

SHELDUCK'S CRUISE TO AMERICA

Cascais to the Chesapeake, 2013–2014

Neil Hegarty and Anne Kenny

(In 2013 Neil and Anne enjoyed significant birthdays, and to celebrate in a memorable way Neil invited Anne to cross the Atlantic and cruise America. Because of their age their families were not happy for them to do it alone, so they joined the 2013 Atlantic Rally for Cruisers (ARC).

Shelduck is a Dufour 34, built in La Rochelle in 2003. She is fitted with the standard rig, but has a deep, racing, lead keel which makes her quite stiff. In November 2012 she was laid up ashore at Belém on the western outskirts of Lisbon, Portugal to be prepared for the voyage...

Our first task on a long list was to replace all standing and running rigging. While the mast was down, folding steps and an active radar reflector were added, and we also fitted a roller-reefing unit with an anti-twist high tension halyard on the detachable

inner forestay. This would allow us to roll away or reef sails from the cockpit and still be able to move the forestay out of the way when we want to tack the full genoa going upwind. We moved the headsail Spinlock cleats to the mast to free up cockpit Spinlocks for a second spinnaker pole, and bought a second genoa which could be set with the existing one on the twin foil. We planned to do most of the fresh downwind sailing with these two sails set on poles, but no mainsail. We also have a spinnaker for light winds.

The next issue was the provision of energy, and we considered a diesel generator, the engine, a wind generator, solar panels and a fuel cell as possible sources. We eventually decided that the most suitable solution



Shelduck ready for winter storage at the end of her trip



for a boat of *Shelduck's* size was a fuel cell, so we fitted an Efoy Comfort 140. It would keep the batteries topped up without noise. Watermakers can be troublesome and expensive, so instead we added a 100 litre flexible tank to the existing system and carried another 100 litres on deck. All safety equipment was checked and serviced, and a discharge plate fitted in case of a lightning strike. Among the final items were charts, courtesy flags and a sat phone.

Cascais to Las Palmas

We flew from Cork on 6 October 2013 and spent two nights in a hotel in Belém so that we could inspect *Shelduck's* hull, including her new folding propeller, prior to launching. We joined her afloat on the 9th for what was to be almost eight months aboard, and immediately left for nearby Cascais. We were joined for the passage to Las Palmas in the Canary Islands by Len Curtain and Peter Clark, both of whom were a great help in the final preparation of *Shelduck* for the Atlantic crossing.

We left Cascais on 24 October, starting with easy passages to overnight in Sesimbra and Sines before rounding Cape St Vincent to Lagos, where the crew spent three days cutting, fixing and cleaning before departing on the afternoon of 31 October for the passage to Lanzarote. This was our first opportunity to experiment with the new twin-headsail downwind rig. *Shelduck* averaged 140 miles a day while the wind held, and we arrived in Puerto Calero on 4 November. We rested for a day, and then headed on for Las Palmas, Gran Canaria and arrived after 12 days' cruising during which we'd used just one 5 litre tank of methanol for the fuel cell. Peter and Len both left, one for a walking holiday with friends on Tenerife and the other to return home, while we enjoyed a fantastic evening, said to be the best ARC Welcome Party

Anne and Neil at the Skippers' Dinner in Las Palmas



in the event's 27 year history. This party doubled as a farewell to the fifty or so ARC+ yachts who were setting off one week ahead of the rest of us so that they could stop off at the Cape Verde islands.

