



Charlie Fisher's Bass Strait adventure

the return

Bruce Kirby designed Norwalk Islands Sharpie 23

by ROBERT AYLIFFE

FOUR hundred miles of what we now knew to be unpredictable open water, waited for us.

This time, I had to do the Tasmanian east coast section, Hobart, Dunalley Canal, Marion Bar, Wine Glass Bay and the bar at St Helen's, on the top north-east corner solo because Ian had other commitments in Tasmania till then.

So, solo it was.

I admit to some trepidation, sailing away from the comfort and kindnesses I had experienced as a guest of the Royal Yacht Club of Tasmania.

But my little ship felt good, with the clear Tasmanian water once more moving under her as we cleared the Royal Yacht Club Of Tasmania.

I reflected on the wealth of the time and place that we are fortunate enough to inhabit, that makes such vanity possible. It is without precedent in the sweep of human history. It matters to know, in the middle of things, that we are so lucky.

The cabin and cockpit lockers had been fully aired and cleaned from end to end, and all the provisions, charts and navigation equipment had been checked and restowed. I had plenty of fuel should I need it and the small Ray Marine Auto Helm had been checked. I used the auto helm extensively for light air down wind work, and for the few times we were under engine power. The big gel battery had been kept well charged by Troy's small solar panel. The battery was easily capable of powering the auto helm for 30 or more hours without further charging, and since we had plenty of sun I could rely on 48 hours should I need it. I had plenty of stores, and fresh apples, carrots and other goodies

were low down in the cool of the hull. I had good coffee, ground just before I left and packed in an airtight container. My clothes were all clean and aired and the Helly Hansen wet weather gear had been carefully aired and washed too. The knowledge of order makes me feel good, and it helps my normally chaotic brain behave itself; a comforting thought, setting out on a trip like this.

I had plenty of small tins of high protein snack food, tuna especially, baked beans and the like. There was, under the vee berth 40 litres of water and more under the bridge deck. In the midships cockpit lockers, down low we had 40 litres of petrol for the out board. My little transistor radio chatted away as I ghosted down the Derwent.

I had farewelled our friends Matt Cecil and Heather Hesterman and NIS 23 'Shearwater' owners Rob and Jo Nolan, two special couples who very kindly provided me with home accommodation during my Hobart stay. Rob and Jo built 'Shearwater' around 10 years ago, and seem to almost live aboard the boat during the warm summer months.

Without exception, the Tasmanian boating fraternity had been very kind to us, from our arrival to our departure.

This time there would be no one to take over if I was silly enough to get hypothermia again, and the awareness that no matter how careful the preparation, there still could be some fatal oversight, with the already mentioned cascading series of consequences that can follow.

On the other hand I was extremely confident in the boat and the lessons we had learned on the journey down.

The pace on the Derwent was leisurely, drifting till I was about three miles north-east of Betsey Island, around 5pm. The wind, for a change as

forecast piped in from the south-east, moving around later to the north. Local thunderstorms and northerly gale warnings crackled over the VHF radio as I rounded to the east, so I anchored north of Betsey Island, just a few metres off the beach near Black Jack Rocks, thinking that the lee would provide a good shelter.

It turned out to be one of the wildest nights I have experienced at anchor.

The lightening came first, followed with increasingly short interludes of rolling thunder. The wind went to the north, and blew so hard during the moonless night that the boat shook continuously. The ferocity was such that waves seemed to come from no fetch at all, just a few metres from the beach but enough to slap against the hull all night. Sleep? Well an approximation anyway, interrupted by thunder and the sharp waves, the quivering of the hull and the frequent illumination of the cabin from lightning. I could see Betsey through the companionway, lighting up like daylight in the big sheet lightning flashes.

I had set the GPS for drift alarm, but did not entirely trust it, preferring to wake frequently and eyeball Black Jack and Betsey from the companionway to confirm my position.

Morning brought respite, clearing skies, boating traffic and the urge to have a proper sleep!

I succumbed. It was midmorning before I weighed anchor for Storm Bay and my intended destination, the small village and canal port of Dunalley.

