

Hall of Fame - Shirley Carter

By Graham Cox



Shirley Carter: 1948 -

The Laurent Giles designed Vertue is an iconic voyaging yacht. Despite being only 25'4" LOA, with a 4'6" draught and 7' beam, it is possible that more Vertues have crossed oceans than any other single design. It has a reputation for being strong, seaworthy, and surprisingly fast on long ocean passages, if not around the buoys.

In 1964, when Bill Nance was running down his easting in the Southern Ocean aboard *Cardinal Vertue*, he set a world record of 122 miles a day for 53 consecutive days. *Cardinal Vertue*, incidentally, was the smallest yacht to round Cape Horn in that era. In 1956, John Goodwin set a record for the passage from Las Palmas to Barbados aboard *Speedwell of Hong Kong*, covering 2,800 miles in 26 days.

Shirley had dreamed of ocean voyaging since she was a teenager. After sailing from Panama to Tahiti on a friend's yacht in 1994, she returned to South Africa more inspired than ever, buying a Colvin Gazelle and preparing it for cruising, but a failed relationship set back those dreams. Eventually, in 1998, she decided to buy *Speedwell* and go alone.

The bermudan-rigged sloop had been lying unattended and neglected for some time in Saldanha Bay, South Africa. *Speedwell* is Vertue number 44, built in 1952 in Hong Kong, with teak planking on camphor frames and a cast iron keel. She was already famous in

ocean voyaging circles, having been sailed from Hong Kong to England by Peter Hamilton in 1953, and a few years later to Cape Town by John Goodwin.

Under Shirley's stewardship, *Speedwell* has gone on to attain legendary status, cruising extensively through the waters of South America, the Caribbean, Bermuda, the USA from Florida to New York, the Azores, the Bahamas, and Central America. Over a period of more than 15 years, Shirley has poked *Speedwell's* bows into more ports and anchorages than most of us visit in a lifetime.

Shirley's blog, (www.speedwelladventures.com), is an enthusiastic and joyous record of her encounters with people, cultures and nature, as well as being a detailed portrait of the realities of voyaging so extensively on a small, simple boat, operated with an even smaller budget. Her broad experience with *Speedwell's* junk rig is also an invaluable resource for other junk sailors. The blog is a recommended read for anyone feeling jaded with life, or interested in fascinating, out of the way places.

Shirley initially sailed *Speedwell* from Saldanha Bay up to Port Owen to visit old friends, Pete and Annie Hill, and then put the boat in a shed for a thorough refit. She replaced the keelbolts, sheathed the decks in epoxy and glass cloth, renewed the rigging, and rewired the boat. A new forehatch was built, the bilges were cleaned and painted, and a second-hand, Navik windvane self-steering gear was mounted on the stern.

An anchor winch and self-tailing sheet winches were fitted, while the toilet and all unnecessary seacocks were removed. Simplicity was the key throughout.



Speedwell with her original rig - before Shirley carried out her various changes and improvements

Shirley washes her dishes in a bucket, uses another for a toilet, and drinks warm beer. There is no refrigerator on *Speedwell*.

When she sailed away from South Africa on 6 March 2002, it was the first time she had ever been in command of a yacht on passage, or alone at sea. She soon found that there is a great deal of satisfaction in making passages alone, especially for women. Not being beholden to anyone else was refreshing. Not only does she have a *room of one's own*, as Virginia Woolf famously put it, but the room has constantly-changing views.

Along with her cat, Sinbad, she endured several rough, miserable days after leaving the Cape, having to pump the bilges every 20 minutes, with *Speedwell* being thrown violently on her side again and again. The cabin sole was often awash, ruining a great deal of her stores and soaking everything else in a mixture of saltwater and diesel.

It was too rough to use her single-burner, kerosene primus stove, with its primitive gimbals, so Shirley survived by sucking on a can of condensed milk, losing weight rapidly. She was unaware that the Navik windvane was not working properly - in fact it was falling apart - but luckily, with just a scrap of roller-furling jib out, *Speedwell* held her course downwind. These boats look after their crew.

After they reached the SE Trades, conditions settled down. Shirley sorted out the Navik windvane and life became more manageable, though she was covered in bruises, and her hands and feet were in terrible condition from the constantly wet conditions. They arrived in St Helena, 1,700 miles later, on 25 March, after a passage of 19 days, and spent a few weeks drying out. Pete Hill had left South Africa aboard his new catamaran, *China Moon*, on the same day as *Speedwell*, and was waiting for them.



