

Sharpie lookout

Traditional but unconventional, Norwalk Islands Sharpies combine 'workboat common sense' with performance design and modern DIY-build techniques. CB meets Robert Ayliffe, their champion for nearly 20 years

Proof

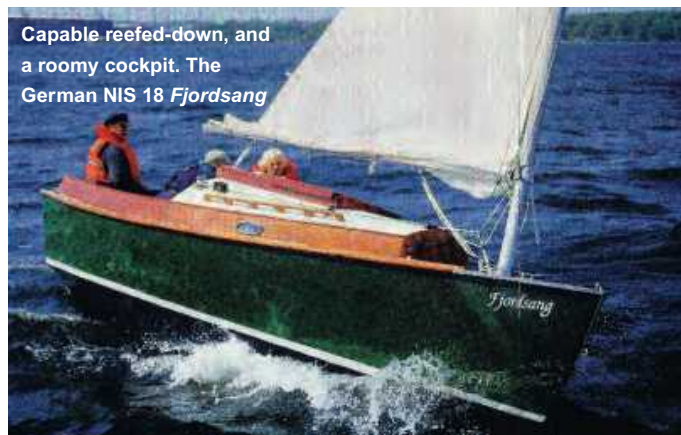
The NIS 23 that started it all, Robert Ayliffe's *Charlie Fisher*



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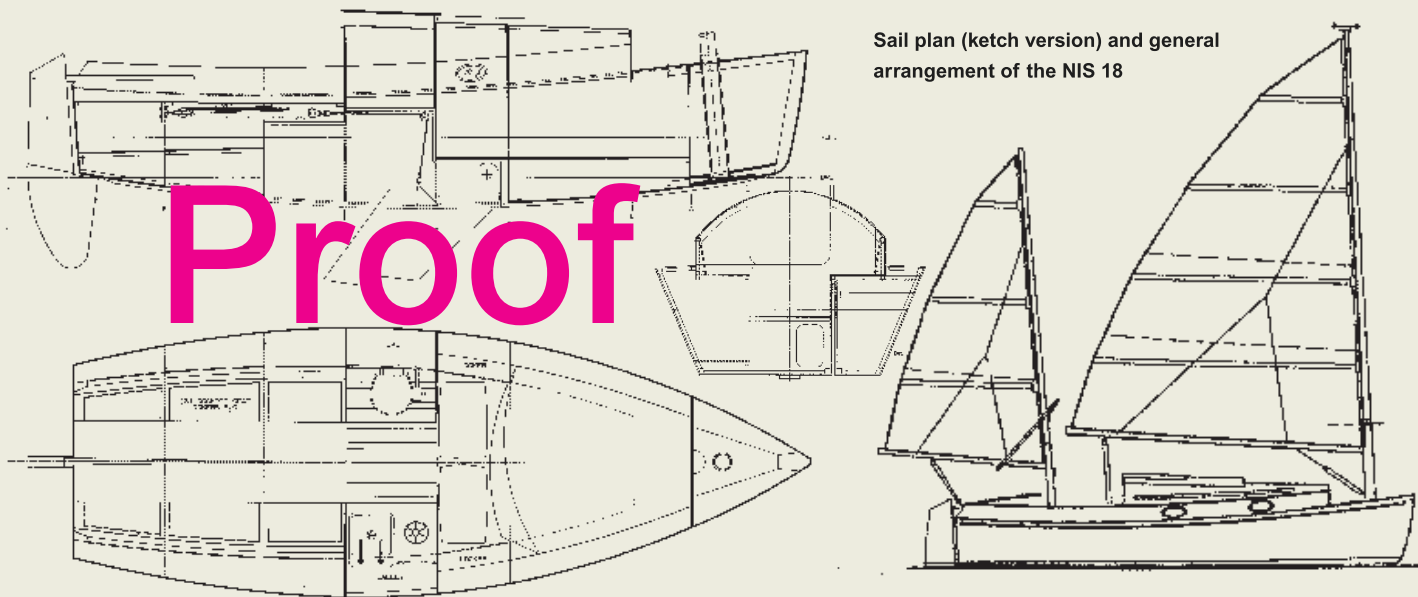


