

# Charlie Fisher's Bass Strait adventure

*Charlie Fisher arrives discreetly in Hobart.  
photo by Angus Houstone from Kings Pier.*

*My NIS23, Charlie Fisher has just sailed from Welshpool in Victoria, Australia, across Bass Strait and down Tasmania's east coast to Hobart, Tasmania, and back.*

## **PLEASE NOTE!**

*This voyage was undertaken only after months of careful preparation and planning.*

**Bruce Kirby designed Norwalk Islands Sharpie 23**

by **ROBERT AYLIFFE**  
with **IAN PHILLIPS**

**T**HE Bruce Kirby designed Norwalk Islands Sharpies 23, *Charlie Fisher* has the seakeeping antecedents, and over the past 18 years, actual experience of open water passage making in blows of up to 60kts+.

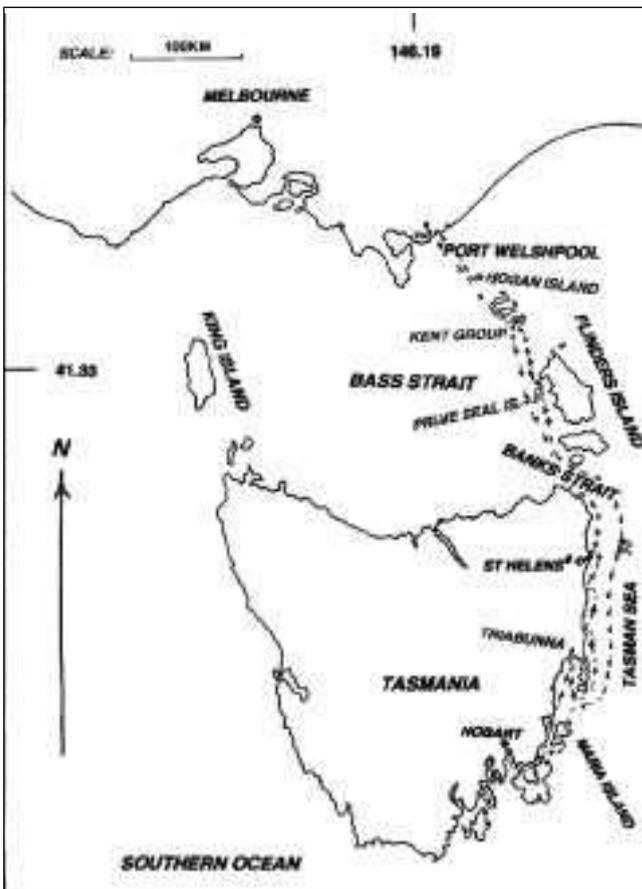
No one should even consider attempting this passage without such experience and careful preparation.

The dangerous, unpredictable reputation of this region was confirmed by our recent experiences.

It has been the best sailing experience of my life, and stunning vindication of a Bruce Kirby's modern interpretation of an already legendary historical type. The working Sharpie of Long Island Sound.

Sounds simple enough.

Put the boat in the water at Port Welshpool, sail south south east along the string of islands that span the 200+ miles of strait, turn east around Flinders Island, catching the flow into Banks Strait and then south round Eddystone light and down



Bass Strait and Tasmania



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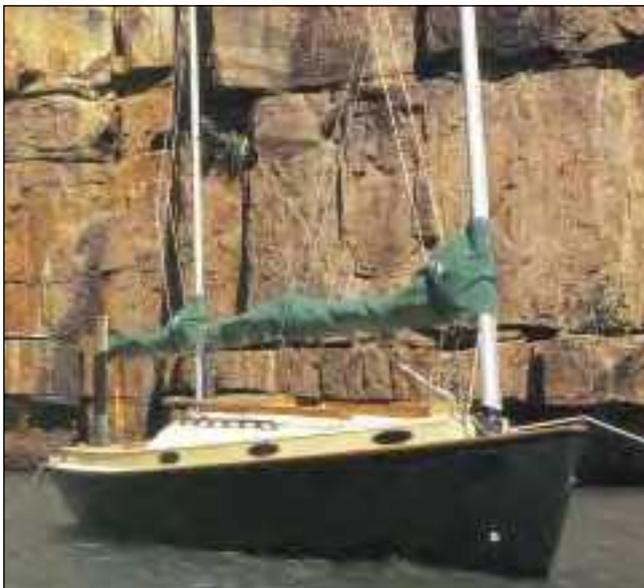
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the last 100 miles to Schouten Island, negotiating Marion Bar, running the tide in Dunalley Canal and, eventually after leaving Betsey Island to port and rounding the Iron Pot enter the Derwent and on to Hobart.