On her way to St Helena.

Both boats then sailed to Jacaré, Brazil, where Shirley left *Speedwell* for eight months and sailed to Cape Horn and back with Pete. This experience had a lasting effect on Shirley, as she was enchanted with *China Moon's* junk rig. Returning to *Speedwell*, she sailed on to French Guiana, Trinidad, Grenada, the Grenadines and Bequia, sailing slowly and enjoying the local cultures.

This style of intensive exploration became a hallmark of *Speedwell's* voyages. Shirley would visit local markets, explore the surrounding terrain, exult in encounters with flora and fauna, take photographs for her blog, make friends with other sailors and people ashore, and work endlessly to keep *Speedwell* looking her best. There was no time or inclination to be lonely, and when she put to sea again, alone aboard her beloved *Speedwell*, she relished the freedom and independence.

Shirley then returned to Trinidad for the hurricane season. She was becoming aware that *Speedwell* needed some serious attention. For one thing, the boat leaked badly when hard-pressed. Recaulking and refastening would be an expensive and challenging task, so Shirley decided to sheath *Speedwell's* hull with West System epoxy and two layers of 16oz, biaxial glass cloth with mat backing. The epoxy work had to be done very quickly in the damp heat, and for this part of the job she needed a helper. Usually, Shirley does all her own work.



Cladding Speedwell in fibreglass

Sheathing the boat caused a great deal of head shaking and clucking among the traditionalists, but has proven to be a lasting success, curing the leaks and shielding the hull against teredo worms. She then painted the

boat bright yellow, with a bold green stripe, which caused more head shaking. Even more shocking to the traditionalists, she decided to convert *Speedwell* to junk rig.



Speedwell in her new livery

Pete Hill built *Speedwell* a hollow, square-sectioned timber mast in Cape Town, and then brought it across to Trinidad on the deck of *China Moon*. He then built a keel-stepped tabernacle, which has proven strong and leak-proof over many thousands of miles. It allows Shirley to drop the mast with ease when desired. The whole structure is braced by four, beautiful, laminated teak knees.



Tabernacle compression post and four laminated teak knees -note 'cutaway' on starboard side to make forward access easier

On the floor of the boatyard café, which was closed for renovations, Shirley built herself a flat-cut sail from yellow PVC material. Occasionally she had to brush off the muddy footprints of passing tradesmen and inquisitive dogs, but it was a great place to work. This sail lasted for nearly seven years and many thousands of miles. She chose the Reddish rig, partially because Vincent Reddish had fitted one to his own *Vertue* and

spoke highly of its performance, and partially because she liked the idea of a low-aspect rig with a short, stout mast.



Converted to junk rig with a Reddish sail

The main halyard has a 4-part purchase and the sail is easy to hoist, only requiring use of a winch for the last part. There is no downhaul, because Shirley finds the sail drops easily enough on its own, though sometimes she rounds up a bit to assist it in coming down, if the wind is holding the sail too firmly against the mast.

The battens were originally made out of Douglas Fir. After a number of breakages on a rough trip from Bermuda to Newport, Pete Hill helped her convert to jointed aluminium battens, using 38mm by 1.5mm alloy tube, and a short, wider section of aluminium tubing for the joints, thus putting camber in the sail. She had been a bit disappointed with the windward performance of the flat sail.

On Shirley's first trip with the jointed battens, coming down Chesapeake Bay, a strong gust of wind caused a gybe as she was passing under the Bay Bridge near Annapolis, and she broke the wooden boom, which she does not think would have happened with the flat sail. She replaced the boom with a slightly shortened aluminium Hobie-cat mast and is still using it.

The jointed battens also had an annoying tendency to come adrift when the wind got up. Arne Kverneland found a similar tendency when he fitted hinged battens, and resolved it by fitting a restraining line inside the alloy battens, which held the separate sections together.

On a subsequent trip from the Bahamas to Bermuda, Shirley was forced to turn back half way, with most of the sail disjointed and unusable (and that was in good weather). She decided to re-join the alloy sections with carbon fibre and epoxy, making one-piece battens again.