Las Palmas

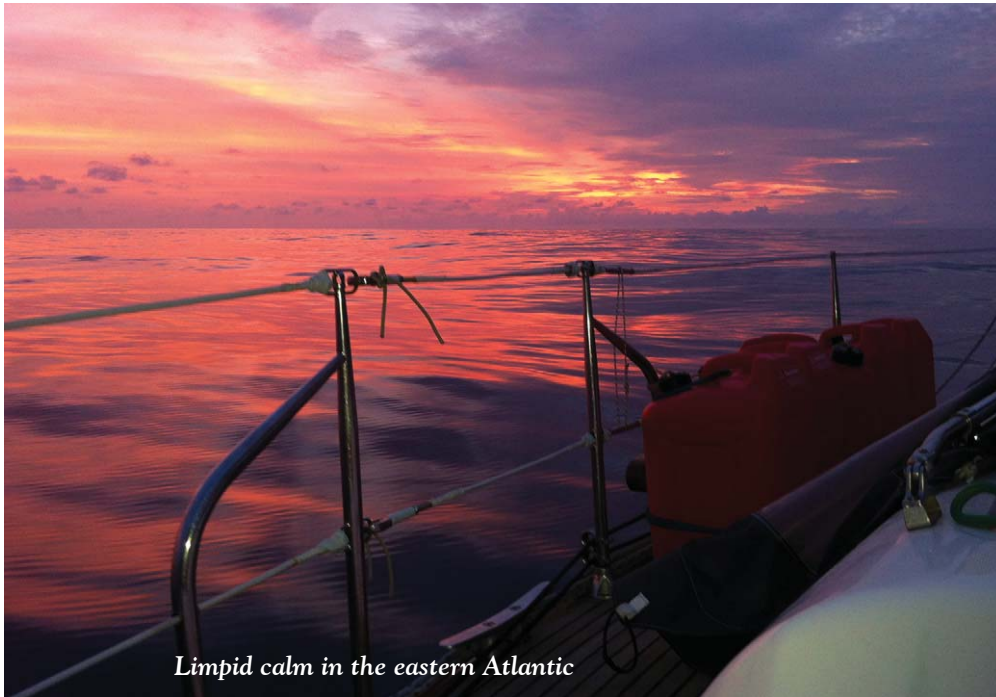
Our crew for the Atlantic crossing were Gabby Perry and Brendan McGarvey. Gabby flew in on Saturday 9 November to help with preparations, and having officially registered we attached our number on the starboard quarter as we were in the 'Cruising Division' – those who were racing had theirs to port. Each evening we attended the ARC Sundowner, a good place to meet other participants. On Tuesday Bojan, a Dutch member of the ARC team, called in to do our safety inspection, which we passed with the caveat that food and water rations, flares and two thermal insulating blankets should be added to the grab bag. Gabby spent a day in a series of seminars ranging from managing emergencies (loss of rudder/rig/power), rigging check, weather, to provisioning food and drink for three weeks at sea. We visited the City Market, and ordered meat which would be deep-frozen to -18°C and delivered to the boat the day before we sailed. We have no freezer, but deep-frozen meat in the bottom of the 'fridge keeps cold enough to avoid spoiling for the first two weeks. After that we'd be down to tinned and dried food. Brendan arrived to join us at the Skippers' Dinner, and he and Neil spent the next day at the ARC seminars.

Neil was given the honour of carrying the Irish Flag at the opening ceremony, when we paraded around the port with the flags of each participating country – at least thirty were represented. There were more than 200 yachts and over 500 crew already there, with the remainder expected to arrive the following week. There were speeches from various Canarian dignitaries, and Leo, the Port Authority and Cultural Representative from St Lucia, provided us with a tantalising glimpse of the festivities and activities we could expect when we arrived.

Next day Brendan set up Anne's 'SPOT' GPS locator device and sent out the first message to our friends and family, and set up the laptop to accept the Iridium sat phone. After five days of off-wind sailing from Portugal we had worn the ends of our genoa sheets, so Neil fitted blocks to the ends of the spinnaker poles. 'Jerry the Rigger' called by to do our in-depth rigging check, and we were more than surprised to find that a split-pin was missing at the base of the forestay. Meanwhile Anne, with help from Gabby, was working hard planning menus and listing how much we needed to buy. The start on Saturday 23 November was approaching rapidly, and to our delight Anne's son Ian and grandson Lucas flew in to see us off. On Friday evening we ate out in Las Palmas, and went to bed in anticipation of the next morning's departure.

Atlantic Crossing (eastern)

While motoring to the start we had a great send off from hundreds of people lining the walls of the harbour, and the boat marking the line and controlling the start was a Spanish Naval Patrol vessel. *Shelduck* had fresh winds at the line – she was doing 7 knots with the No.4 jib and two reefs in the main – and then Neil had to continue hand steering while we fixed a connection which had become dislodged behind the autopilot control. For much of the night we had breaking waves from astern, and we all admired the beautiful stars and quite a few meteors. Four days out and we were in



Limpid calm in the eastern Atlantic

‘cruising mode’ and had taken one of the most easterly routes south, only 100 miles off the African coast, to avoid a low which was further west. We may have sailed an extra 30 or even 50 miles to avoid the low, but at least it meant we stayed dry. There were amazing thunder storms to be seen to the west, especially in darkness.

We were able to do some motor-sailing at night, but mostly we were motoring into force 1 directly on the nose. At sunrise the wind freed, then followed the sun round to be on the nose again at dark. We topped up with 40 litres of diesel from the cans on deck – at 2000 rpm she was using 1.6 litres per hour. One night the moon rose looking very tropical – like a great crescent on its back and much bigger than you’d expect, blush pink to start with and gradually turning to gentle yellow as it rose. We had a small, dark bird with a white rump following us for two days, and also saw a large mixed pod of dolphins and porpoises.