Easy.

The boat is seven metres long, flat bottomed and draws 200mm with the board up. It weighs a little over one tonne.

Some friends who know Bass Strait were vehement that we should not do this. Because the boat is not a heavy deep keeler it was completely unsuited, they insisted. After one especially vigorous serve, at a friends' party just before I left Adelaide for Melbourne Bram Portas asked me how I felt. Gutted was my reply, especially since my critic is a friend whose opinion I usually respect. Bram suggested that I should not be too concerned. Fifteen years ago he crossed the Atlantic in an even smaller bilge keeler, surviving several force nine gales on the way. He said he had observed my boat and it had his confidence. In addition, he told me he had hanging up on his wall at home, something from the Atlantic trip that saved them in those Force 9s. He had, he said been looking for the right person to give it to. We left the party and went to his house. From the wall he took a bright yellow 'Seabrake Technologies' drogue. Bram said that the force nine gales resulted in breaking swells of up nine metres or more that had the potential to flip them end over end, but the drogue, with its bit of chain out the front, and 100m of warp steadied the boat every time.



David Nelson's *Matilda* – Kimberley region Western Australia (1993).

It's yours now, he said.

You will have a great voyage, come round and tell me about it when you get back.

I built the Bruce Kirby designed Norwalk Islands Sharpie 23 *Charlie Fisher* nearly 20 years ago. I was informed in my decision to attempt the return crossing of Bass Strait by years of reading of the type in American *WoodenBoat* magazine, and especially the exploits of 'Commodore' Ralph Munroe' with his legendary Sharpie Yacht, *Egret* in my well worn copy of *The Commodore's Story*. By then I knew also of the experiences of David Nelson in his self built NIS23, *Matilda* in the impressive seas off the Kimberley in Northern Australia, and especially his tales of riding the tide walls into the gulches, seeking shelter along that forbidding coast. I also knew of the exploits of Chris Nye, and his self build modified Bolger *Martha Jane* leeboard Sharpie, who sailed his all the way from Adelaide to Devonport, Tasmania, then west east along Bass Strait. He eventually fetched up in far North Queensland, where he now lives. Chris was bolder than I, the *Martha Jane* type have as it turns out, a dubious self-righting record.

I had by now my own many heavy weather experiences in South Australian waters, in St Vincents Gulf, Investigator Strait, Backstairs Passage and around Kangaroo Island. I was convinced that even though the boat was small, its design and antecedents meant that the only thing on this expedition we had to fear was fear itself, and our personal capacity to run the ship well at all times.

Over the preceding months I had been quietly upgrading and proving the reefing systems, with everything, including a line for the headboard, running to the cockpit, so that both sails could be reefed and finally struck into the lazy jacks completely, without ever leaving the cockpit, and so practiced that we could do it blindfold.



Retrofitting the new hatches.



excellent 75 amp hour Gel battery, and solar panel. The battery was firmly locked down under the vee berth. Randall Cooper made new transom boarding steps, and the solar panel transom bracket in record time.

I bought the smallest autohelm I could, a RayMarine unit, in case we had light air down wind or complete calm to negotiate under the vast thrust of my venerable 3.5hp Tohatsu pull and go outboard.

The longest period of use, on the way home from St Helens in the north east of Tasmania to Goose Island was nearly 14 hours. The battery drain seemed zero. In addition, I knew we'd be frequently sailing through the night, which meant house lights, navigation lights and so on. It's quite instructive how much heat is generated by one 12 volt incandescent globe. Nav lights have three globes, and the house lights another two. So we changed the whole lot to LED globes.