Sits flat, above, and, main, sails fast in light winds (Darwin, Australia)



Capable reefed-down, and a roomy cockpit. The German NIS 18 *Fjordsang*

The NIS 18 has proven itself “a surprisingly capable boat”, according to Robert, “fast in light winds and capable reefed down in strong”. The big cockpit makes the 18 a great daysailer, but two can sleep comfortably in the cabin, with room for two more under a boom tent in the cockpit. There is good space for a head and a galley in the cabin. Its size makes it the most easily trailerable and with the optional ketch or yawl rig, overall length of about 22ft (6.7m) on the trailer makes it easy to store in the carport at home. It’s soon to be available worldwide in pre-cut kit form. Other sizes to follow.



Sail plan (ketch version) and general arrangement of the NIS 18

What on earth could America’s Cup contenders, the ubiquitous Laser and the Norwalk Islands Sharpies, have in common? The answer, in case you hadn’t guessed, is their designer, Bruce Kirby.

But what the Sharpies also have is Robert Ayliffe who, for nearly 20 years – since they first came into being, in fact – has been their besotted fan, builder, champion and promoter. He’s also recently become the worldwide agent for their plans – for the Sharpies make excellent home-build boats, alongside their many other virtues.

“The Norwalk Islands Sharpies are what happens when racing and lightweight performance aesthetic meets over two centuries

of workboat common sense and heritage,” he argues. “I first came across them in an article in *WoodenBoat* in 1985 or 1986, on the NIS 26, which was still a prototype. I thought, ‘That’s the boat I’m looking for.’ I liked the unstayed mast, the shallow draught, the sheer seaworthiness and the simplicity of build.”

Robert, who taught evening classes on boatbuilding, visited Bruce Kirby, who had his own NIS 26, *Exit 12*, in the water. Then he went home to Australia, and built a NIS 23 – the first in the world – *Charlie Fisher*, launched in 1987. “It was an unproven boat. I was still unsure about the unstayed masts, and I had almost no experience of cat rigs and cat ketches.”

A month or so later and *Charlie Fisher* was no longer unproven.

As Robert, who can rightly add ‘raconteur’ to his catalogue of boatbuilding skills, tells it:

“A bright, still, warm South Australian summer morning, *Charlie Fisher’s* bow was run up on dry white beach sand at Port Vincent on York Peninsula, in South Australia, a picture of peace and tranquility with our damp clothes and sleeping gear airing on the booms. Run up so far that you could step off the bow onto dry sand. A yachtsman rowed past in his dinghy. He shipped his oars and observed, ‘I’ve never seen a boat like that before. It’s some sort of ketch, it floats in nothing and



Winging it...
Charlie Fisher



Gives ditch
crawling a new
dimension

The NIS 23 has more cabin space and waterline length than the NIS 18, permitting greater speeds; Robert has frequently seen 8 knots on the GPS on *Charlie Fisher*. The NIS 23 is also trailerable, but her trailer weight (about 1,500kg) is about 50 per cent more than the NIS 18, so a larger car is required and 33ft (10m) is needed to store the boat, because of the mainmast length. The 23 sleeps “two brilliantly and four adequately”, depending on the cabin set-up. Of course, there is always the cockpit option. There is, as with the 18, no attempt at headroom. Both the 18 and 23 are affected by crew weight and placement, as is the case with most smaller trailer-sailers. That said, Robert rates it “an amazingly comfortable cruiser racer and an outstanding single-handed cruiser”.



Owner builder Ern Sabel
sails his NIS 23, off Kiama,
NSW South Coast

there’s nothing to hold the masts up, either.’ He then asked if the rumour that we’d sailed from Kangaroo Island during the previous evening was true. We had. ‘Did you know that the wind speed was 50 knots gusting to 65 all yesterday afternoon?’ We had a fair idea. A long silence. The rower picked up his oars. ‘That’s some boat you have there.’ We did not need to be told.”

