

Dione Sky

THE NORTH WEST PASSAGE BEEN THERE, DONE THAT

BY CPT. BRIAN HARRISON



AS I AM WINDING DOWN MY YACHT-MASTER CAREER it has occurred to me that my life at sea has been driven by a desire to tick boxes. Back in the early seventies it was simply to skipper a sailboat across an ocean, box ticked. Then after many thousands of miles under the keel the government decided we had to go to school, another box and surprise surprise I actually learned something. But as the ocean crossings, Cape Horn salutes and circumnavigations piled up there was one box that had always seemed to be beyond me.

THE NORTH WEST PASSAGE

Then finally in 2010 everything fell into place for an attempt at the Passage, the Holy Grail of modern cruising sailors. We had a superb vessel in 'Dione Sky' a 150 ft twin screw expedition type designed by Vripack and well built by Palmer Johnson. As something of a trial we had already circumnavigated South America and got way further south along the Antarctica Peninsula than on our previous visits there on our sail yacht 'Dione' in 1979 and 'Dione Star' in 2001. So naturally, with the noticeable ice



reduction in the South we could assume that the NW passage would be a doddle. Wrong! It is the most beautiful and lethal place I have ever had the honour of taking any yacht.

WEDNESDAY 28TH JULY 2010

74° 46'N – 68° 20'W

'This morning we came to the north eastern edge of the pack ice in Baffin Bay, ran parallel to it until we found clear water and turned west direct for Lancaster Sound and the beginning of the passage.'

Our trip from Greenland across Baffin Bay had been surreal. In 1857 McClintock became entrapped in the ice on this same passage. It was recorded that he stopped on the coast of Disco Island off the Greenland mainland where his crew dug seven tons of coal for the ship. Turned out he needed it, the season was bad and an early freeze kept him stuck in the ice for eight months till the spring thaw when he turned about and did the trip again. For us it was a three day passage through ice free waters with very little wind and no fog.

Entering Lancaster Sound on the morning of the 29th, morning being a designated time on our clocks not the return of the sun, we were with 24 hour daylight, Devon Island sat to the north, Baffin Island to the south, we were cruising in a broad 40 mile passage. We did our first serious ice dodging here as we nudged along the shore of Devon Island toward Blanley Bay. The landscape was amazing to see, it consisted of sandstone laterally carved by glacial flow and vertically sculptured by water run off; it had the appearance of enormous carved cathedrals, really beautiful with a multitude of colours running through the stone, from orange to purple, pink and silver.

Ashore the beach was made up of tiers of shingle, everyone a perfect flat skipping stone, with a surprising amount of vegetation, small clumps of flowering mosses, a stumpy type of grass, and a 'tree' with a trunk as thick as your thumb that spread out over the stones, laying flat to them. A safe anchorage and always to be remembered, our first sighting of a polar bear! It was just strolling along the beach with no concern for us. They are extraordinarily beautiful creatures, a perfect creamy white and so big and proud, afraid of nothing and no one. Never has a bear been so photographed.

One of the famous places in these waters is Beechey Island where Sir John Franklin wintered over in 1845; where he famously did not leave a cairn with a message in it as to his plans; where three of his crew are buried; where Belcher built a house and spent three years in the search for the lost Franklin, his two ships and his 129 crew. And now we were here, walking the beach, photographing the tombs, the ruins of the house complete with hundreds of rusty cans of food, hoops from barrels, the remains of the coal dump. Very moving and so very sad.

We found excellent anchorage in Kearny Cove which was as well for we spent the next five days here. The weather in these regions is very unpredictable. It can blow from the north at five knots all day then within a minute be 25 knots out of the south. The ice forecasts are very accurate but the weather is a bit hit and miss. The wind also moves the ice around on a whim, a channel that has been open for days can close shut in an hour, so while the main ice reports are accurate the local ice conditions are subject of the local winds. Totally secure anchorages are rare to nonexistent. Several times we were awakened in the night to



either move ship or fend off flows if they were small enough. All this in mostly windless conditions, having this meandering ice in a strong breeze is the stuff of nightmares!

Finally we escape Kearny Cove and make it to Resolute the capital of Nunavut province and the 'big smoke', in fact it is the only smoke! Funny little place, a collection of square container like houses with one store, a church and school and a lot of fuel tanks. The town is located where it is because the land is flat, suitable for the airport, as a harbour it is a disaster, totally open and foul ground everywhere, so after an excursion ashore we got out of there. The weather was predicted to blow from the south so we went in search of a suitable anchorage. This proved a challenge and a new experience in ice navigation. We spent a worrying hour dodging ice in a snow flurry that reduced our visibility to nothing, we found open water then went back to 3/10 ice, picking our way through it northwards towards Bathurst Island and an anchorage that sounded promising. This was our thickest ice to date. The radar helped show up the general leads, spotters with binoculars worked out the best route and fed information to the helmsman who had to concentrate fully on the stretch of water immediately in front of the boat. Indeed a team effort.

That night was one of my most memorable. The night sky was stunning and the sun so bright that though close to midnight,

in the bridge, we had sunglasses and hats on. We were headed due north but the sun was in our faces and was headed west to east, a fact that I had trouble getting my head around even while I knew why it was so. The cloud formations enhanced the picture; stratus, cumulous, mackerel streaks and astern very black as if a storm were brewing and in air so clear and you could see forever. Pink and lavender clouds from pure white to cream to gold – a riot of colour. I did not know what to expect from the Arctic but I did not expect it to be so beautiful.