The sailing was memorable for the vista of muscular cliffs as I sailed in close, through Storm Bay and into Frederick Henry Bay. It was cheery too, fishermen waving as I sailed past, sunlight, seabirds wheeling. The wind still had some northerly, so self steering was easily achieved,

rudder dead ahead and the course set by the mizzen. Book reading time! Serendipitously, *The Tipping Point (How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference)*: by Malcolm Gladwell. Given to me, with great prescience by Heather Hesterman, just as I cast off. Thanks, Heather.



Storm clouds, Betsey Island.



NIS23 *Charlie Fisher*, Lagoon Beach, Tasmania, late February 2007. Over the bar. (inset)

Evening saw me in light air and tired, just north of Slopen Island. Rather than hurry, I decided to enjoy my time, and sailed in to Lagoon Beach for the night. The lifting centreboard meant that running up on to the beach was pleasure, and the balmy evening was a treat.

Morning saw me into Dunalley and breakfast. The wind was piping by the time I left, and the run down to Chinaman's saw a leap in wind speed, a reef or two and very short tacks as I worked up the channel toward the Marion Bar.

Strong northerlies persisted, but as Ian puts it:

"Robert, becoming impatient actually ventured out over the Marion Bar into 50 plus knots of northerly."

Well that's part of the story. I *did* eyeball the Marion Bar before crossing it, and *did* come to the *rational* conclusion that it was doable. The boat did

bump the bottom as we crossed, but we were very quickly out into the open, if vigorous sea. Another advantage of having a strong, lightweight retractable centreboard boat!

I already had the mizzen first reef in and the main deep reefed. Pretty soon I was getting radio and mobile phone calls from crews of yachts I had made friends with in Hobart. They knew I was 'somewhere' on my way north. As it turned out they were only a little ahead of me, sheltering in the lee of the blow at Coles Bay and Bryans Corner. I did not know what the wind speed was, except that it was big, as were the seas. There was some disbelief that I was 'out there', as Anna Commandeuz, navigator and chef on the very pretty Wittolz designed 35ft steel yacht *Jo Jak* put it, "because there is mayhem here. Most of the boats can't hold their ground, the wind is gusting 60+ and anchors are dragging all over. Most of the boats

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have got their motors running just trying to stay in one place.

Are you SAFE out there?"

I was.

Six and a half knots most of the time over the ground (GPS) to windward, with the bit of string self steering as usual, and me snuggled up in the lee of the cabin. This time I was very warm and comfortable, even with the occasional big spray over the top as a breaking coamer swept past the boat. I reflected on what a difference the well designed Helley Hansen wet weather gear makes on a passage such as this. It seems a statement of the obvious but having gear that is comfortable to wear and at the same time prevents those icy creeks from sneaking down your neck and into the body of your clothing is so reassuring! The motion of the boat in these seas was such that, combined with accumulated Michelin man bulk of safety harness and life jackets, moving down into the cabin to get a snack was really a project, but doable. I'd describe that six hours or so as 'surprisingly comfortable hanging on'.

Needless to say the safety harness remained firmly clipped.

It was wonderful. Made more so by the radio and phone calls throughout the journey. The fraternity at work.

As I neared Triabunna, I had the company of a large steel trawler, the only other boat I saw on the water that day. Interestingly he seemed to be more or less continuously pitching and crashing into the sea, huge spray and solid water passing over his ship. I was intrigued that my little ship was by comparison dry, and simply going with the sea. I have noticed this with seabirds, in storms in the past, they just seem to sit there without drama, rising and falling, buoyant and on top of the turbulence.

I have some video taken of *Jo Jak*. In the video she is sailing to windward off to starboard in about 18kts of breeze in confused sea. It is quite instructive.

Jo Jak is a very well made and designed boat, but like most other cruising boats of her size has real mass, which is often in her favour. But, I suspect BECAUSE of her mass, which includes a heavy mast, and fine hull shape, she gets a relatively high pitching rhythm, the period of which increases with each wave, till finally the bow is coming right out of the wave and then diving back down into the body of the next.

By comparison the very buoyant, lightweight Sharpie is not pitching and she is dry, just sailing easily over and on top of the water's surface. Her appendages below the surface are minimal, which means the turning effect of breaking water is reduced. In addition, with her theoretical 143° self-righting, her flared sides and the ability to withdraw rudder and centreboard, she will simply slide sideways in a breaking swell, should she get caught that way. We had deliberately tested the theory at sea in the big blow coming down the coast; we could have put the kettle on!