Robert and his crew, 15-year-old stepson Abe and his friend Wal, had been caught out by the forecast of moderating conditions. They’d decided to head across Investigator Strait to Port Vincent. But the weather report had been terribly wrong. “Fifty knots is a lot of wind, and it was

against a 3-knot tide for the last couple of hours. We were reaching, fully reefed main and struck mizzen and still flying; the noise of the wind and water, the motion of this small boat over the standing waves was breathtaking. Terrifying, actually.

“As evening fell, we made Troubridge Light, standing out from the shoal at the foot of Yorke Peninsula. In the lee of the land the wind abated slightly, and in the calmer water our spirits rose. For the first time I tied the tiller, shook out and trimmed the mizzen and let the tiller go. It worked, just as Bruce said it would! That boat steered herself. We revelled in the feel of the invisible helmsman, pushing the boat up slightly in the windshifts and then

easing her back again in the lulls. Our spirits soared as we fairly rushed up the coast, the three of us sitting back in that warm comfortable cabin, checking now and again to confirm our invisible helmsman, and we tipped our hats to the designer.

“The modern plywood composite hulls are like guitar soundboxes; sitting in that cabin we had the added pleasure of amplified water, rushing past the 10mm-thick hull skin. All in all, it was a pleasure and a vindication so pleasant that it almost hurt.

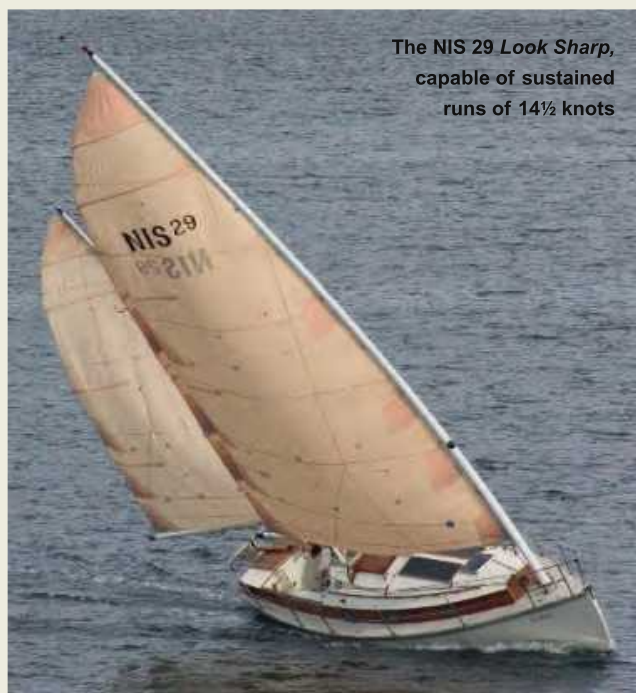
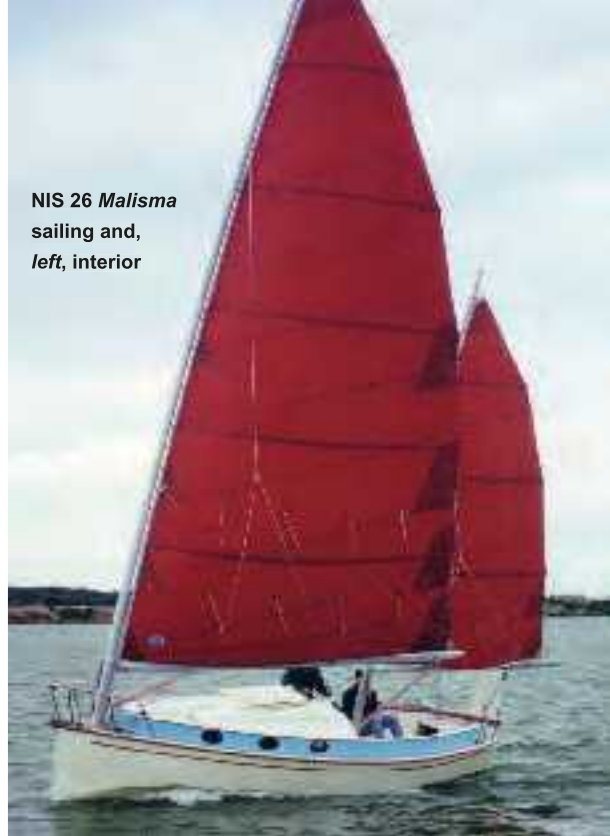
“That summer, I knew I had found something special.