These battens have since withstood many years of hard use and are still in service. Shirley has reinforced them

several times, first with epoxy and carbon, then, when funds got tight, with epoxy and glass cloth. Her South African funds, subject to eye-watering currency conversion rates, can only stretch so far.

The sail therefore reverted to its original flat shape. Shirley decided that she would rather put up with the slower windward performance, preferring reliability over speed. After all they still got there, and the flat-cut sail wasn't *that* much slower. Small heavy boats are inherently slow to windward in the open ocean anyway.

The hull sheathing and junk conversion, were complete by the end of the 2004 hurricane season, and Shirley sailed north from Trinidad once again, trying to make better time than the previous year. They made a fast passage through the Windward Islands, making stops at Nevis, St Kitts, St Barts and the Virgin Islands. Next destination was Bermuda, a gentle, quiet place she came to love and visit many times.

Then it was on to Newport, Rhode Island, down Long Island Sound, through New York City, the New Jersey Coast, Delaware Bay, and Chesapeake Bay, where she fitted the jointed aluminium battens. A winter was spent in Baltimore before heading down the ICW to Florida and the Bahamas. From the Bahamas she sailed to Bermuda, reverting to one-piece battens for her second try at the passage.

From there she returned to Newport, to wait for the arrival of the contestants in the first Jester Challenge. After sailing down the Intracoastal Waterway, she departed from Beaufort, North Carolina, to head across the North Atlantic to Flores Island, in the Azores archipelago.

After visiting most of the Azores, *Speedwell* sailed on to Madeira and the Canary Islands. In Lanzarote, Pete Hill joined ship for the trip back across the Atlantic to Brazil, via the Cape Verde Islands, as Shirley was worried about cracks that had appeared in the mast. Pete left in Recife, and after backtracking to Jacaré for mast repairs, Shirley worked her way down the coast, spending the winter of 2008 in Baía da Ilha Grande, just south of Rio de Janeiro, a beautiful archipelago popular with cruising yachts. It was also popular with Sinbad, who loved exploring the local beaches.

Continuing on in the summer of 2008-9, *Speedwell* sailed south towards Buenos Aires, spending a lot of time on the Costa Verde, which stretches roughly from just north of Rio de Janeiro almost down to Florianópolis. They were now leaving the warm, balmy tropics for more inclement southern latitudes. The weather on the way to La Paloma in Uruguay was rough and unpleasant. They stopped at Punte del Este, Buceo, and Colonia, before crossing the Rio de la Plata to San Isidro on the Rio Lujan, close to Buenos Aires, where Argentinian friends let her use a free berth.

Later she was joined by Pete and Carly aboard their junk-rigged *Freedom*, *Pelican*.



With Pete and Carly Hill in Buenos Aires

While here, Shirley made a new sail from acrylic material, putting some camber into each panel using the shelf-foot method. She says her design was a *thumb-suck*, and that the sail looked a bit droopy, with rather a lot of bagginess in the panels. Despite its looks, the boat's windward performance improved dramatically. Then they began a long, slow sail back north, extensively exploring the coast.

In September 2010 they were north of the Rio Grande and ran into some rough weather. For three days they were hove to in a NE gale, with massive waves and lots of water over the boat, suffering some damage. The spray dodger was knocked off, the dinghy chocks broken, oars adrift. The chart table got drenched. Shirley was grateful that the boat heaves-to nicely. Running off would have taken them back to the start. As it was, they lost 50 miles.

Eventually they set off again, with heavy clouds and some rain. It felt very exposed without the spray dodger. The odd rogue wave crashed into the cockpit. The wind was still quite strong and the seas enormous and confused. *Speedwell* made very slow progress. At one point Shirley noticed that the mast lift had come untied and was tangled round the halyard and lazyjacks. She hove-to and spent an hour battling to sort it out.

She continued to be impressed with the performance of the baggy sail, if not its looks or reliability. Even in lumpy seas, with the wind well forward of the beam, they managed to keep going at 3 knots, far better than they had managed with the flat sail.

By the end of 2010, *Speedwell* was anchored once again in the beautiful Ilha Grande archipelago, just south of Rio. It had been an interesting year, with highlights including the most spectacular Pampero she had ever seen at Puerto Sauce, a side trip to the Falkland Islands and Patagonia aboard a friend's yacht, and a

pilgrimage up the river to Antonina, the place where Joshua Slocum built the junk-rigged *Liberdade* and sailed back to New York with his shipwrecked family.

