

Stoke-on-Trent Boat Building 66ft

Length: 66ft 0in Beam: 6ft 10in Engine: Beta Marine 43 Electrical: 45amp & 150amp alternators, 1600w Victron Phoenix Multiplus inverter/charger

PREFACE

We've all filled in one of those 'where did you hear of our product?' survey forms. You know the sort of thing: was it from a magazine article, an advertisement, the internet and so on.

Or was it 'personal recommendation'? Businesses love customers who come by personal recommendation. What better (and cheaper!) advert for your goods can there be than one happy owner passing on the good news about a product to others.

The builders of this month's test boat were found in just such a way. And it wasn't just a recommendation from a bloke in the pub or a mate on the towpath; no, much better than that, the recommendation came from the owner's parents who used the same builder for their own boat. Hence the name – Sue and Chris Nicholls' Swansong Too follows on from Swansong which was her parents' boat, both of them being built by Stoke on Trent Boatbuilding.

In this boating version of The Generation Game, Sue and Chris first took over Swansong from her parents when they retired from boating but with a growing family of ?? teenage?? Boys?? who all enjoyed boating they eventually decided they needed a boat with more permanent accommodation that it could offer. So 'Too' was commissioned as a semi-trad family boat with five permanent berths in two cabins as well as a convertible dinette to provide a further occasional double berth. All this takes up space (especially as the three-bedded children's cabin has its own en-suite toilet) and the finished craft is 66ft long.

EXTERIOR AND LAYOUT

Some longer narrowboats carry their considerable length much better than others whose long and skinny proportions seem the first and only thing to catch the eye. Swansong Too is very definitely in the former category: it's a handsome looking boat which, though clearly long is one that few would actually guess at being only four feet off the maximum. Stoke Boats are one of that diminishing breed of narrowboat builders who build rather simply fit out boats. They do the lot, from the

steelwork to the paintwork, and their hulls, particularly those like Too's that have an elegant Josher bow, are much admired. (As an added trad touch they can come with 'rivets' too, although the Nicholls chose not to have these.) Down at the other end of the boat, recessed rear side panels are another good looking detail. They carry the boat's name and its Stoke Boats number – 274 (not many firms can claim that many builds) – all executed in stylish signwriting. Paintwork is an understated but attractive Craftmaster 'coach green' with lighter 'dovedale green' side panels while the brass cabin side windows are a mix of rectangular for the saloon and galley and slightly larger than normal double glazed portholes in the private areas. There are no side hatches – the interior layout doesn't really provide for them – and a Houdini hatch above the galley. Though it is a semi-trad, a design which often favours a rear galley layout, Too has a conventional configuration inside, with a rear master cabin followed by a side bathroom to port. Next comes the children's cabin which features bunks to one side and a single bed on the other, leading forward to the galley and on into a large, open-plan saloon and dinette before exiting into the relatively short, cratch-covered front deck.

SALOON AND DINETTE

We start our 'walk-through' from the front where glazed doors lead into the saloon/dinette area from the well deck. They're a little wider than some – Stoke build them this way to ease access for the full size 'white goods' and larger furniture many owners specify these days. A simple storage box cum step brings one down into a saloon space that is bright and light thanks to its open-plan layout and large window area. To one side of the step is the Morso solid fuel stove and on the other a TV stands on a corner cupboard with music system and storage shelves inside. The boat's interior fit-out is in ash – an attractive wood that is well figured with a variety of interesting graining yet is not too dark in colour. The joinery has a solid 'chunky' style to it but that certainly doesn't mean it is in any way down on quality compared with some fussier interiors. Quite the opposite; all edges are nicely chamfered, the joints square and tight and the chunkiness of uprights, door framings and the like give a nice sturdy quality to the boat. Stoke like to build traditional 'boaty' interiors and Swansong Too's saloon reflects this. The ceiling is lined in tongue and vee groove ash and the cabin sides in ash veneered ply. The vertical frames for these run up and over the ceiling as stylish 'ribs'. Below the gunwales in the saloon it is t&g again, this time vertically, and to show off this to best advantage skirting level fin-rads supply central heating. Pretty wall mounted reading lights are complemented by LED down lighters in the ceiling (these low consumption lights are used throughout the boat). Flooring in the saloon is hard-wearing carpet – a practical choice for a busy boat. The interior is fitted with a sensible eye on future service and repair, too: covers for cabling and pipes can be easily

unscrewed to give access to everything – it's a common sense touch that comes from years of boatbuilding. The open plan style of the living space is emphasised by the choice of furniture. There's just a single swivel-recline armchair and footstool taking premier position near the TV in the saloon 'end' while the L-shaped sofa that doubles – indeed trebles – up as mealtime seating and extra bed provides very comfortable general family seating along with a couple of square pouffes. The sofa features soft, well-padded leather cushions and backrests, with a particularly nicely curved corner cushion. The table and accompanying Desmo legs are cleverly stowed in a hollow half bulkhead between the sofa and galley units. When required, the sofa converts quickly to a double bed by pulling out an extension frame from under the main seating and using the backrest cushions to complete the mattress. L-shaped dinettes have rather fallen out of fashion but, given the comfort of this one, it's hard to see why as they offer far more versatile and open seating than the boxed off 'Pullman' style dinette.