“Eighteen years have passed. I love this little ship even more. Of all the boats I have owned or built, *Charlie Fisher*, named

The NIS 26 is about double the volume of the 23. It's also heavier – weighing about 2.5 tonnes including the trailer – but less affected by crew weight, and almost achieves standing headroom – 5ft 8in (1.7m) – near the companionway.



NIS 26 *Malisma* sailing and, left, interior



The NIS 29 *Look Sharp*, capable of sustained runs of 14½ knots



The smartly-finished NIS 29, *Chilli*

The NIS 29 doubles again on the volume of the NIS 26. Robert reports: “I have recently sailed one of these in Tasmania; what a powerful, comfortable, capable boat. The owner of *Look Sharp* has seen sustained runs of 14½ knots on his GPS, running single-handed down the NSW coast this April. The 29 is the largest NIS that can be reliably trailered, though you’ll need a bigger four-wheel drive or small truck as the appropriate towing machine.”

for my much-loved father-in-law, is the only one I have never wanted to sell. *Charlie* just keeps getting better.”

The secret of the Sharpies’ success lies at least partly in their workboat ancestry. Bruce Kirby apparently conceived the design out of the need for a shallow-draught, capable boat to access his own slowly-silting waterway in Rowayton, on the edge of Long Island Sound, and the Sharpie type was a natural choice. Rowayton is adjacent to the Norwalk Islands in Connecticut, which were a processing centre for the famed oyster grounds of the area. The light, shallow, crossplanked, unstayed cat ketch sharpies were ubiquitous to the area. Their low, flared sides facilitated the

tonging of oysters from the shallow seabed; the flare providing enhanced reserve stability. These boats had to be easily handled by ‘man and boy’, carry great loads of oysters, gunwales awash, across breaking bars, and get to market surely and fast.

Four boats

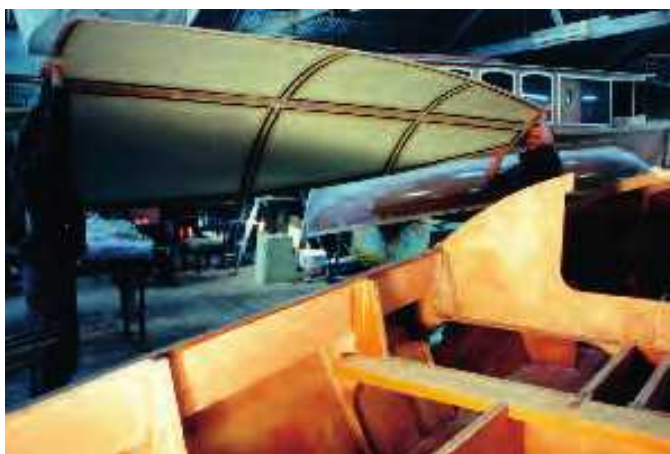
There are four boats that carry the ‘Classic’ Norwalk Islands Sharpies name, the NIS 18, NIS 23, NIS 26 and NIS 29, the designations all referring to their length in feet. All have unstayed rigs as did the original Long Island Sound workboats. There is one other for which plans are available, the 31, which has a similar hull shape to the Classic range, but has a more

conventional stayed ketch or yawl rig. There is also a very successful NIS 43 on the water, also stayed, but this was a custom design and plans are not yet available.

