

A CLASSIC ADVENTURE

ROUNDING THE HORN

BY RICHARD HAWORTH

In the Austral summer of last year, Richard Haworth of High Latitudes was employed to pilot the 100 year old classic yacht *Merrymaid* around Cape Horn and north through the Patagonian Channels. Here Richard recounts some of the highlights of the expedition.

As we neared the western end of the Beagle Channel we had expected the winds to increase. The funnelling effect of the deep sided channels is renowned for causing problems for west-bound vessels in the region. However, as the gusts got up into the high 50s it became clear that we weren't going to be able to make headway into the fetch that would be running down the final 15 miles of Canal Brecknock. We began looking for a suitable refuge. The nearest good anchorage was some 25 miles behind us, but looking at the chart I had seen a small bay on the north side of the channel which looked like it would be worth a try. The thick kelp and steep rocky sides of the bay did not look promising, however *Merrymaid's* anchor was a massive 140 kg bronze fisherman. This is the perfect tool for rocky, kelpy anchorages and had proved very effective in the anchorages we had used as we made our way slowly westwards along the Beagle Channel. The anchor once again, proved its worth in this bay. In smaller anchorages, where there was sufficient forestation, we would also make use of long shorelines which we tied around suitable trees. There were not many individual trees that we could trust with the mooring lines for the 90-odd tonne *Merrymaid*, so we often tried to spread the load between several trunks, using shorter mooring lines to create a spider's web in the dense forest.

By this stage we had been in Chilean waters for 10 days, arriving after a good passage from the Falkland Islands. This passage can be very slow and painful, as the vessel is usually making headway into the prevailing westerly winds. However, we had been able to take advantage of two days of light north-westerly winds and the voyage had been a pleasant introduction to sailing this beautiful vessel.

Merrymaid was obviously far removed from the purpose-built high latitude yachts more commonly visiting these areas, which are set up to be sailed short-handed with roller furling foresails and up to four reefs in the mainsail. Aboard *Merrymaid*, the Captain, Justin Holvik, explained that we needed at least an hour to reef the mainsail. I was stunned by the size of the boom which must clearly weigh a tonne or more. Projecting way aft over the sleek stern of the boat, it was easy to imagine this huge spar being thrown around by a gusting gale while trying to handle the sail. I was assured that this was the new, shortened version! Like most of the above decks' woodwork, the boom was highly varnished. As I surveyed the seeming acres of teak and varnish, it occurred to me that it would all need a lot more tender loving care when *Merrymaid* had finished her southern voyages.

I had last seen the 1904 built yacht in Southampton as she was undergoing a major restoration at Southampton Yacht Services which meant that the *Merrymaid* that I welcomed into Stanley Harbour, some six months later, was a very different vessel. She had covered around 9000 miles and for much of this time she had been in the very capable hands of John Bardon, one of the most experienced classic boat Captains in the business. He had not only transformed *Merrymaid* into a well prepared cruising boat, but had also recruited a permanent captain to take her on her circumnavigation. Justin had joined her in the Cape Verde Islands and had since built up a crew with many thousands of classic yacht miles between them.

Having departed from Puerto Madryn in Argentina they had encountered a deep depression just north



of the Falkland Islands over the previous two days. This stretch of water, lying over the continental shelf, is notoriously rough, but vessel, captain, crew and owner looked remarkably unfazed by the conditions that they had come through when they moored alongside in Stanley. They followed in the age old tradition of sailors and recovered from the southern ocean storm in the cosy environment of a proper 'English' pub over a few pints of ale. During her stay in the Falklands, Merrymaid was the centre of attention and a constant stream of islanders turned up, curious to see the boat as she is far removed from the usual steel and aluminium cruising yachts that pass through the port.

A look through the vessel showed that many of the changes we had recommended had been well executed during her refit. With water temperatures around 4°C, the performance of the watermaker would drop to around half its rated capacity. A pre-heater to the sea water intake had therefore been added to boost the output. We also reviewed the heating system of the vessel, looked at the problem of condensation from the hatches and agreed additional equipment that should be carried on board, such as long lengths of floating polypropylene rope for mooring the vessel in rocky anchorages. Potentially the greatest challenge to overcome was Merrymaid's tankage capacity – with a range under engine of not much more than 400 miles.

This was going to be pitifully inadequate for the passage up the west coast of Chile, where narrow channels, contrary currents and strong headwinds could be expected. Plans were made for fuel bladders to be carried on deck for this leg of the voyage and arrangements made to ensure that fuel would be available in the remote fishing village of Puerto Eden.

But to make it that far we first had to round Cape Horn. The legends surrounding this famous rocky headland hold a strange fascination for sailors all over the world. The shores are littered with the wrecks of ships that were damaged in the big seas around the Horn and multitudes of mariners, including myself, have been punished by its notorious seas. This was at the forefront of my mind as we approached the Beagle Channel in Merrymaid.

En route to the Cape, we had cleared into Chilean waters at Puerto Williams, the southernmost town in the world. Here we were met with the usual paperwork, but also with the locals' friendliness and the warm hospitality of the Micalvi Yacht Club Bar. Housed in a sunken naval supply vessel, she has settled at such an angle that every person inside tends towards the bar. This is a regular venue for the start and finish of many big adventures at sea and was a fitting place for us to plan our trip around the Horn and northwards. Both Justin and I felt strongly that if we were to take a vessel such as Merrymaid around the Horn, the event must be recorded on camera. We therefore arranged with two French yachtsmen, Bernard and his son Christophe aboard their yacht 'Pulsar', to accompany us around the Horn. This needed some logistical planning, since at 40 feet there was no way that Pulsar could match the speed of Merrymaid.

