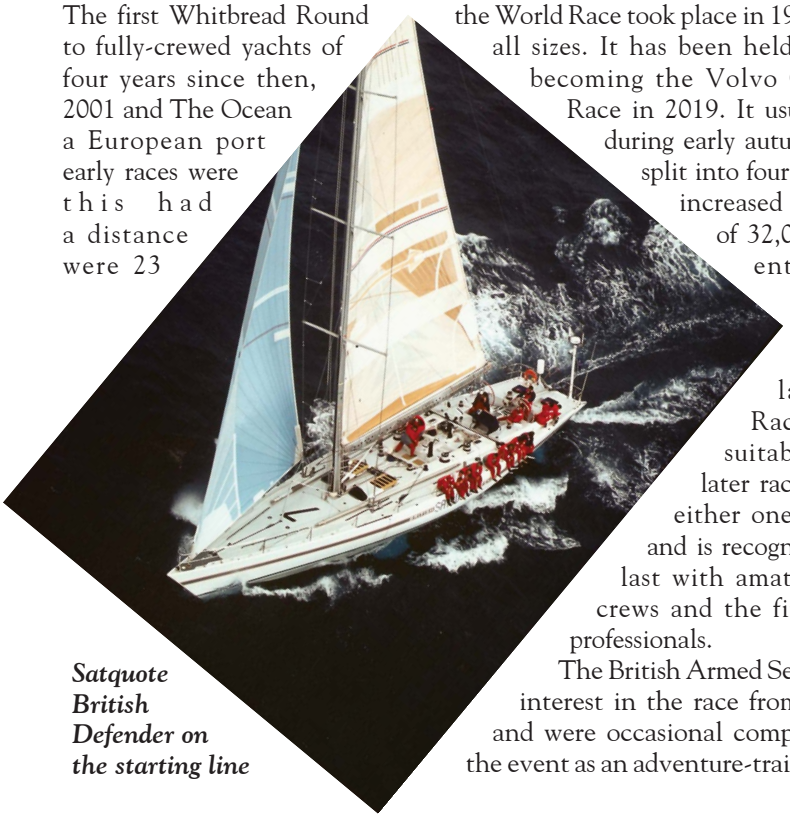
THE 1989/90 WHITBREAD ROUND THE WORLD RACE
Colin Watkins
Introduced by Richard Nicolson

I spent my early years building pretend yachts from timber off-cuts in cold, damp Scottish boatyards. Much to my frustration, my father, a Founder Member of the OCC, spent more time building boats than sailing them. Then in the late 1970s he saw sense. He bought a bare hull, and as soon as a secondhand mast was acquired we went sailing. This sort of sailing was basic – no engine, no electrics (not even lights) and no luxuries. My dad, my sister Elizabeth and I short-tacked into local marinas under cover of darkness to refill the water containers (no water tanks) and, as our experience grew, my sister and I would sail the boat without parental supervision.

On leaving school I assisted with the rebuild of a 42ft wooden yacht, *Tritsch Tratsch*, Beth and I completing our first transatlantics (and OCC qualifying passages) aboard her from Falmouth via Madeira and Bermuda to Marblehead, Massachusetts. On arrival I hitched aboard racing yachts in Long Island Sound and the vicinity.

The first Whitbread Round the World Race took place in 1973 and was open to fully-crewed yachts of all sizes. It has been held every three or four years since then, becoming the Volvo Ocean Race in 2001 and The Ocean Race in 2019. It usually starts from a European port during early autumn, and though early races were split into four legs, by 1989/90 this had increased to six, covering a distance of 32,000 miles. There were 23 entries this time, ranging in size from 51ft to 84ft. It was the last Whitbread Race to accept all suitable yachts, with later races contended in either one or two classes, and is recognised as both the last with amateur Corinthian crews and the first with all out professionals.