All the boats, including the two largest, bear a distinctive resemblance. They also bear a resemblance to their workboat forbears in that the hull shape is very similar, and the topsides and cabin structure are sufficiently light not to affect the overall balance. The rig, too, is similarly placed, though the modern boats use fully-battened bermudan rigs, instead of the gaff and sprit variations of past times. Other virtues, according to Robert, are: “Flat-bottomed, flared sides, excellent cabin space, distinctive sheer, high-crowned



Stages of construction: *above*, no roof – the moulds are still inside the hull; *right*, adding a pre-cut panel, and, *below*, on goes the pre-fabricated roof



Tabernacle job

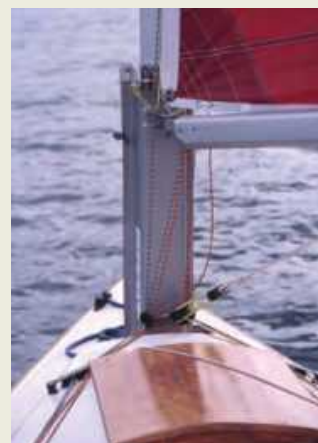
Not content with building, promoting, selling – and, of course, sailing – sharpies, Robert hasn't been able to resist improving them. One of his favourite modifications – after a few teething troubles – is the Easy Raise Tabernacle System, jointly developed by rigging genius Randall Cooper.

"I went down to Canberra, to retro-fit our new mast-raising system to Ruth Mills' 23ft (7m) Sharpie, *Hobgoblin*, and also to set the boat up with the simple, effective reefing system that we have developed on *Charlie Fisher*," recalls Robert.

"*Hobgoblin* – the renamed *Patients*, the 23 built by Mark Boutle – is one of the best built 23s I have ever seen. The layout inside really works, much better I think than my own boat! All of the finish of the boat is to a very high standard.

"The downside to Mark's excellent work is that what took a certain amount of time with my own boat was pretty much doubled on this one, especially when it came to removal of the mainmast tube. It was just so massively fixed in place.

"The main problem though was that the mastmaker we used previously made his masts slightly thicker than the current ones, not by enough to be noticeable but enough to really set things back after initial assembly. The stock tabernacles are designed around the newer masts so these had to be modified to fit *Hobgoblin's* masts. So if you are planning retro-fitting one of these rigs on your boat please check the mast tube diameters. Anyway, we got all the work completed; by lunchtime Sunday we were at the Canberra Yacht Club launching ramp.



"Delight. Lots of blokes still fiddling around rigging their conventional trailer-sailers. I let Ruth get on with it. She was able to put that 29ft (9m) mast up from the cockpit, unaided and without raising a sweat. The boat was in the water, main and mizzen up and sails set inside of 20 minutes of pulling up in the rigging bay. I can still see those guys, still rigging their boats as Ruth sailed off, with a 'what the...' look on their faces!"

cabin tops, great speed, excellent self-righting, safety, absurdly easy handling and all the self-steering and hold-the-nose-to-windward advantages of the cat ketch rig."

The other great charm of the Norwalk Islands Sharpies for Robert was their potential for being built using modern plywood epoxy composite techniques. Around 1986 his evening classes, as he puts it, "sort of morphed into Duck Flat Wooden Boats", his boatbuilding business. What he calls the "spiritual core of the business" was embodied by innovative designers like Iain Oughtred, Phil Bolger and, especially for Robert, Bruce Kirby. "We were using modern epoxy sealed and glued plywood in what we considered were

very clever ways. It was the path to the future because it was sustainable, unlike traditional boatbuilding techniques. We were building boats of extraordinary lightness, strength – and durability."

Robert actually left Duck Flat to its own devices just over a year ago. "Running a factory with 10 people got to me in the end – too much signing invoices, not enough interaction with our clients." But he's hung on to the Norwalk Islands Sharpies, at Bruce Kirby's request, and is now running the whole business for Bruce, worldwide, through his new firm nisboats.com.

At present he is concentrating on the NIS 18, the first of the series to be available as a computer-driven pre-cut kit for easy

home assembly – it should be available in the UK shortly.

And there's the famous Ayliffe support. "We offer unstinting support to anyone building one of our boats – here in Australia, or through contacts around the world," explains Robert. "The price of the plans includes prompt support by phone, fax or email through the life of the project. And here's no such thing as a dumb question... we learn more from listening to owner builders than any other source!"

"We're in the dreams business," he declares, "and the greatest reward is the look on a new owner's face when a stranger walks past and says: 'That's some boat you've got there!'"