My sailing companion was BoatCraft Pacific's Director, Ian Phillips, a tough, calm and resourceful companion on such an adventure. Ian is also the manufacturer of Bote Cote Epoxy resins, and rationalised his decision to join me on the grounds that it was the ultimate test of faith in his product, a nearly 20 year old boat held together with no other fixings but Bote Cote, on a sustained return passage across one of the most notorious waterways in the world.



**Ian Phillips. Tough, calm and resourceful.**

Ian is a very experienced navigator, both in the two dimensions of sea and the third dimension as an experienced pilot of light aircraft. In addition he has since childhood been sailing on Bass Strait, albeit in much larger keel boats.

This last experience has been invaluable, both in the careful planning and preparation that went on before this adventure and during it.

I am only now starting to realise how much I have learnt from him. I picked Ian up from Tullamarine and we trailed *Charlie Fisher* down to Port Welshpool, to wait on a window of weather. We stayed at the Port Welshpool Caravan Park, using *Charlie* as our caravan. The park's owner Guss Kok (03 568 1273) was very generous to us, letting Ian use his computer for forecasting, and also letting us leave the Nissan Patrol and trailer in his yard at no cost while we at sea. His park is also very conveniently placed to the wharf area and town facilities.



**Ian and Gus as we leave the Port Welshpool Caravan Park.**

It quickly became obvious to me that the forecasting in this region was, in spite of all the technology pretty hit and miss, which is part of what contributes to the fearsome reputation of the area. As Ian puts it, dry inland air from mainland Australia meets the top edge of the roaring 40s, and that conjunction is very hard to predict. Reliably hard, as it turned out.

While waiting it out, we busied ourselves with final tuning of the boat and the setting up of a jury rigged UHF aerial to complement the new VHF set on board the boat. We had full paper charts, and two GPS units for security. We had made use of a red LED trailer brake light unit, for reading maps at night without affecting night vision. This seemed so simple, but proved over the weeks to be a very useful addition.

The only thing that Ian remained grumpy about was my hastily made converted bucket 'cockpit abluion unit'. Unfortunately, I did not have time to file the sharpest edges off it before departure. A feature that I thought did encourage concentration and discouraged long reading spells of reading, while occupied!

It was not such a bad wait. The Wilsons Promontory area is rich in history, and here are some very good local museums that explain and reflect that past. My kettle had rusted out, which caused me angst because there was a very poor selection in the greater Port Welshpool area.

The five day theoretical weather window upon us, in the early morning light we cast off from Port Welshpool, riding the ebb to the open sea and Bass Strait.

It was a dream run to Hogan Island, the boat self steering pretty much all the way. The south-easterlies were fortunately light to moderate, and the boat boomed along under full sail, at up to 6kts over the ground. The self steering gear is simplicity itself. It's a metre and a half of 8mm spectra fixed each side of the cockpit and running through a simple jammer on top of the tiller handle. Set the handle amidships, adjust the sails to the desired heading in the conditions and set about your house keeping!

I got the urge to put out the trolling line, and by midday I had caught a ridiculously large Barracuda. I looked at it, thinking, where do I start eating this damn thing, and I swear it looked at me and wondered, just what do these two buggers think



Where do I start eating you?

they'll do with me in this boat? We took the hook out of his grumpy maw and tossed him back with his snappy mates.

And contented ourselves with canned tuna. By late evening Hogan had vanished behind us, and the Kent group of Islands were rising slowly from the horizon. Progress was excellent, and we engaged ourselves fine tuning the boat, reorganising yet again our stores and rechecking all our fittings and equipment. We had two GPSs, and these were on most of the time. In addition we had Admiralty paper charts, and our GPS positions and course were constantly being checked against the paper charts.

We sailed through the night. We were not really religious enough about it, but we tried to work four hours on watch, four hours off. I was asleep when Ian called me to say we were just passing between two of the Kent group islands, South West Rocks and Deal. The wind had dropped somewhat, and it was quite eerie, to be out in the middle of that strait, passing between these two mountaintops, the sound of sea crashing on their bluff granite cliffs. Night birds flew around us, and some phosphorescence punctuated our wash.

We were half way across, but we also knew that the hardest part was to come.