GALLEY

Swansong Too was designed as a weekends and holidays boat rather than a comprehensively equipped live aboard so the galley is practical and functional rather than something from a kitchens magazine. It's built either side of a central aisle, with the main length of cupboards and worktop to starboard and a shorter row opposite. Both are topped with conventional surfaces edged in ash for added quality. There is a pair of compact corner wall cupboards at the rear of the galley but otherwise everything is kept below worktop level which, again, helps the feeling of space in the area. The floor is finished with large attractive tiles. On the starboard side the units begin with a shallow cupboard and drawer unit that backs on to the dinette, turning round the corner to the Stoves 500 DIT cooker. Next comes a double cupboard, again with drawers over, then a free-standing Ranger 12v fridge before the units end with a highly practical roll-out larder unit. On the opposite side the large single drainer sink sits centrally in the work surface. There's a double cupboard below (with false drawer fronts above it to keep symmetry with the rest of the units) and a further storage cupboard to one side. A clever waste bin arrangement occupies the angled front end of the unit: there's a lift-off stainless steel lid set into the worktop through which rubbish can be dropped down a chute into a large bin in the end cupboard below. A door in the end of the unit opens for access to the bin when required.

SECOND CABIN

The cosy 'kids' cabin' comprises a pair of full length bunk beds on the port side with a matching single berth opposite – plus the inevitable telly mounted on the bulkhead ahead of this bed for viewing and game playing. Both the lower beds have storage underneath. A nice twist is that the upper of the two bunks has a split-folding base and mattress design that enables half the base to be swung back up and latched against the cabin wall. In this way, if there are only two on board the lower berth user gains a seat with proper headroom from which to watch TV or read. Behind the bunks is a roughly triangular shaped and very useably sized toilet compartment with a Vetus macerator pump-out w.c., washbasin and towel rail rad. Doors at either end close the cabin off and we were impressed by the quality of the slim brushed alloy door handles and the use of 'proper' door hinges. It has to be said, though, that locating the kids' cabin in mid-boat is a slightly curious decision. It means that if young children have gone to bed early adults have to go through the cabin from the saloon to reach the main bathroom while older children (and their parents!) might prefer being away at the back of the boat where they can play music or games without disturbing the rest of the boat. A rear secondary cabin would also double up as a handy day cabin to keep the steerer company on a wet day. But a bespoke boat is a bespoke boat and this is the layout the family wanted.

BATHROOM

The main bathroom is a sensible off-the-corridor design. It is smartly tiled throughout in white with an attractive light and dark blue central strip of smaller tiles. The 28-inch square domestic shower compartment is located against the rear bulkhead with the calorifier alongside and this has airing cupboard style shelving above. Toilet is another Vetus macerator and the ceramic basin sits on a corner vanity cupboard.

MASTER CABIN

The simple and stylish main bedroom has an in-line double bed which shows off another Stoke Boats 'tweak': it doesn't extend but instead has been built slightly wider than the usual fixed double, at 4ft 3in wide which, says Stoke's Mike Adkins while leaving a perfectly adequate corridor "makes all the difference to comfort". The waste tank is located under the bed, with a large clothes drawer alongside. There's plenty more clothes space: a sizeable full height wardrobe at the rear of the bed with a half-height hanging cupboard alongside it below which is the electric cupboard. On the opposite side of the rear steps is a dressing table unit with a mirror above it and there is an over-bed cupboard above the bed head with reading lights in its base. As elsewhere the ceiling lights are LEDs

and there are more LEDs set under the gunwales which are very useful to light the gangway to the toilet (or in an emergency) at night. The floor is carpeted to match that of the saloon and the carpet extends up the lower cabin sides to gunwale level, as it does along the corridor.

TECHNICAL

Nothing too surprising here; the Nicholls wanted a craft for pleasure boating not living aboard so they opted for a straightforward technical specification, using mainly 12v electrics, a healthy battery capacity and a modest output inverter – a Victron 1600w inverter/charger. When the boat is not in use it is stabled at Swanley Moor marina where the batteries can of course be topped up by landline charging. The engine is the ubiquitous Beta 43 and there is some good attention to detail in the installation. As well as a Centreflex coupling there is a thrust bearing installed in the driveshaft to absorb propeller thrust and further reduce engine vibration, plus sound deadening under the deck boards. The Beta has twin alternators; a 45-amp unit charging the engine battery and a 150-amp unit which charges the boat's five 110ah leisure batteries. The battery box is located under the deck on the starboard side, below the locker and seat. To make access to them for service work easier the whole locker can be unbolted and removed, another sensible provision. Up front there's a Vetus 75kgf electric bow thruster with its own pair of batteries, all accessed via a cross-locker in the well deck.

ON THE WATER

A long boat, a breezy day, a narrow marina exit and a couple of tight bridges – all good reasons to be glad of that bow thruster (its switches very sensibly mounted on the flat upper surface of the throttle control panel rather than tucked away as some are). That said, Swansong Too is a craft that belies its length with a light and smooth tiller action and easy handling. I have to confess to being content to admire the owner of the company put his 30 years of experience of canal boating into play on the tricky bits but, even so, the boat never felt the belligerent beast that some long craft can when negotiating bridges and locks or mooring up.

CONCLUSION

Swansong Too is an altogether very likeable craft. It's not a boat of frills and fancies but an honest, traditional boat in the classic mould. It is extremely well built, both inside and outside where the steelwork and painting are terrific, but so it should be at a finished price of £117,000. (Stoke do build 'em cheaper – from a bit over £90,000 for a 60-footer but then the extras like that Jasher bow and

those recessed panels are what makes a boat special but increase the bill!) There is a lot to be said for buying a boat from a company that's been around a while; that understands from long experience what works well and what doesn't. Too has plenty of little tweaks that are the result of all that experience. In a changing economic climate there is a lot to be said, too, for dealing with a firm that knows the business – and that knows the best way to survive any tough times is to keep the customers satisfied. Satisfied enough to bring back a second generation of customers in fact.

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