On Monday 2 December we made a lightning stop for fuel at Mindelo Marina on São Vicente in the Cape Verdes – the wind had been incredibly light and variable for the previous few days so *Shelduck* had had to motor. We were just berthed when Neil heard, from an approaching inflatable, “Hello Mr Hegarty!”. Who was it but Dave Hennessy with whom, some years back in his previous yacht *Beagle*, Neil had had many a joust in the Royal Cork Yacht Club, and whom we’d last seen when Dave entertained us with music and song in a pub on the Isle de Croix during the Irish Cruising Club Brittany Cruise in 2011. Dave was very helpful, telling us not to check into the country as it was unnecessary if we were not staying overnight, but advising us to pay the marina fee, which we did. He also took Gabby and Neil in his inflatable to a beach next to a fuel station where they purchased a replacement gas bottle.

By Sunday 8 December the wind was still light, but *Shelduck* managed 120 miles in 24 hours. Next day *Shelduck* motored in a flat, limpid calm. The ocean surface had a

slick oily look and the waves were just small humps and hollows. There was a colourful sunset of strong pinks and blues created in the combination of sky, sea and clouds approaching from the east. The day was split into five watches – two 6 hour watches from 0800 to 2000, followed by three 4 hour watches from 2000 until 0800 – Anne and Neil keeping one watch, and Brendan and Gabby the other. Dinner was cooked for all by the 1400–2000 watch.

Atlantic Crossing (western)

On Tuesday 10 December the wind arrived at last and *Shelduck* sailed 160 miles in 24 hours, settling into a steady reach. We celebrated the halfway mark from the Cape Verdes to St Lucia with a five course dinner prepared by Gabby (Brendan and Gabby were on watch). We were being carried by the North Equatorial Current, as well as being pushed along by the Trade and non-Trade winds, and the waves were enormous, maybe because we were crossing an area called Researcher Ridge which is only 550m deep rather than the usual 3000–5500m. There were huge mountain ranges below us, taller than Mount Everest, but we kept well northwest of the Vema Fracture Zone. The seas made life below decks particularly difficult, and it was almost impossible to move around without using both hands.

It was still blowing hard by Saturday, with 5–6m waves. Several days had been overcast, but the squalls were easy enough to see coming, like dark shapes in the sky. When they hit the wind usually increased to force 7 and backed 30°, though a few times it backed 50° and increased to gale force. During one of these *Shelduck* lay down and water came over the cockpit coaming, engulfing Neil up to his armpits.

Shelduck finishing the ARC, St Lucia





The ARC crew at the finish in Rodney Bay, St Lucia

At about mid-day Saturday, Neil was down below and just moving to the chart table to download the weather forecast when he was caught off-balance by a broach and thrown across the boat. He landed on the bar protecting the cooker, catching it just to the left of his spine. He decided he should not move from the floor for an hour, but organised the crew to pull him onto a blanket and under the table to protect him from any flying objects. After a further hour he reported movement in all parts of his body, with only superficial cuts and some bruising, but was very sore. He was able to transfer to the nearest bunk, and stayed there till noon next day when he returned to the watch rota. During this period he altered the watches to 2 hours on and 4 hours off, with just one person on deck-watch at a time. On standing watches again he changed them to 4 hours on and 4 hours off, working in pairs – no 6 hour day watches for now.

Five miles from the finish at St Lucia it was blowing force 6 so we dropped the poles and rolled up the genoas, and still made 5 knots without any sail. We then set the No.4 on the inner forestay – our speed increased to over 7 knots – and set the main when we gained some shelter from the land. We finished in Rodney Bay at 15:08:59 GMT, 11:08:59 local time, on 17 December. (We had decided not to change ship's time as we travelled west, which resulted in our dinner time going from dark to light.) *Shelduck* sailed the 3026 miles from Las Palmas to Rodney Bay in just under 23 days at an average speed of 5.5 knots. OCC qualifying passage completed!

The Windward, Leeward and Virgin Islands

Gabby and Brendan returned home on 22 December and Neil's son John arrived to cruise with us over Christmas. First we headed south to spend Christmas in St George's, Grenada, where John and Neil enjoyed their first Christmas Day swim (Anne had often gone swimming on Christmas Day). *Shelduck* cruised Grenada until New Year's Eve, and then headed north visiting Carriacou, Union Island and

our dream anchorage at the Tobago Cays. On 5 January we reluctantly departed for Bequia and on to Marigot Bay, St Lucia, where John left us to fly home. We continued with just the two of us, visiting Martinique, Dominica, Guadeloupe, St Kitts, and the British and US Virgin Islands.

Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, Cuba, the Bahamas and the US East Coast
Shelduck reached Culebra in Puerto Rico on 19 February, checked in, and learned of the strict rules of Homeland Security. We cruised on south of the main island and through the Mona Passage at night, making sure to avoid the Hourglass Shoal, then headed for Puerto Plata on the north coast of the Dominican Republic, and on to Cuba. We had decided to tour Cuba by land from the marina at Puerto de Vita on the northeast coast, so that we could easily sail on to the Bahamas. *Shelduck* arrived there on 6 March and we had two very enjoyable weeks touring the island by bus (Neil had bought the tickets on the internet six months earlier while at home in Cork). We had both been keen to visit Cuba before McDonalds and Walmart arrived.