As day broke, we could see Deal still behind us, and ahead the form of Flinders Island, the largest of the Furneaux group rising in the haze ahead. The breeze continued south-easterly and progress was good. Talk turned to the size of the boots of the early navigators who had passed this way before us, after seeing some of the outcrops, stabbing out of the sea as we passed, and more menacingly, the swirls of water to starboard, indicating a nasty rock, lurking just below the surface. Ian made the observation that we could be grateful for those ships' captains and crews who discovered, noted and gave their names to most of these horrors, at great personal cost. Here we were in a small but competent boat, and we had GPS and charts to confirm our position, and the whereabouts of hazards.

How must it have been, in the black ink of night with only dead reckoning and a howling westerly in your teeth? The 10m swells would have been breaking and depending on the wind and tide, standing with overfalls, confusing navigation and exhausting the ship and her crew. Even the big, modern North Sea capable RO RO ferries that run between Melbourne and Devonport in Tasmania

have reports of their bridge windows smashed in on some trips, such is the force of it all.

Imagination made sleep difficult.

It took us all of that day and into the night to get past the Furneaux group. The big worry, Banks Strait was still to come. It is about 20nm through Banks Strait. It runs West East between Lady Barron Island and the north coast of Tasmania. It also runs flood and ebb to four and a half knots. It is vital in any boat to pick the wind and tide combination that will get you through with least pain. If sailing against the tide, almost no progress is made, and if wind is against you as well, then you go backwards. If the wind is against the tide, then the dreaded square waves and overfalls follow. It is a nasty piece of water, in a larger already nasty piece of water. Working out the tides is tricky too, because of the various accountings on charts of Zulu time, day light saving time, standard time and so on. Added to that of course are the corrections needed because the tide times for the specific area have to be calculated against and adjustment from a centre, such as Devonport.

Fear cures dyslexia.

Ian's good planning and we luck meant we timed it well. I slept most of the way into Banks Strait, and

Ian roused me as Swan Island light came abeam to starboard. The wind built quite strongly from the north-east and so did the sea. I put two reefs in the main, pleased with myself for having been so careful in setting it up so efficiently. The boat drove at a cracking pace; as the wind went more northerly, we went from reaching to broad reaching and we saw nine knots frequently. This was wonderful. I strained my eyes all the rest of the night, imagining containers broken off freighters, waiting for us, just below the surface in the black crashing seas.

Eddystone light off to the south-east soon became Eddystone light to the south, as we swept eastward, out from Banks Strait into the beginnings of the Tasman Sea. Ian, asleep in his bunk, stirred from time to time in the red nightlight to check his charts against the GPS.

It was a great ride, all through that night. The boat fairly rushed on, the self steering behaving impeccably, the tiller just visible in the dark, tugging happily against its piece of string, etched against the spread of stern light on the foaming wake, hissing away from the transom while breaking wave tops occasionally sent spray across the cabin top. It was the best of times, time to reflect that you were truly alive, more so in the slight risk of

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not being, and your tiny life held in the great indifferent vastness. The feeling of life, hunched against the companionway in that swirling cockpit in the confidence of the boat was sublime, strong, almost mad.

My four hours up, Ian came out and I went below. The winds dropped shortly after that and we slatted around for an hour or two after daylight, not moving much. We were a little south of Eddystone when I came out. Ian stayed on the tiller for the next hour and tried to hook the tiny breeze, which was now directly behind us, from the north. Abeam of St Helens, the zephyrs become winds, 10kts, 15, 20. First reef in, mizzen struck. Twenty minutes later, the wind is still rising. Bugger it. Jesus reef. This was not forecast. Thirty knots and cooking. Warp out. No special reason, I'd read it in the books. Rudder (dagger type) blade up. Centreboard mostly up. Wind still building. Seas already large. From the east, big swells coming in from New Zealand. Meeting swells from the south, legacy of a recent storm. Ian had retired to his bunk by now, and was amusing himself calling the over ground speed on his GPS. Steady nine knots,

not bad, Robert. Twelve, hell we just hit 12. Back to 9kts. Bored with 12.

A big swell lifted us and we knew this was special. Ian had said it's okay if you don't look back. Fifteen, 15, 15.5 15 holy moley, 17.5 17.5: how are you handling this?!

No problem, but I admit to trepidation, for the first and really only time on our voyage. We were to see 17.5 several more times, as we surged down that coast.