Satquote British Defender on the starting line

The British Armed Services took great interest in the race from the beginning and were occasional competitors, viewing the event as an adventure-training programme

Richard preparing to peel the spinnaker

with a change of crew for each leg. By 1989, with private sponsorship, the Services were able to enter a competitive and purpose-built yacht to be named *Satquote British Defender* (*SBD*). They announced a crew selection process and, as a newly-commissioned Army Officer, in the spring of 1988 I submitted my interest. A mix of sailing, fitness and psychological testing was carried out. At the British Parachute Regiment's headquarters we slept in the gymnasium, were woken in the early hours and then water-cannoned. This was very typical of the next few months. Unlike previous Service entries, to maintain consistency we would have a core crew and only a small number of changes at each stop-over. *SBD* would race each leg with a crew of between 14 and 16 and, after arduous tests, I was selected as principal bowman and sailmaker.

SBD was a state-of-the-art custom 81ft maxi, competing in Class A. This contained the 15 largest and fastest yachts, including *Steinlager 2* (NZ), *Merit* (Switzerland) and *Rothmans* (UK). There were 23 starters across all four classes, and most yachts were sponsored with budgets reportedly running to £10 million (about £26m today). The race departed from Southampton in September 1989, and during the next nine months we would sail to Punta del Este, Freemantle and Auckland, then back to Punta del Este, before the penultimate stop in Fort Lauderdale, and finally home.

The following extracts are from the log kept by Colin Watkins, skipper of *SBD* during Leg 2: Punta del Este, Uruguay to Fremantle, Australia.

Saturday 28th October 1989: It was good to feel that at last the day of the start had arrived. We had worked hard on the yacht during the four-week stop-over and many of the crew had taken no more than a couple of days' local leave. The spinnaker crane had been replaced, a new pulpit made and fitted, the usual routine jobs completed

The crew, including shore team, in Punta del Este

and, most importantly, the deck leaks forward had been filled.

Having been wished farewell by the Duchess of York (who had travelled to Uruguay to present the Leg 1 prizes) we slipped and set off for the start. The timescale went something like this:

1130: Halcyon compass fails. (This supplied data to the majority of our onboard tactical computers and was later repaired.)

1200: Start, second over the line, *Fisher & Paykel* is recalled.

1220: Round the inshore buoy and we are off across the South Atlantic.

The first night found us reaching along at 14 knots, initially under blast reacher then, as the wind freed, under reaching kite. The fleet was closely bunched together except for *Steinlager 2* which had pulled five miles ahead. During the night the spinnaker halyard shed its sheath, jamming itself in the mast. Loath to cut the halyard on the first night out, it took a while to clear. Later the head of our heavy reaching kite, 2·2oz with Kevlar reinforcing, pulled out. These incidents lost us several miles and resulted in us being the wrong side of a front. Rather than chase the fleet and make ground to the north we bore away in the rising easterly and sailed a great circle route that took us down to 52°S.

Monday 30th October, 40°S 50°W: 'What are we doing beating in the Roaring Forties?'

Eventually the wind swings round to the south and then to the west at last. Going south early looked bad at first but as usual it paid off and *SBD* together with *Gatorade* and *Charles Jordan* which had followed us were only a few hours behind the leading group.

Thursday 2nd November, 46°S 33°W: Making good 300 miles a day under a 1·5oz kite with a true wind of 25 knots, apparent wind 11 knots, air temperature 6° by day and 2° by night – lovely weather! It is all going too well and next day the helm becomes very stiff. Nothing wrong with the top end, something must have jammed it. Much peering over the side with torches and we can just make out a vast bunch of seaweed trailing behind us. The yacht is almost uncontrollable so with regret we drop the spinnaker and round up but are still going too fast to clear the rudder, so drop the main and stop the boat, with Justin Packshaw, our diver, ready to jump in. The seaweed, which is not jammed but held in place by water pressure, luckily falls off but Justin has a quick, cold look anyway. Up mainsail, bear away, up kite ... we have to carry out this procedure twice more within the week.

Monday 6th November, 50°S 7°W: Running hard with 31 knots true wind, making over 300 miles per day. Properly in the westerlies now, and in true Southern Ocean style visibility is down to 25 yards, can just make out the forestay. Other yachts are reporting icebergs, which are carefully plotted. We run the radar for a sweep every 10 minutes with the standby watch leader on the tube. Some of the boys are nervous – is it good seamanship to run at over 20 knots in zero visibility with ICE about? Of course it isn't, but if you wanted to be safe you would not race in the Whitbread.

A contact is seen on radar at three miles bearing green 30°. Minutes later it is ahead at two miles, and soon bears red 20° still at two miles – a 20 knot iceberg?