In a reflective mood, Shirley wrote: *I sometimes wonder why I'm doing this. Living on a small slow old wooden boat. Either anchored in often uncomfortable places or taking my chances out at sea. Mostly only able to communicate at a rudimentary level with the local people. Being forced to cope with the immediacy of things when something goes wrong.*

Surviving in the tropics with no refrigeration. Showering in the cockpit when the weather permits. Very erratic and unpredictable Internet access. Many other oddities that I have become so used to that I no longer notice but that would probably astonish the average suburbanite.

I look at my ageing body and am acutely aware of the fragility of my life. My total vulnerability. An email from a friend who has just lost a crew member overboard. I think of losing Sinbad which is a poor comparison and yet it would be a terrible loss. But my survival chances are probably just as good as someone living in the suburbs coping with the humdrum of getting to the office every day, maintaining a house and family and whatever people normally do. Just the thought of it makes me aware of how much I prefer my situation.



In the Ilha Grande, December 2010

From Ilha Grande, *Speedwell* sailed into Rio de Janeiro's spectacular and unforgettable (if filthy) Guanabara Bay. After a pleasant stay, visiting the statue of Christ on Mount Corcovado, Sugarloaf Mountain and the famous beaches, they sailed on past the Abrolhos Islands in the early morning. Using the excellent, free digital charts of Brazil, Shirley went in for a look, but was unable to see the reefs clearly enough in the blinding glare, so headed back out into deep water. Singlehanded sailors need to be extra cautious, not being able to send someone aloft to con the ship.

The day turned out to be the sort you dream about but rarely get. The sea was a clear, sapphire blue, the wind was a steady F4 from the south, and the sea calm. *Speedwell* was gliding along comfortably at 5 knots.



*Approaching Rio's Sugarloaf from the south -
January 2011*

Lunch was a perfectly ripe and juicy mango. Shirley rigged up her sun awning and lounged in the cockpit. In the evening she was treated to one of those miraculously simultaneous moonrise-sunsets. Even the warm beer tasted good.

Later, the wind and sea built up a bit, and *Speedwell* starting rolling uncomfortably, but was sailing fast. Shirley noticed that the seam at the leading edge of the third panel was coming apart and decided to reef down to prevent it tearing further. She'd just sorted everything out when they were hit by a vicious squall. Rather good timing, she thought.

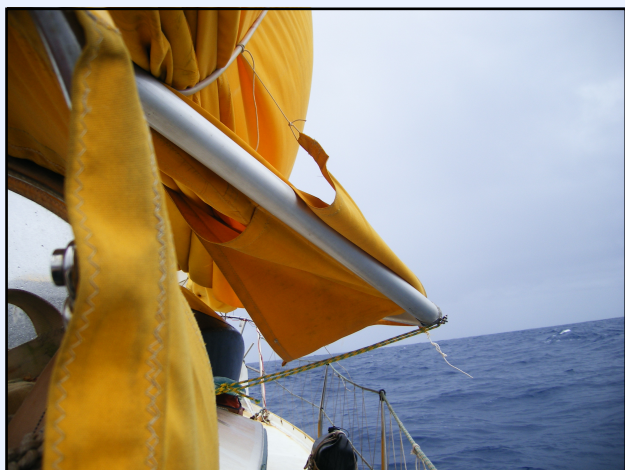
The squall didn't last long, with the wind rapidly easing, but Shirley left the sail reefed and retired below for a rest. Better to go slow than risk further damage to the split seam. She was just getting comfortable when the sail gybed. Although the wind had gone light, the sea was still rough and the boat was being tossed about, which caused the gybe.

When she got up on deck it was a bit of a shambles. The reefed panels had fanned up, and now she was faced with a classic Chinese gybe, with the after end of the yard caught high up in the lazyjacks and the forward end on the wrong side of the mast jammed down low. On a fanned sail, the yard moves aft when reefing. This makes a fixed yard parrel (which would keep the yard on the right side of the mast) harder to set up, unless you fit an extension to the front of the yard.