Seventeen and a half is very fast, I have never seen such speeds in my little boat, in fact never in my sailing experience. I don't really know what the strains are and this is all new. Where will it end? We are 15 miles or so off shore. Helicopter, from here? Don't think so. Water. Cold, too.

Someone said 40 minutes max. Then you go to sleep. It's called hypothermia. Not nice, I think.

Imagination runs.

Does the bow panel open up? Masts snap off? Are the pintle bolts strong enough?

After about an hour of this glorious mayhem, Ian stuck his head out. 'Never thought I'd hear myself



The moment of the first 17.5kts, with 40+ behind us. It's better if you don't look behind ... Note port side warp.

saying this. This little boat is very competent!’

Bram’s yellow drogue sat in the cockpit, I swear it was winking at us, saying, you don’t need me yet!

One hour of trepidation, the last seven hours delirious pleasure realising that A we were not going to die and B this really was fun!

We never looked like broaching, surfing down four to five metre swells and across confused seas. We tried bare poles, found a steady seven and a half knots, Ian decided it was not brisk enough so up with the Jesus reef rag. Then, because we could, we tried all sorts of things like lying a hull, board up with sheets slack. Amazing. Quiet, even though seas were breaking round us. Just like the old *Egret* stories.

I had been on the tiller during that rush down the coast for about six hours, at first in trepidation, then heady with the pleasure that comes out of confidence in the furiously fast ride we were experiencing. In sight of Schouten Island I had imagined that we had an hour or so before we could take a breather behind Maria Island, but Ian informed me that was still two hours away.

Two more hours on the helm. I suddenly felt very tired. In that instant I realised that something was seriously wrong. I started to shiver, and the adrenalin that had sustained me, now let me crash. I had trouble staying awake. I started seeing things aberrantly. I called Ian to take over, and kept repeating that he should put in his warm gear. He did; came out, and I went into my bunk and wrapped myself in everything warm I could find. I shivered for nearly an hour. I could barely move.

Then, near disaster.

Ian again. “The moderate northerlies had turned into a 40kt blow as we roared down the east coast of Tasmania. After we had finally rounded Schouten Island we encountered the weirdest change I have ever seen. We were about 10 miles to the north of Maria Island when the wind went dead calm, then after about 10 minutes turned instantly into a 40kt southerly. This blew for about 30 minutes, then it went calm again for 10 minutes, then another huge southerly for about 30 minutes, then calm again for 10 and so on, through maybe six repetitions before it settled down to a 10 to 15kt southerly. Afterwards I realised it was probably eddies and rotors coming off the 2000 foot high mountain on Maria Island.”

All the while Ian was handling the boat by himself. I was too stressed to move myself, and unable to help Ian should he need it.

I now know I had the beginnings of hypothermia, exacerbated by tiredness.

My mistake began when I came out to relieve Ian in the cockpit off St Helens. It was quite warm, hot even, at that point. I did not worry about putting my warm gear on under my excellent Helly Hansen wet weather gear. As the day wore on, the combination of fine spray, physical effort and cold caused by growing cloud cover conspired to chill me without being very conscious of it.

From that time, no matter what the weather, we started each watch with ALL our warm gear, plus our wet weather gear, plus our life jackets, plus our safety harness. We never had that problem again.

Having survived the fun with the rotors, we sailed through the night relying now entirely on the GPS to get us into Oyster Bay on the south-west side of Maria Island. It’s a little sandy anchorage, a favoured place to wait the weather and tide for yachtsmen heading back to Blackman Bay and Hobart. This was significant for us because the waterway was littered with hazard and the bay itself a narrow entrance. Ian had not so totally relied on the GPS to feel our way in to such a tight spot before. The accuracy was a revelation for him.

Refreshed from a night at anchor, after three days and three nights of continuous sailing we crossed the Marion Bar late in the afternoon and made our way to the village of Dunalley, at the entrance to mile long and fascinating convict dug Dunalley Canal, which provides a considerable short cut to Hobart, avoiding most of the rigors of Storm Bay.

Then Hobart. Midnight. Warm welcome from the Royal Yacht Club of Tasmania. When we woke up in the morning we heard through sleepy ears, from the dock above, ‘They came from where, in THAT?’