AUGUST 16TH 2010

75° 20'N – 98° 02'W

Bathurst Island

Wind swept and wild. The anchorage looked bulletproof. Ashore we found caribou scat and the prints of a herd of musk ox in the soft ground around a fresh water pond that hosted a cloud of ducks that the 'birder' in the group declared to be eiders. Another of our knowledgeable crew enlightened us to the fact that eider down feathers were collected not by killing the ducks and plucking them but by harvesting down from nests after the young have left.

Our bulletproof anchorage turned out not to be when in the middle of the night the bay started to fill with masses of moving ice. Incredible, it had turned a corner to get at us! So it

THE NORTH WEST PASSAGE



was up anchor and move out of its way to the other side of the bay. Here we spent another couple of nights anxiously watching the ice increase in the outer bay in a howling northerly. Eventually the build up forced us to move before it embayed us. Picking our way out we made for the lee of a small island where we were out of the ice but hardly secure. We then moved to Pioneer Bay a large deep bay on the south west corner of Cornwallis Island. Here we saw a lot of seal, harp, bearded and ringed and some rather shy walrus as we manoeuvred our way slowly through large ice flows. This was our new home for the next four days. The wind blew and the ice in the channels to the south stayed stubbornly

put. We had one interesting evening when the wind died away completely and the offshore ice started to come into the bay. We had to up anchor, head out till the wind returned, wait a couple of hours, the ice retreated and we returned to our anchorage.

This was the time the poetry competition began – you can tell boredom was beginning to set in! There were moaning ones about lack of wildlife; grumpy ones to do with lack of progress;



one funny one about poor guillemots for heaven's sake and endless ones about food, especially the sad, fast approaching day when we would use our last tomato. It was even given a name, Fred and became almost too precious to eat. Almost!!

But eventually things started to move. For the past three weeks we had been receiving weather and ice reports, roughly every four hours and we had been hashing endlessly over what

they were saying and trying to get a handle on it all. But pack ice has a life all it's own, it sometimes moves with the current, but not always, the wind doesn't have a constant effect either, you cannot predict just what it will do and it can move with a speed that is truly frightening. For all the expert advice, well in the end it's your call.

The 'normal' route through the North West Passage and the one first navigated by Amundsen in 1907/10 is down Peel Sound round the east side of Prince William Island and out through Queen Maud Gulf, Coronation Gulf, Amundsen Gulf and so to the Beaufort Sea and the Pacific Ocean beyond. Consequently all the reams of information on weather and ice conditions cover these areas. There are other passages leading to the Beaufort Sea, the

one via McClure Strait is always subject to the pressure of ice from the Beaufort Sea and has never been considered an option. The McClintock Channel looks good on the chart, wide and straightforward, but is always choked with solid pack pushing south around Byam Martin Island and is not a choice. Then there is the Prince of Wales Strait, the narrow passage between Banks and Victoria Islands. In 1969 the SS Manhattan, a specially reinforced oil tanker, chose this route in her attempt to test the viability of a 'commercial' sea route between the Atlantic and



Pacific Oceans. She succeeded in the trip but had at times four ice breakers in attendance, sustained damage and certainly proved it was not a commercial option. As a result few ice charts or weather information reports cover this area. But there is a satellite radar picture printed every week showing general ice movements and covering the entire Arctic.

The current picture showed that the Prince of Wales Strait was opening! Peel Sound was starting to show signs of break up but it was slow and intermittent. The passage via Prince



THE NORTH WEST PASSAGE



of Wales Strait, never used by yachts, is also considerably shorter, some 400 miles, it was worth the gamble.

We hoisted anchor just after lunch in sunshine with a water temperature of 1°C, air 0°C and wind 20 knots from the north. A succession of areas lay ahead with open water interspersed with bands of ice varying in density and width. We would spend an hour picking our way through this maze and cover half a mile in the desired direction, then some open water would appear and we'd be away at 10 knots till the next band of ice, we would then reduce speed again and tackle the maze. Our progress was recorded on the electronic chart plotter and looked like the meanderings of a drunken ant.

The wind increased to 30 knots and we were fortunate to have some relatively clear water and mercifully no fog. By morning we could see solid pack ice to the north and also the south. By noon this closed in front of us. The door was shut. No forward progress. We had to backtrack some 10 miles to a section of perhaps 4/10 ice where we turned south west and headed towards the entrance of the straight 110 miles away. It was more of the same; open water, then zig zag through ice, open water, full cruising speed, more zig zaging, crawl speed, sometimes out of gear bow thrusting we were getting pretty good at this, the team were well practiced, long hours, no night, all my crew were loving it, I had to order them to sleep.

Two lookouts, helmsman, a watch officer who generally 'drove' the bow thruster in the tightest leads. Then all of a sudden we burst out into clear water with no ice visible in front of us. We

entered the straight and found the ice conditions tolerable but fog descended on us. We were still having 24 hours of daylight but the fog blinded us and so it was back to inching progress. By half way down the straight the fog lifted, we were in open water and the sun was shining. An amazing turn in conditions, with a water temperature of 8°C, air at 10°C and not a cloud in the sky. We were greeted by Bowhead whales, the first we had seen and lots of them.

We headed for Walker Bay on the south west coast of Victoria Island for an anchorage. It came well recommended, Richard Collinson on HMS Enterprise wintered over here in 1851/52 as did Henry Larsen on the St Roch in 1940/41 and tomorrow we would enter the Beaufort Sea, the North West Passage behind us! The first yacht through for the year and perhaps the first through the Prince of Wales Strait?

Either way, box ticked.

>||

Dione Sky is now in Barcelona for sale and is ready for the next adventure.

Photos with thanks to the crew and guests of Dione Sky and Cpt. Philip Walsh.