Nothing seemed to be broken. First, she brought the boat up into the wind and hove-to. The boom was still swinging about too much to be able to work on things. She clipped her harness on and went on deck, bousing the boom down by attaching a rope to a handy loop near its centre, and then lashed the boom to the handrail.

By raising the sail a bit, she managed to free the end of the yard which was stuck in the windward lazyjack, but it immediately swung over and hooked itself neatly and immovably on the leeward side, too high up to reach. She then tried to move the forward end of the yard to the right side of the mast without success.

She went back to the cockpit to slacken off the sheet, hoping it might make things easier. Back at the mast, she successfully freed the forward end of the yard, but her elation was short-lived. There was a nasty crack, and a quick look around showed that the boom had snapped at the point where she had tied it down.



The broken boom

Assessing the situation, Shirley decided to head for the nearest anchorage, Baía Cabralia. The time was 10.30, they were about 30 miles offshore, and the wind would be abeam on the way in. With luck, they might get in before dark. The engine started at the first try, which was the first bit of luck. Despite the sail being fouled aloft, they managed to average 4 knots, with just two panels of the sail up, arriving in the late afternoon.

The entrance to the bay is wide, but it was still scary, because the reefs on either side were invisible in the heavy rain that was falling. Also, it was a spring high-tide, making the reefs even harder to spot. She worked her way in relying on the GPS, hoping it was accurate. Once she had going a further 5 miles into the bay, she found a sheltered anchorage behind the reefs. The lazyjacks were let go, allowing the sail to drop to the deck.

As the sun went down, Shirley allowed herself *two* beers in celebration. When the rain eased, she took *Speedwell* into the anchorage off the village of Santo André, where the boom was repaired with epoxy and carbon fibre. Shirley also recut the sail, shortening the luff, which she hoped would make it less baggy and set better.

She also took time to explore the area, going for long walks on the beaches and visiting nearby towns, and

was glad she had been forced stop here. Shirley always embraces the positive side of any situation. There are always interesting buildings to look at, fascinating work boats on the beach, and friendly locals. The photos in Shirley's blog reflect her delight in exploring these places.

By mid-April 2011, she was ready to head north again. At Ilha do Goiό, she careened the boat on the beach, calling it her beautiful island boatyard. It is hard to imagine a more idyllic setting for working on a boat. Many happy months were spent exploring exquisite, out of the way places like this. Shirley says that the coast of Brazil remains her favourite cruising destination. In the Caribbean, such beautiful places would be swamped with yachts, but here there were only a handful, and often *Speedwell* was the sole visiting yacht in the anchorage.



Shirley's 'beautiful island boatyard' on Ilha do Goiό where she careened Speedwell

At times there was a fierce contrary current, but they managed, occasionally with the help of the diesel engine. Further north, the current began to set to the NW, giving them a lift. In May 2012, sailing from Jacaré to Natal, the Navik paddle sheered off and the boom broke again. Shirley thought about returning to



Speedwell in Bahia Camanu

Jacaré, motor-sailing to windward, but when the autopilot drowned, she hove-to. They were pointing to windward, but the fierce current took them backwards to Natal anyway.

In Natal, the boom was repaired, a new paddle was sourced from Brian, the cruiser's friend, with his boatyard in Jacaré, and the autopilot resurrected after being dismantled (it was full of rainwater) and dried out. Shirley had a fine time exploring the old, Portuguese fort and nearby beachside cafés.

In September 2012, they were approaching the entrance to the Essequibo River at dawn, looking for a way through the fishing nets. Sailing in, Shirley noticed one of the lazyjacks had come adrift but decided to wait until they were anchored to sort it out. After all, they were just in a river.

Then they were struck by a fierce squall, the sail gybed, and the leach lashing of the second batten broke, leaving the sail a baggy mess. Shirley had to remove her hearing aids before going out into the deluge (they are more expensive than a new sail), and dropping a couple of reefs in the sail, which promptly fell to the deck, without the lazyjacks to contain it. She fired up the engine and motored in through the deluge.

In November 2012, anchored off Baganara Island in Guyana, Shirley recut the sail, making it flat again, removing the shelf-foot lenses that created camber, willingly giving up windward performance for reliability. The task was completed in three days.