On Friday 21 March we prepared *Shelduck* for her next passage. When changing the chart card Neil seemed to have damaged the guides in the plotter at the chart table, so put the card into the plotter at the wheel instead and made it the master. But as we steered for Ragged Island in the southern Bahamas the autopilot was not happy with its new master, so we steered one hour on and one hour off and visited Long Island, Cat Island, Great Abaco Island and then Great Sale Cay, from where *Shelduck* sailed across the Gulf Stream to Fort Pierce, Florida. We had finally finished crossing the North Atlantic Ocean, and having sailed 119 miles on this last passage without an auto helm we were very, very tired. In fact we had sailed all the 667 miles from Cuba without one, which was very hard work, particularly at night.

Anne and John in the Tobago Cays



The Dismal Swamp Canal

Shelduck's journey from Florida to the Chesapeake was partly by sea and partly through the Intracoastal Waterway.

On reaching Elizabeth City, North Carolina we decided to take the Dismal Swamp Canal route to Atlantic Yacht Basin, just south of Norfolk, where *Shelduck* was to be stored for ten months. The name alone attracted us and *Shelduck* was just within the maximum draft allowed. Everything from birds and slithering reptiles to winged insects and bears, including a few scattered people, inhabit this unique primeval forest. Once owned by George Washington, the swamp holding was donated in 1973 by the Union



Neil steers through the Dismal Swamp Canal

Camp Company to create the Great Dismal Swamp National Wildlife Refuge. At 0830 on Monday 19 May *Shelduck* left the Mariners Wharf Free Dock in Elizabeth City to catch the 0900 bascule highway bridge opening, and then headed up the winding, narrow, unmarked headwaters of the Pasquotank River. Here you have some of the most undisturbed and natural cruising grounds anywhere. *Shelduck* passed through a manually-operated railway bridge to South Mills Lock, where she arrived at 1315 for the 1330 opening. We decided to moor for the night between the lock and the nearby bridge, which are worked by one person who drives between the two. On a grassy bank we folded and bagged *Shelduck's* sails in the late afternoon sunshine. Next day *Shelduck* passed through the bridge and entered the Dismal Swamp Canal, and as we reached the Welcome Centre the floating bridge that gives access to the Dismal Swamp itself opened for us. Although the depth gauge showed a minimum of 0.5m under the keel

in the Canal itself *Shelduck* rolled over logs on the bottom a few times.

Next morning Neil timed *Shelduck's* departure to get us to the Deep Creek lock at 1330. She exited it at 1415, and continued through the winding but marked Deep Creek to join the Intracoastal Waterway at Virginia Cut. We turned south for the Steel Bridge into the Great Bridge lock, and at 1600 passed through the Great Bridge, which opens every hour. Neil immediately called the dock master at Atlantic Yacht Basin, which lies just beyond and where we secured alongside at 1630. We had brought *Shelduck* here because our insurance company insisted she was north of Cape Hatteras before the start of the hurricane season.

Our seven month cruise – almost eight months away from home – was over, and *Shelduck* had logged 7013 miles. We had sailed 3987 of those miles with friends and family, including the passage from Cascais to Grand Canaria and the ARC itself, and another 3026 miles on our own.

Things we were glad to have:

1. **The Active Radar Reflector.** We observed many ships altering course to avoid *Shelduck*, including a tanker as we exited the Mona Passage.
2. **The Hella Fan** in our cabin. We would have expired in the heat of the southern Caribbean without it.
3. **The Fuel Cell** which kept the autopilot, 'fridge and GPS going without noise and with only two noisy 30 minute periods each day running the engine to assist the cell. It was also very useful while at anchor or on a mooring as we rarely had to run the engine in neutral to charge the batteries.
4. **The two poled-out genoas** but no mainsail for many of the fresh periods between Lagos and St Lucia.
5. **The Satellite Phone**, which we used to upload our blog – <http://blog.mailasail.com/shelduck> – and for weather routing with Neil's son Tom in Cork.
6. **'SPOT'**, which is a satellite GPS messenger and sends e-mail from anywhere on earth to selected people.

Our best tips from the ARC briefings before the start:

1. Have a block at the outer end of each spinnaker pole to run sheets through. *Shelduck* did not damage any lines through chafe during the entire cruise.
2. When the frozen food is being put in the 'fridge just before you leave, fill any remaining space with water bottles and don't open the door for three days. We had fresh meat for two weeks.

There was little trouble from customs and immigration. Our US Islands – Dominican Republic – Cuba – Bahamas – US East Coast route seemed to please all of those countries, and we enjoyed a welcome from many who noticed our Irish flag. People were friendly, helpful, interested and seemed delighted to see us wherever *Shelduck* took us.