I was pleased to get to the lee of the top end of Freycinet Peninsula, at the entrance to the woodchip export and fishing port of Triabunna before darkness set in.

I motored the last mile or so up the winding channel that leads to the town dock. Was delighted to see Doug and Sandra Williams on their boat *Freycinet 2* already tied up and asked permission to raft up alongside. Doug and Sandra greeted me warmly, and asked me where I had been hiding all day, since they had been in harbour for the past 24 hours, and had not seen my boat. Then, hang on, you were not out in that...?!'

I sailed the next day around to Wine Glass Bay, following the fleet that had been holed up in Brian's Corner and Coles Bay the previous day, and *Freycinet 2*, who motor sailed out ahead of me from Triabunna.

It was another inspiring day, light air and spectacular scenery. I deliberately sailed close in by the big cliffs of the eastern side of Freycinet Peninsula. I saw what looked like a dead whale, floating in a bed of floating 'grape' kelp. As I drew nearer what I had thought was its prone tail and flippers, it weirdly sprung to lazy and disjointed



Dead whale, NO, sleeping seal.

life; it was group of seals apparently sleeping in the floating kelp, their 'hands and feet' held up akimbo like comical sails.

As I passed, the seals drowsily lifted their heads, looked the passing apparition up and down, and then, with seeming indifference, returned to their comical slumbers. Dolphins joined me, as the wind increased from the north-east. I never tire of watching these slippery mammals, and the excitement of the whispered hints of their eye contact, their play and intelligence never ceases. I also saw penguins appearing to be asleep, sometimes far out of sight of land. As we approached, they would look up, but unlike the seals, dived out of sight quickly.

Wine Glass Bay surprised me. It looked to be a forbidding, narrow granite walled gulch with only a threatening rocky bay at the far western end, a real trap in an easterly blow. I could see that swells from the east could pump up against the walls and my boat would surely be smashed to pieces. I sailed warily all the way in. I felt the boat lifting on some of the more ominous shoulders of swell, uneasy hints of what could be.

I should not have worried. As I reached the end of the passage, it suddenly opened up to the south to reveal a sheltered, long white sandy beach, ringed by scrub, backed by beetling cliffs and high escarpment. Six yachts were swinging on their anchors in the turquoise waters; people swimming and walking along the beach.



Owner John Reed on *Jo Jak* in Wine Glass Bay

Jo Jak was there too, and pretty soon I was invited aboard to join them for pepper squid, brilliantly cooked by Malcolm Murfitt, a local fisherman, who later elected to join me for the run north, the next day up to St Helens.

Malcolm ('Bushy', as the locals know him) is one of those guys you meet sometimes who hides under a joking façade, lest someone actually realise how good he really is. For he is. He has amazing local knowledge, and his suggestions about the ways to handle the coast were valuable to me, then and later on the journey.

He talked about changing directions in his life and whether it might be not be too late to go back to study, for example.



Charlie Fisher and friends in Wineglass Bay. Tasmania at its pristine best.



Charlie Fisher at 9.5kts, running wing and wing up past St Helen's Island. Bushy Murfitt in the companionway. Pic taken from *Jo Jak*.

I really hope he does.

It was a glorious run up the coast, swooping over confused seas ahead of a tail wind. To our delight we managed to overtake the 35' *Jo Jak*, though their version of events was that they called in at a coastal pub for a drink, showers, a massage, a game of pool and a meal while we were looking the other way! Special thanks to Andrew for taking the picture that you saw on last AABB cover, as we overtook *Jo Jak*.

The best of times!

A couple of days followed in the surprisingly attractive town of St Helens, once more waiting for the weather window. Ian rejoined the ship, and we sailed out again across the notorious St Helens bar, homeward bound. By now we were sceptical of the forecasts; and were also more confident about the boat's ability. The four day window we now regarded as academic.

We ran north up the coast, then west around Eddystone Light in a fading breeze.

By the time we reached Banks Strait the wind dropped altogether. Our progress into the strait had been slower than expected.

We now had the worry of clearing the strait before the tide turned. For the first time in our travels we decided to motor the distance.