Speedwell off Baganara Island

Besides the fact that the cambered sail didn't set well, which embarrassed her, she felt it imposed localised stresses. The lashings at either end of the battens were constantly wearing through, which had never happened with the flat sail. She found it quite difficult to fix this problem while sailing offshore in strong weather. The sail would creep along the batten and have to be hauled back before the lashing could be replaced. Shirley was using the same thin line she had used on the original sail.

Also, she was constantly tweaking the sail, trying to improve its set. She had read accounts of how this

might be achieved, using parrels, outhauls, downhauls, etc, but was loath to complicate things to this extent. The next passage, from Guyana to Trinidad, was mainly downwind, and the newly flattened sail gave no problems. *Speedwell* has sailed with a flat-cut sail ever since.



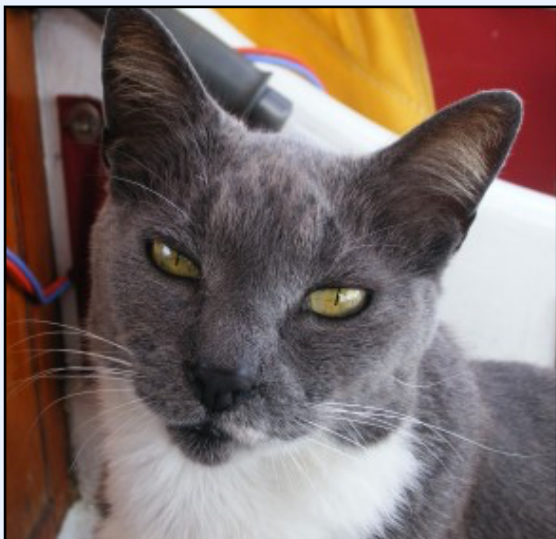
Flat sail going to windward

January 2013, found *Speedwell* out of the water in Trinidad for another refit. The mast was lowered, using two control lines led to winches, and carefully examined. There were some signs of chafe on the corners of the square-sectioned mast from the parrels, but the epoxy and glass sheathing remained intact. The long-suffering battens received further epoxy and glass reinforcement.

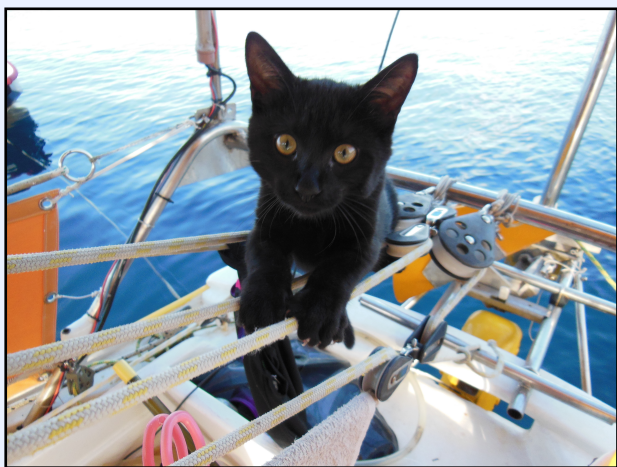
In March they were underway again, slogging to windward to Grenada, with the flat-cut sail performing well in the fresh breeze, *Speedwell* holding the course and sailing at 3-4 knots. For a single-hander, this is the worst sort of trip; close to shore, a fair amount of traffic, and no chance to grab some sleep for at least 24 hours.

The initial plan had been to keep moving through the islands and head for the Azores in summer, but instead Shirley lingered in these islands she enjoys so much. Leaving Grenada for Martinique, she did not pay enough attention to the course and found herself well to leeward, with a predicted favourable windshift failing to materialise. A hard slog to windward in lumpy seas, and a night in St Lucia, finally brought them to their destination. The flat-cut sail was not proving to be much of a handicap.

Shirley returned to Trinidad for the hurricane season, determined to make an earlier start the following year and get further north. In September, tragedy struck. Sinbad, her faithful feline companion for so many years, was lost ashore in the jungle after a scare made him panic. The following winter, Shirley acquired a new kitten, Sparky, a small bundle of energetic black fur, and they set off hopefully for northern waters.