Yet another parted line…

Surfing at 30 knots or more causes SBD to submarine and the crew to be swept aft (sequence)

A quick chat on VHF establishes that it is *NCB Ireland* – they didn't know we were there! We seem to be plagued with electronic trouble and Andy Bristow is busy fixing and jury-rigging computers and B&G equipment. To be fair most of the problems are water ingress. We have a seawater leak in the hydraulics panel, which is over the chart table and electronics bay, so it's a wonder that anything works at all!

Wednesday 8th November, 50°S 5°E: Air temperature zero at night rising to 3° by day, the sea temperature a steady 3°. Running superbly and making 60 miles in each four-hour watch. The boat is behaving well in a large following sea. She picks up speed very quickly to allow surfing at over 25 knots for periods of over two minutes. We have enough speed to overtake waves and although it is difficult, demanding in concentration and very hard work to steer, this is why we joined. One can easily get hooked on downwind speeds.

Overnight the wind increases to 40 knots – time for the second reef and the storm kite, fondly named the Beast! The boat becomes too wild, so down kite and up with the blast reacher. Our normal practice when reefed is for the reefing clew to be secured by a nylon strop and Sparcraft snap-shackle, thus relieving the weight on the reefing line. This naturally means the on-watch bowman (Richard Nicolson or Paul Anderson) going out on the boom. Last night it was considered too dangerous to do this and before long the inevitable happened and the second reefing line parted, dropping the boom into the sea. The vang piston, a solid titanium bar, had been at full extension and snapped like balsa wood! Priority was to get the boom, which is 37ft long and weighs about 800lbs (360kg), out of the water. A good old-fashioned lazyjack was rigged, the mainsail set up and a wire-rope cascade rigged as jury vang, and we were off again.

The HF radio has been soaked once too often and has packed up. No radio communications with the outside world makes one feel a little lonely, but there are 16 of us so what the hell. A couple of days hard running in near gale conditions with frequent snow showers and freezing temperatures confirms our position at 50°S 20°E. I had intended to go further south, but equipment failures and lack of a reliable HF radio to receive ice reports keep me at 50°S.

The temporary vang is not powerful enough to keep the leach tight, and the leeward curl of the main makes steering awkward. Eventually it had to happen – a serious broach, boat laid over and crew trying to trip the guy to get rid of the kite. Before they succeed the inboard pole end fitting shears and catapults the pole end through the mainsail. Luckily the kite is not damaged! Down kite, up storm kite on the second spinnaker pole and continue. The rip to the main is near the luff and therefore not taking much strain. The sailmakers, Bill and Richard, reckon it will last the night. The next day, with a little less wind, we drop the main leaving the kite up, take the main below and Bill sews up the damage. The sewing machine is red-hot from kite repairs.

Friday 10th November: My birthday is celebrated with a screaming surf which cumulates in the bows buried under tons of water as we catch the wave ahead. We are then laid flat as we broach momentarily before swinging round to leeward as the kite refills. The main preventer cannot hold the boom, which swings across and removes the check stay. Fortunately we have the second reef in – otherwise we might have lost the runner. Repairs to the check stay do not delay us and we continue in the driving snow, passing the halfway point which we celebrate with a rare tot of rum.

The HF radio came back to life quite suddenly and without any help from us. We found that we were lying in the middle of the fleet, with the leading four yachts some 12 hours

Wet bowman hard-wiring the first reef

ahead and the third group some 12 hours behind. Morale boosted, two more days and another 500 miles under our keel. The wind dropped slightly, allowing those who had gone down to 53°S to get ahead. We were receiving fax pictures from the Soviet weather station on Antarctica and still just receiving data from Buenos Aires, which produced excellent circumpolar pictures taken from the UK Met Office at Bracknell. The signal from Pretoria, South Africa was stronger, but the weather data did not quite tie-up with the other two! The fax was backed up by our weather satellite receiver, which every 3 to 4 hours provided real time pictures from the NOAA orbiting satellites. Everything pointed to a depression coming north, and the fleet made ground to the north to keep on the west side of it.