The little motor, a 3.5 Tohatsu of indeterminate age initially had us running over the ground at up to six knots. Ian had gone down to his bunk, with the stern instruction to be left sleeping, no matter what. Late in that afternoon I saw the most unexpected sight of our travels. I had no choice. I woke him up, saying, Ian, you have got to see this. The grumpy head peered out of the companionway.

I'm glad you woke me.

Malcolm had told me of giant 'rafts' of mutton birds that were known to form in Banks Strait. I had imagined that they were mythical things of the past, not to be seen any more.

Just as Ian came up from his bunk our boat was nearing the edge of the biggest group of birds I have ever seen. The water was black with them, as far as the eye could see.

I had been watching the raft for some time, thinking that the birds would disperse as we drew nearer. I became curious about their lack of obvious business out there, out of sight of land. They did not seem to be actively feeding. They seemed to be just sitting there, silently as far as I could tell.

The 'myth' was real.

Floating in front of our eyes. How many? Hard to tell, maybe 200-300,000?

We were about 20 metres or so into their raft, when in one incredible beating of wings, they panicked, splashing across the water in take off. Whizzing, flapping, close over our heads. Noise of wings and water, but no calls or cries. Ghostly in its unity and epic in its dimension, the frenzy lasted for about 10 minutes. When it was over, they had all but vanished.



In the middle of Banks Strait, in the middle of 2/300,000 Mutton birds!

I turned in, and Ian took the helm till night fell. By this time the tide, as we had feared, had turned. We were slowed to two knots over the ground, and still not out of Banks Strait. *Tojo* was starting to misbehave, just a little. Not quite full revs.

The wind was starting the west.

The forecast prediction, received at St Helens and borne out by *Sea Rescue Tamar* was 15 to 20kts of westerly in the evening. I was woken from my sleep by wind noise and vigorous sea motion. The 15-20kts, as we had seen so often before was now 35+ and north-westerly, and in the early part at least tide was against us. We beat into the night. It was the roughest part of the voyage. We were sometimes being thrown off breaking waves, but apart from a slight thumping as we hit the next wave, no pounding at all.

I noticed that as we were being thrown off the waves we were also falling off by the head, and this was disconcerting because we were as a result struggling to clear the rocky tip of Goose Island. This was the first time I had experienced the boat being knocked off course. Seemed to me we needed more 'air rudder'. So I shook out one reef

from the mizzen and snapped on the mizzen sheet. Reliably on course again!

A couple of hours before daylight we made the decision to take advantage of shelter behind Prime Seal Island, in Peacock Bay, west of Flinders Island and to our north. Ian checked the charts, and we plotted our course in to known holding ground, made easier to access for us because we could choose to run in very shallow. This was the first time we had consciously taken shelter and it was very rewarding. The Danforth anchor held well, as the chart said it would, we had around five hours of sound sleep, while the wind built to a fury over and around us.

As Ian puts it, "It blew from the west like a mad thing until about 2pm then by 4pm it was blowing 10kts from the south and at 7pm a huge rain squall came at us from the east."

The next day, fully refreshed, and with a spring in our hearts we set off for Deal Island, the major

island in the Kent group. This was one of those runs to die for. The wind was from the south now, the seas smooth. The boat almost sang along, frequently hitting 10kts over the ground. The Kent group seemed to rush up over the horizon at us.

Ian suggested we approach from the south west, and sail carefully into the tricky Murray Passage to Eastern Cove, where we would find good shelter for the next few hours.

Like Banks Strait earlier, this waterway was superficially smooth, but punctuated by small standing waves, ominous ripples and swirls, the effect of endless tide over uneven bottom. We made Eastern Cove, with its little lighthouse keeper's jetty, a remnant from era of manned lighthouses. We ran the boat at full sail right up onto the beach, and into a cloud of the most tenacious and annoying blowflies I have ever experienced.

A Robinson Crusoe moment followed, when to our complete surprise a very fit woman made her



Ian in the companionway as *Charlie Fisher* approaches Deal island, mid Bass Strait.