Transversing the convict dug Dunalley Canal.



**Bosuns Ron Blake and Danny Ryan, wonderful ambassadors for Royal Yacht Club Tasmania and their state.**

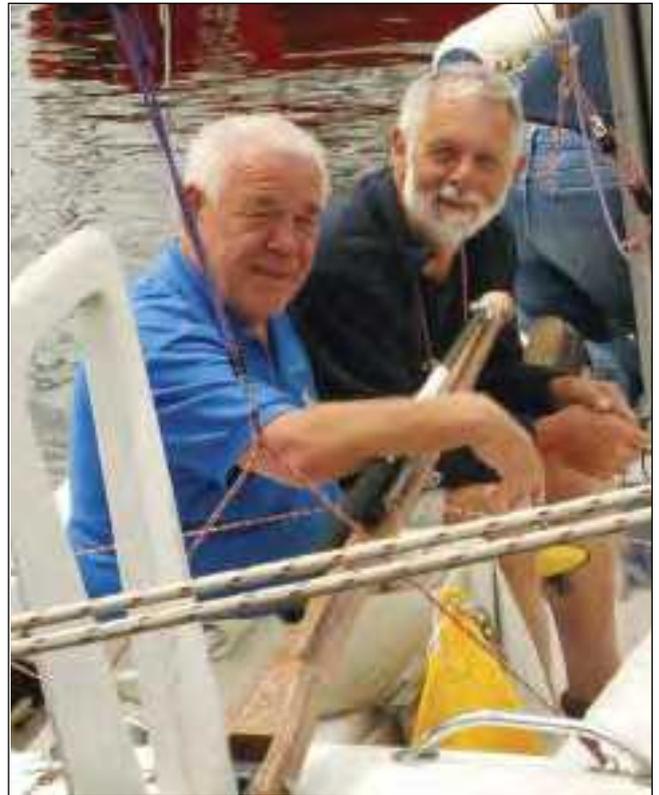
We arrived at the very welcoming Royal Yacht Club, Sandy Bay at midnight, on the Saturday night.

We woke the next morning to the sound of yachtsmen's voices through our cabin roof.

"They came from where, in that?!"

Over the next couple of weeks these same yachtsmen came to revise their scepticism.

The crew of yacht *Charlie Fisher* cannot thank the Royal Yacht Club of Tasmania strongly enough,



**Yachting royalty visits *Charlie Fisher*. Tony Bullimore deciding on his new round world boat. Tony has just left Hobart on his round world record attempt, you can follow it on the Royal Yacht Club of Tasmania Web Site. (ryct@ryct.org.au) (pic Yachting Royalty (T Bullimore) visits *C Fisher*)**

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with special mention of the interest and encouragement of Bosun Ron Blake and his mate, Bosun Danny Ryan. Royal yacht Club of Tasmania. (ryct@ryct.org.au ph: 03 6223 4599)

We stayed for the event that spurred our journey, the world recognised Hobart Tasmania Wooden Boat Festival.

Director Andy Gamlin seems to have been the driver, supported by his committee of a remarkable festival best described as the Brest of the Antipodes. Seven hundred boats registered, for starters.

It was the best three days I can imagine. All the right bits, starting with the boats themselves, but also including a wonderful Dutch contingent, including a Music Boote, Tjotters, Botters and more, all brought out for the Festival by the Dutch Consulate.

Music on the wharfs, fine food, wine and very friendly ambience all around. This is a small colonial era city, richly steeped in history, and a very worth while destination in its own right.

The festival was a great success, with Roy Barkas's

NIS31, Malcolm Scott's 29 and Rob and Jo Nolan's NIS23 and mobs of owners from other parts of Australian present.

We had a lot of visitors, including yachting royalty in the form of Tony Bullimore, who had heard of this cheeky little boat and came round to check it out.

Ian had commitments that precluded him joining Charlie Fisher for the run up the coast to St Helens, at the top north east corner of Tasmania.

**Next Issue ...**

**Solo up the east coast, and then the long run home. ■**



NIS23 Charlie Fisher and friends in Parade of Sail, Hobart Wooden Boat Festival.

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