A bowman up the mast to retrieve a shredded spinnaker

Sunday 12th November: We were reaching along under blast reacher when at 0710 the forestay parted! The forestay is in two sections: one is approximately 30m and the other some 6m. The reason for two sections is that at the tuning stage it is much cheaper and easier to make a new shorter or longer lower section than change the whole forestay. Anyway, thank heavens the lower section was the one that had parted! Needless to say the blast reacher was seriously torn and the head foil a write-off.

We were lucky that the helm, John Bartlett, promptly bore away saving the mast. Once the mess was cleared up we set the storm staysail on the inner forestay and thought about the problem. Watch leader Serge Guilhamou and rigger Latimer Clark designed and constructed a side clamp from which we secured an eight-part wire strop to a couple of spare turnbuckles*, the whole arrangement being shackled to the stemhead. It was an excellent job which attracted much admiration from professional riggers and other crews in Freemantle and earned Serge and Lats the Henri-Lloyd Trophy for Outstanding Seamanship.

* Often called bottlescrews in the UK, though they differ in that turnbuckles have open bodies which expose the threaded sections while bottlescrews have enclosed bodies so the threads are hidden.

One problem remained: how to hoist headsails without the luff foil. Fortunately the No 4 and No 5 jibs were fitted with cringles, but through an oversight we carried no hanks! Problem solved – we removed the carabiners from our safety harnesses and made up a few from rope strops, which gave us enough fastenings for one sail. Just as strong, though a little fiddly with cold hands. (Before anyone thinks we were compromising our safety, our harnesses were through-footed in the eyes on our oilskins, this being in the era of harnesses being intrinsic to oilskin jackets.) Later in the race, when we needed to hoist larger and lighter sails, Bill sewed Kevlar strips to the luffs enabling us to attach the sails to the forestay.

Wednesday 15th November, 50°S 60°E: Beam-reaching in 30 knots true wind and making 40 to 48 miles per watch. The variation is 51°W, increasing by one degree every three hours, another regular event is the time-zone changing every second day – it takes a while for some of the inshore racers to get used to these bluewater facts of life! Although we are never quite sure of our position in the race and have long given up trying to catch the race reports from Portishead Radio Station in the UK, which provide fleet positions using the Argos satellite system, we know from the twice daily chat show on HF that the middle group (including ourselves) is catching up the leaders who are in light airs with sunny weather and getting worried.

Thursday 16th November: The long-awaited depression has arrived. The wind swung round to the west and started to increase, and we gybed so that we could easily run past the north coast of the Kerguelen Islands. The wind increased to a steady 40 knots gusting 50 knots – time for the second reef! Reefing completed, the vang parted again (getting to become common-place), the boom skied in the water to leeward and a crack was

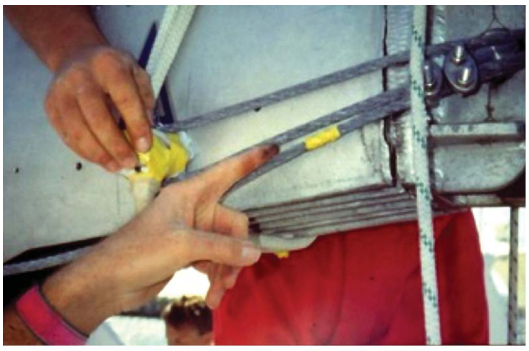
A rigger preparing the forestay repair

The end of a surf

heard from the mast. On inspection, the boom was found to have cracked for 70% of its circumference at the weld holding the gooseneck to the boom end.