Heading south towards Cape Horn we visited some scenic anchorages, including the very small and remote fishing





village of Puerto Torro, where we were able to go ashore to explore. Awaking on the day of our intended rounding, we had been joined in our anchorage by 'Australis', a charter yacht who had just returned from Antarctica. The skipper Ben advised us that conditions off the Horn were pretty rough, with winds of over 30 knots from the west. However, Justin and his crew had not sailed 9000 miles to wait in anchorages and were anxious to have a look at the seas about which they had read so much. As we approached the Island of Hornos, it was gusting 35 knots and more and a fierce sea had built overnight, but with the tri-sail and storm jib set Merrymaid was making good progress into a difficult sea. By late morning, the wind had gone into the south west and abated somewhat, allowing us to make our way around the Horn on one single port tack. The dark cliffs of the Cape towered above us and we were soaked from the spray thrown up as Merrymaid buried her bowsprit into the waves. We frequently lost sight of our photographers, as they dropped from view behind the large seas. It was very exciting to be under these famous cliffs in such an amazing boat.

The following day the wind and the sea had subsided considerably. Justin was keen to take the opportunity of rounding the Horn once more – this time under full sail and in the opposite direction! This second day spent in the area gave us the opportunity of landing on the island, and visiting the Chilean naval officer and his family who manage the famous light house situated there. For the owner, captain and crew, this was the culmination of years of re-fit and much hard work in order to get the vessel ready for these waters. There was, quite rightly, a feeling of satisfaction as we sheltered in amongst the kelp of Brecknock. This area has some of the most beautiful, wild anchorages in the world and I was very much looking forward to showing Justin, his owner and crew the sights of Patagonia.

Having restocked in Puerto Williams to avoid the extortionate pilot fees for entering Ushuaia, we made a few interesting stops in the Beagle Channel, including at an estancia (cattle ranch) where the crew were able to go horse riding – Patagonian style. This was exciting, involving some interesting deep river crossings and was enjoyed by all. In the days following we had made good

progress up the Channel, spending time amongst the amazing glaciers that tumble down to the water in some of the deep inlets to the north. It was a strange feeling to be moving through brash ice in such a unique boat. Care was taken to avoid any of the larger growlers, which could have made a mess of the bobstay and its fittings, not to mention the paintwork.

The scenery that we were travelling through was spectacular. As we got closer to the forces of the Pacific Ocean the currents were stronger, and the channels northwards involved passing three significant tidal gates. One such constriction had a nine knot tide running when we arrived and anchoring just next to the narrows, a seething, boiling mass of water that would have interested most white water canoeists, which was just off our transom.

Progressing to more northerly latitudes, the air got warmer, but no less wet. Most days it rained. Some days it never stopped raining! However we did enjoy good weather for our visits to the impressive ice fronts of

Ventisquero Pio XI and Seno Iceberg. Here we could take Merrymaid up close to the ice front, though not too close as the high walls of ice are constantly calving large lumps of ice. Justin and his crew were intent on wakeboarding in front of a glacier, which was achieved in Seno Iceberg. The crew also made a tour of the bay in the aptly named 'Merrybaby', the beautiful clinker built sailing dinghy that is carried on deck.

On the last leg we were fortunate to be able to take advantage of light southerly winds when crossing the Gulf of Penas, a relatively shallow stretch of water which can get very rough in strong westerly or north-westerly winds. Finally, berthing in Puerto Montt, we could look back on a great experience in the Patagonian waters. Our voyage had enabled us to see Patagonian foxes, condors, sea lions, humpback & Sei whales and we were even fortunate enough to encounter a pod of orcas. Merrymaid and her crew had done themselves proud, coping with everything that the region could throw at them and I left the boat in Puerto Montt with many





happy memories. From here, the boat was to continue up the west coast of South America, looking for somewhere suitable to give her the tender loving care that she deserved and needed to restore the varnish to tip top condition.

THE ROUGHEST SEAS IN THE WORLD?

Why is Cape Horn (probably) the most famous coastal landmark in the world? It is surely connected to the fact that so many vessels and so many lives have been lost in these waters over the years. There is a romantic legend surrounding the rocky headland that entices mariners from all over the world.

The weather systems that pass to the south of the Cape have been moving uninterrupted over the cold southern ocean for many thousands of miles. As these systems approach the Drake Passage, they often feel the squeezing effect of the two adjacent high pressure systems – one over the southern part of South America and one over the Antarctic continent, sometimes extending northwards over the Antarctic peninsular. It is this squeezing effect that makes the winds in the Drake Passage some of the strongest in the world. The frontal systems in these depressions add to the confusion by causing abrupt changes in direction in the prevailing wind as they pass overhead, leading to dangerous cross

seas. This whole combination of natural phenomenon is amplified in a sea which is moving at currents of over a knot and rising over a sharp upwelling of the ocean floor. The Southern Ocean current, that flows from west to east through the Drake Passage, in reality has many eddies around the Cape, and bodies of water are found to be moving in unexpected directions as far as 50 miles south of the island. All these factors give the waters of this area their horrendous reputation. >||

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Richard Haworth is an experienced skipper of yachts in polar waters, having managed many established yachts including 'Pelagic' and 'Pelagic Australis'. His wealth of experience exploring remote areas includes leading the first sailing expedition to explore some of the uncharted coastal areas of Baffin Island. Richard runs the company High Latitudes, who specialise in assisting and supporting private vessel expeditions to the remote cruising grounds of the world www.highbalitudes.com.

For more information on Merrymaid:

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