Charlie Fisher in the pristine waters of Murray Passage, Kent Group, Bass Strait, Erith Island in the background. Conversing with a Bennetts Wallaby, Eastern Cove, Deal Island. (right)

way down the cliff to our boat. Kate Johnstone introduced herself as one of two volunteer caretakers of the island, the other her partner, Damian Hope, and made us welcome, inviting us to a barbecue on the beach that evening. Thrilled at this turn of events, and happy that the boat was secure I went exploring along the coast, while Ian explored inland. I experienced the interaction with the local wild life that Flinders reported, on first landing on Kangaroo Island. Bennetts Wallabies were so unused to predators that I could just walk up to them.

Ian: 'We received a forecast, from *Sea Rescue Tamar* for the following day of 10-15kts east winds rising to 15kts to 20kts in the afternoon.'

Brin Warrick, the volunteer at *Sea Rescue Tamar* was one of the angel's wings over us on our voyage, and we really respect the network of volunteers in this organisation and others such as Volunteer CoastGuard who do so much to help sailors all around our country. One of the many highlights of the Hobart Festival was the honour we had of Brin's visit to our little ship, and the very happy hour we had with him aboard.

And with that, I can't let pass that other angel, Peter Summerton, owner builder of NIS23 *Pasquin*, (AABB cover story Vol 2 Issue 3 Summer 93/94) who tirelessly monitored our progress through Brin, and relayed our circumstances to those dear to us, throughout our voyage also NIS26 *Isolla Bella* owner Ian Mortleman from Brisbane, who helped me enormously in Hobart during the festival and again in March at the festival in SA.

Ian again, "Two, by now deeply cynical, (about the weather) sailors decided to depart at 10pm that same evening so as to be home on the 'big island' before the next afternoon.

Our cynicism was justified. As we worked up Lewis Channel at Welshpool the by now familiar 40kts of easterly was blowing. The ride into Port Welshpool was quite brisk as a result."

Francis Chichester once observed something to the effect that it's not the ocean that's dangerous; it's what happens when the ocean stops! In ports, especially.

Sailing up into the wind as we rounded into the inner channel into Port Welshpool was pretty scatty. The beats were short and the tacking frequent, especially since the tide was ebbing fast. The self-tacking rig on the Sharpies makes easy work of this but the tide run made it hard to gain



Sea Rescue Tamar's Brin Warrick, aboard *Charlie Fisher*, Kings Pier, Hobart Festival, February.

ground. The wind if anything seemed to increase, and the rickety wharfs provided no shelter.

The only soft-landing wharf in the port suited to a smaller boat, especially a yacht, serves the public ramp and the only practical approach was under motor. The pontoon was only about 25m long. The boat is seven metres. Not much room for fumbling. The outer end was backed by a very bitey rock wall. The inner, shore end was old and broken pilings, more suited to skewering than cradling a small boat.

It was one shot in the locker. After 800 miles of some of the hairiest water in the world, it seemed crazy that we were in most danger of harming the boat now.

I took a deep breath. Ian already had the fenders over the side. We came in unavoidably fast. I cut the motor about 25 metres from the floating dock.

We bumped up to the dock spot on, save that the wind pressure pushing the boat against the dock caused one of the pneumatic fenders to pop. It took all our strength to push the boat against the wind far enough to slip another fender in.

But we were home.

I have just opened my emails after nearly a month of living on board *Charlie Fisher*; four gales, 800 incredibly varied open sea miles.

I admit to amazement at the activity on the



James and Tim arrive in 18ft *Tookalook* at the Royal Yacht Club of Tasmania, having island hopped all the way from Lakes Entrance to Hobart a couple of days behind *Charlie Fisher*.

forum, and delight! We had been buoyed through it all by the generous acts and warm wishes from so many of you, before we left, during our passage and after our homecoming. You were all wind under our wings and strength in our hearts, especially as the screeching winds built, reefed down and beating off lee shores in the inky darkness.

Delight at the proof of Randall Cooper's execution of the NIS tabernacle; their strength in open water is proven, and their convenience demonstrated when I was able to attend to a minor masthead glitch at sea by myself.

Mizzen dead ahead, nose to wind in a rolling sea I was able to lower the main mast, straighten (that's right straighten!) the Windex stalk, put the mast back up, and then get on my way again.

Without sweat.

Delight also to reflect just how good citizen Kirby, as NIS23 *Scherzo* owner Geoff Heriot has titled him, has been in weaving 200 years of American workboat evolution into such a gutsy range of yachts.