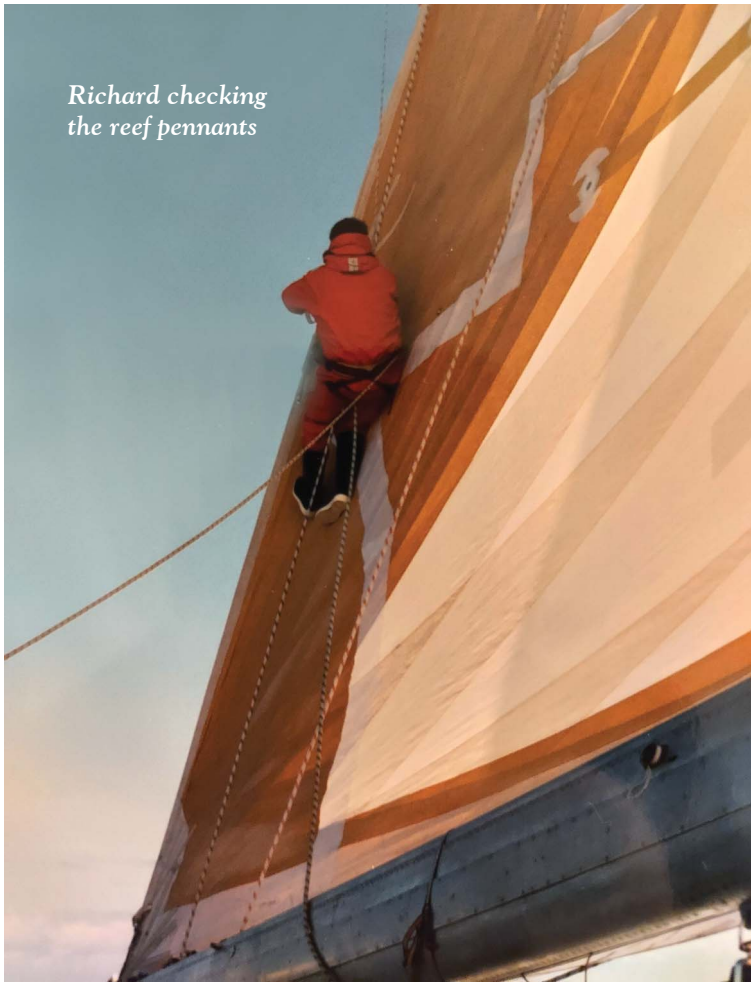
My initial thought was, 'if the weld breaks the boom will fall to the deck, possibly going through it!'. We quickly tied up the boom's inboard end, then down with the mainsail and up trysail. Night was falling and our situation was not good. Because we were making slow speed we were being pooped every few minutes, the wind was increasing, it began to snow and somewhere ahead was the west coast of the Kerguelen Islands. We had 2000 miles to go, without the boom we could not race, and with the conditions on deck a repair was not feasible. Out of curiosity more than anything else I spoke to the Met station on the Kerguelens – the head man was delighted to talk to someone new! He offered the use of their workshops for an aluminium weld repair and said they'd be delighted to receive us. The settlement and harbour lie on the east coast and it would not be a very large detour to skirt the north coast and nip in for a quick repair.

We picked up the island on radar and sailed inside the off-lying rocks and close to the rocky coast all, of course, invisible in the snow. It was an uncomfortable night – a very rough and confused sea, constant pooping and a leak in the lazarette and (later discovered) a leak in the steering cockpit which was allowing gallons of water to pour onto the nav den, soaking charts and electronics and making me very grumpy. By the time we got to Cape Digby at the island's



The crack around the forward end of the boom

Not very tidy, but it held



Richard checking the reef pennants

northeast corner, the wind was a steady 45 knots which, as we hardened up, rose to 55 knots over the deck. *SBD* was slamming into the short sea caused by the island's lee and I was worried for the temporary forestay. A chat on the radio again and the Met station reported gusts of 70 knots in the harbour with white water and a 1m chop! No way could we offload the boom onto a workboat and take it ashore. I decided that we could not afford to wait a day for the weather to moderate and therefore set a course for Fremantle. *Creighton's Naturally* put into the Kerguelen Islands a couple of weeks later for repairs. They had a superb reception, excellent food and were presented with 100 bottles of wine by a Soviet factory ship – mind you, they did have a few girls on board...

Running down the seas at 12 knots with trysail and No 4 jib when all around you the fleet is surfing at 25–30 knots is depressing! As well as losing some 250 miles in 48 hours to the fleet, our EPIRB, Danbuoy and a horseshoe lifebelt were all washed overboard when the pushpit broke up under the onslaught of the sea, and our last remaining satnav system died when the aerial was taken out with the pushpit. Thank goodness we were carrying a sextant.

