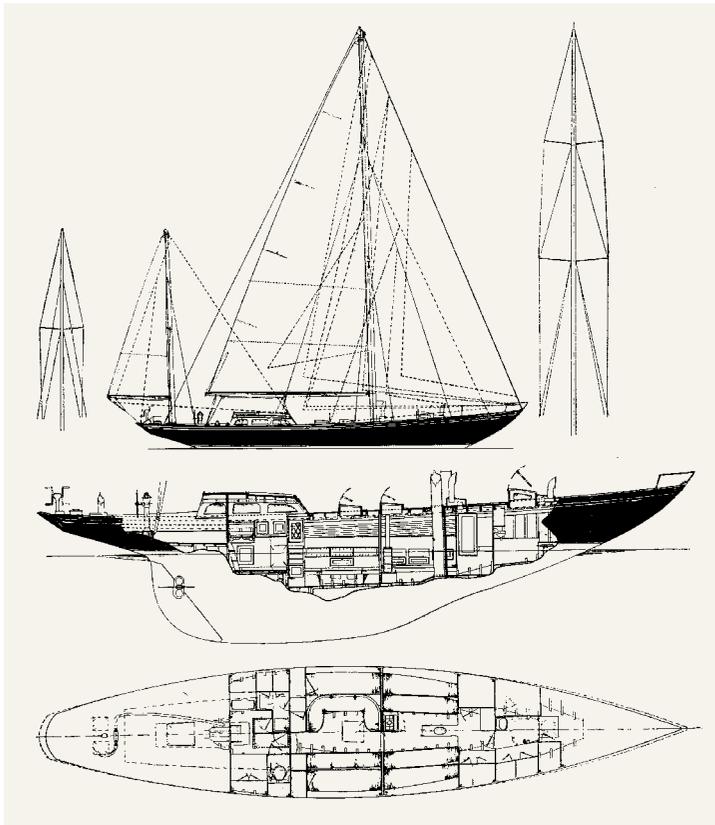


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the S&S *Zwerver II*, which by coincidence is a sister ship to *Circe*, built in 1954 on the same lines but as a sloop, not a yawl.

Perhaps it was his close knowledge of *Zwerver II* that caused him to pause over a yacht-for-sale advertisement two years ago. “It was the perfect line,” he recalled. “I’m not particularly an S&S man, more Fife or Estlander! But on this yacht Olin had continued the bow and the stern a little bit and bump, it’s the perfect boat. We got attracted to it and we went to have a look, in California. I said beforehand: ‘We are going to sit on the boat and if it feels okay, then okay. If it doesn’t feel okay, we walk away.’”

It was okay. He and the ex-owner with his son sailed the boat to Mexico, then shipped her to Fort Lauderdale, put her back in the water for a week and then shipped her to the Med. From a base in Saint-Tropez, he took her back to bare wood below the waterline and applied an epoxy coat, then raced her twice, at Imperia and Cannes.

“With that information, knowing how the boat behaved, we started work,” he says. New sails were designed, then redesigned, paint and varnish was stripped, systems were overhauled, the engine was serviced, new instruments were fitted, the aluminium mast was stripped back, lightened and repainted, water tanks were replaced with bags, solid stanchions were taken off, bunks were refitted down below, a heads was removed and everything was reupholstered.

Danel says: “We have tried to give her a little bit of a different character than the other S&S yawls, just a bit off, but very sensitive, not too aggressive. Even down to the sail numbers – they’re grey, not black. If there’s a lot of input on a boat, your eyes are always looking, but the less you have to look at, the nicer it is. It calms the eye.”

Aesthetically the boat is completed, but this past winter Danel took her to the Ventis Shipyard in

The 1949 design by Olin Stephens; oblong ports; bronze spinnaker sheet winch fitted in 2001 made by LVJ Winches

Enkhuizen, Holland, for further engine, piping and planking work as well as to recaulk the teak deck. “Pfff, another very long winter,” he comments. Refit phase three, perhaps next winter, will include changing the aluminium rig for wood.

Meanwhile this summer she is heading north, to return to her home waters for the first time in almost 70 years, where she will do the Baltic circuit, Kiel Week and the Gotland Runt race, in early July, that she won in 1950.

On the water at Cannes, *Circe* is a magnificent sight. She was designed without reference to any rating rule. The Cruising Club of America rule might have encouraged a broader beam than her 11ft 9in (3.6m), while the RORC rule might have seen her longer-ended and with a lower rig, as a *Yachting World* review of the ‘New Yachts of the Year’ noted at the time. “Olin just wanted the best boat he could do,” says Danel. Her clear S&S heritage, her straight good looks and Danel’s meticulous refit ensure the boat is surrounded by a phalanx of photographers and onlookers on the Cannes town quay.

Once we’re afloat and out in the bay, with an international crew, snatches of Finnish crackle across the deck, moments of French, Spanish – and there’s an American accent. Marvin Buurman is here from California to see his old yacht in her new life.

“Over in San Diego, I knew she was fast, but we never had the chance race against all these famous S&S yawls,” he says. “That is what we did today and it was good to see.”

How did she do? When *Circe* crosses the finish line, Danel looks around and asks: “Where is everybody?” We’re alone bar the committee boat. The entire Med fleet is in our wake. *Circe* has shown her colours again.

Look out Gotland.

**CIRCE**

LOA  
**56ft 10in**  
**(17.3m)**

LWL  
**40ft 4in**  
**(12.3m)**

BEAM  
**11ft 9in**  
**(3.6m)**

DRAUGHT  
**8ft (2.4m)**

SAIL AREA  
**1,378sq ft**  
**(128m<sup>2</sup>)**

DISPLACEMENT  
**20 tons**  
**(44,800lbs)**