We were always conscious of the big footprints we were following in, especially Bass and Flinders. There was such a tiny boat, 12¹/₂ft, virtually no safety equipment such as we know it, non of the comforts, radio weather forecasts and modern navigation aids that we take for granted. We were also conscious of our friends (and approved NIS builders) James Frecheville and his business partner, Tim Heaney, of Frecheville Heaney Boat

Builders (www.fhboats.com.au) in Paynesville, who had been island hopping 'somewhere' behind us on our way down in their self designed and built 20' diesel clinker launch, probably the smallest displacement power boat to go to the Hobart Festival under its own power.

They made it to Royal Yacht Club of Tasmania a few days behind us.

Theirs is a considerable feat, and we hope they tell *their* story, in AABB soon.

Bass Strait, and the Tasmanian east coast are characterized for me by two words, majesty and menace. And, add to that, nowhere much to hide when the menace shows its teeth.

As Ian pointed out as we said our goodbyes at Tullamarine, "It has been a hell of an adventure. There are a lot of lessons in this for all of us."

Especially, we repeat that this story must not be taken as a suggestion that anyone can just hop in their trailer sailer and head off to Tasmania. It can be done, but it requires careful preparation and extensive homework. The type of boat must be fundamentally good, with high self-righting and ultimate buoyancy among the attributes. It must also be set up to be very easily handled, and all of the crew should have some heavy weather open water experience as well. The boat should be reliably capable of being its own life boat. We know for sure that the Norwalk Islands Sharpie, as *Charlie Fisher* is constructed qualifies for that.

Being disciplined about rest is essential. Fear in adverse conditions combined with tiredness is a dangerous mix. One small breakdown in the discipline involved in maintaining a boat's rhythm can swiftly lead to a cascading series of blunders, which in turn become disaster.

Ask a lot of questions. Our critics were on the right track. They actually contributed by raising our antennae and the preparedness of the boat.

Ian's conclusions: 'The Norwalk Island Sharpie is a narrow, flat bottomed, high freeboard centre board yacht with an unstayed cat ketch rig on it. It is broadly based on the professional fishing boats of the north-east of the United States. It performed magnificently. Twenty three feet is small for lengthy

adventures like this (except for masochists) but I think this little boat is superbly capable.

Running downwind in high seas and a lot of wind, we surged through 17.5kts (by GPS). Not the slightest sign of instability. We were reefed to the third (very deep) reef in the main and no mizzen so it is what would be expected as the centre of effort is almost at the front of the boat and the centre of resistance way behind.

It showed no signs of pounding in any of the seas we encountered. In fact, its motion was relatively comfortable (as comfortable as you can be in 35kts of wind and the two to three metre seas generated by six hours of wind and going to windward at that). It was a lot dryer on deck than might be expected. I initially asked, where is the dodger. Now I don't think it needs one.

It reliably self steered to windward in just about any conditions. The hull shape and lack of drag from rigging yields an extremely easily driven boat, needing only a very small amount of sail once the wind pipes.

Charlie Fisher is constructed from Gaboon plywood, coated with three coats of Bote-Cote on every side and surface and then glued together with Bote-Cote and Fillet and Glue Filler. It was built about 18 years ago. Apart from cleats and similar fittings it has no screws, bolts or nails in it, it is entirely held together by Bote-Cote. It is a sound as the day it was built. I could see no signs of water ingress to any of the timber. The interior was dry to a degree I have never experienced in an ocean going boat, and apart from one splash, no water at all found its way down below.

Charlie Fisher's undersides are protected with Cop-R-Bote long life antifoul. When we took it out of the water at Port Welshpool after it had spent a month travelling to Hobart and back, the only fouling was a very slight bacterial slime. As expected, Cop-R-Bote also stands up very well to coming on and off trailers, being left to dry out of the

water for weeks or months and occasional deliberate beachings and less deliberate groundings.'

As the last gale flung us up the channel towards those bejagulant wharves in Port Welshpool, I had the strongest sense that all of you who encouraged and contributed to this voyage were with us, and that Commodore Munroe, and his fishy smelling, oil skinned mates were hiked out in some old Sharpie in the sky, looking down approvingly on the tidy completion of our voyage and the excellence of Bruce Kirby's creation. ■



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