Saturday 18th November: The gale had abated and we started to repair the boom. Mark Stevens had spent much of the summer taking masts and booms apart in the UK and he managed to compress the split weld together by utilising the hydraulic flattener. A hole was cut through the boom and an aluminium bar passed through, and the boom wire-lashed to the mast side of the gooseneck fitting using the protruding ends of the bar. The wire was secured with bulldog grips and the flattener left on as a

The view from aloft – the bowman's daily rig inspection

safety precaution. It looked good, so we hoisted the mainsail. Initially we put a limit of 25 knots apparent on the boom, but later this was exceeded without any problems.

Monday 20th November: Dawn came up with another gale brewing, but our jury rigging held out well and we achieved 27·4 knots on a beam reach with a No 5 jib, storm staysail, and the first reef in – not bad for a yacht written off as a cripple by one newspaper!

The sea was getting warmer at last and it was nearing the time to take off our inner-layer polar suits. Adequate precautions were taken to prevent asphyxiation and notice was given before removing clothing! With just 1000 miles to go it seemed to be plain sailing and we started planning a weekend run ashore. With no aerials left we were not receiving fax or radio weather messages, and although we suspected the semi-permanent high off Western Australia and kept south to skirt it, we were not sure of its extent. Eventually, just like everyone else, we came under its influence and our daily averages dropped to 130 nautical miles on Friday 24th November and 107 on the 25th. With 450 miles to go it was just like being in the doldrums again!

Sunday 26th November: The breeze picked and, in the afternoon at 34°S 113°E, the VHF, our only radio left, burst into life. It was *NCB Ireland* and they sounded rather dispirited. The Argos position reports had led them to believe that they were ahead of us by several miles, but when their bowman was carrying out the daily rig check he saw us about seven miles ahead. Great for our morale, bad for theirs. We then had a super night's racing, not knowing exactly where we were as the evening stars were obscured, but at 0300 the loom of Rottnest Island light could be seen from the deck.

Monday 27th November: We crossed the line at 0900 local time, some 38 minutes ahead of *NCB Ireland* but a long way behind the race leader, *Steinlager 2*, and a day behind the yachts we had been close to near the Kerguelens. On the positive side, we had sailed very nearly 8000 miles in 30 days at an average speed of just over 11 knots, no one was injured and we had continued in unfavourable conditions with some quite major repairs. We had all learnt a lot and would be that much better for the remaining legs. The welcome Freemantle gave us was beyond words, as was the help and friendship shown by HMAS *Stirling** just south of the city. Within days they were repairing the boom, stanchions, pushpit, main battery etc, while our electrics were fixed by the local expert and new bits ordered. The crew concentrated on the hull, mast, sails and running rigging. A quick haul out inspection and hull cleaning and we were almost ready to go again.

Footnotes to Leg 2

- As the fleet headed south on the Great Circle route, *Union Bank of Finland* had two frightening broaches among the ice which caused her to sail more cautiously at night.
- *Creighton's Naturally* suffered a serious broach at about 0300 one morning during which Anthony (Tony) Phillips and Bart van den Dwey were swept overboard. Both were pulled back aboard and van den Dwey successfully resuscitated but, after three hours' trying, the crew were unable to revive Phillips. A few days later, following radio agreement with relatives ashore, he was buried at sea.
- *Satquote British Defender* came within five miles of breaking the 24-hour record for a monohull.
- *Fortuna Extra Lights* created a new 24-hour record of 405 miles.
- One of the crew from *The Card* broke his arm in two places during a broach, while the bowman on *Fortuna Extra Lights* broke his collarbone when the spinnaker pole slammed him into the forestay.
- At the approach to the finish in Freemantle, only 22 miles separated leading maxis, *Steinlager 2*, *Rothmans*, *Merit* and *Fisher & Paykel*. *Steinlager 2* crossed the line first, 90 minutes in front. *Rothmans* and *Merit* staged a match-race for second place, *Rothmans* beating *Merit* by 28 seconds after 27 days of racing.
- *Satquote British Defender* achieved 12th place for Leg 2, and 13th over the race as a whole.

* Not a ship but a Royal Australian Navy shore establishment, informally known as a 'stone frigate'. According to our friend Wikipedia, the term stems from the Royal Navy's use of Diamond Rock off Martinique as a gun platform to harass the French in the 18th and early 19th centuries. Because the Royal Navy was prohibited from occupying territory ashore, Diamond Rock had to be commissioned as a ship.