Shirley's feline companions, Sinbad above, and Sparky below



The passage from Tyrrel Bay, Carriacou, to St Pierre, Martinique, is only 130 miles, but it proved to be a classic Caribbean bash, with a fierce current setting them down to leeward, to the west of the course. The intention had been to stop at Rodney Bay, St Lucia, before going on to St Anne, Martinique, but they could not lay the course. After several days of snatching 20-minute catnaps, eating badly, dodging ships in rain squalls, reefing and unreefing incessantly, Shirley was happy to concede, and headed for St Pierre instead. Anyway, she loves St Pierre.

At least nothing broke, and Shirley was grateful for the ease of reefing the junk rig. To add to the discomfort, Sparky was delighted with his new sandbox, (His own

private beach!) which had replaced the more expensive Kitty litter, and gleefully kicked sand from one end of the boat to the other.



Tyrell Bay, Carriacou, April 2013

Sailing on to St Martin, Shirley intended to clear out for Bermuda and Nova Scotia, thinking some cooler weather would be a nice change after years in the tropics. But she discovered, just before she left St Martin, that South Africans now require visas to enter Canada. It was too late to apply for one this season, so she reluctantly changed her plans, deciding to head for the Rio Dulce in Guatemala, with a stop along the way at Port Antonio, Jamaica, some 800 miles away, and about halfway to her destination.

The passage started out in light winds, but soon they



Speedwell anchored in Texan Bay, near the mouth of the Rio Dulce, late 2014.

were racing along in 30 knots of wind with just three panels of sail up in large following seas. She was dismayed one day to note that the sail was chafing badly where it rubbed against the lazyjacks. She was able to reposition the affected areas by adjusting the halyard.

She had to gybe the sail frequently to keep the boat on course. When gybing with deep reefs in, there is

always the risk of a fan-up if the sheet is slack (and you do not have the battens ends restrained, by either a lashing or some sort of fan-up preventer), so Shirley sometimes chooses to tack around. But this can also be difficult in large following seas.

On this passage, she took off her hat and sunglasses, adjusted the windvane, used her foot to help the tiller across, and heaved mightily on the sheet as it slackened. This usually resulted in a neat gybe, but sometimes she had to round up briefly afterwards, to untangle the sheetlets from the slightly protruding battens at the leach.

She also had to tie Sparky up first, as he was always keen to lend a paw whenever there was any action. He seemed quite comfortable with the wild conditions, racing around, eating heartily, and fearless about getting wet on deck. It was impossible to restrain him below at all times. He was too fearless, unfortunately, as one dark night he disappeared, washed overboard while Shirley slept. She carried on with a heavy heart.

She arrived in Jamaica after eight boisterous days at sea. Sailing past Haiti, they were making 6 knots with only two panels of sail up. A brief calm on the morning of their arrival was followed by a fierce squall, which had Shirley reefing down quickly again. They beat into Port Antonio under just a scrap of sail.

The harbour at Port Antonio is wonderfully protected, and Shirley enjoyed a pleasant week there, anchored off the Errol Flynn Marina, exploring the laidback Jamaican town. She found that the shaft of the Navik self-steering gear had developed a noticeable bend but was unable to get it fixed here. However, she did manage to stock up on plenty of Blue Mountains coffee (for which Jamaica is famous), and Red Stripe beer.

When they left, conditions continued unsettled, with violent squalls interspersed with dreadful, rolling calms. They made only 15 miles the first day, and put into Bloody Bay, on the south side of the island, both for some respite and to replace a worn yard-hauling parrel. It was Shirley's birthday, so she stayed a day, celebrating with a warm beer.

When they left again, to sail the 450 miles to Guanaja Island, Honduras, there was a lot of reefing and unreefing for a day or so, before the weather settled down. After that it was delightful, with a waxing moon, fair winds and smooth seas. Shirley felt as if she could sail on forever. For three nights they were visited by a bird, possibly a black noddy, that rested on the solar panel and kept Shirley company. After a diet of bananas, nuts and biscuits during the rough weather, it was a pleasure to cook properly.

From there they went on to Guatemala, to wait out the hurricane season. It was already becoming squally, and on this last passage Shirley hove-to several times to let squalls pass, and to avoid slashing rain from

coming down the companionway. It was necessary to wait for a favourable tide in order to cross the bar at the entrance to the Rio Dulce. The only possible anchorage, across the Bahia de Armatique, was rough and uncomfortable, with strong wind-against-tide antics on a lee shore, but after two days without sleep, Shirley was beyond exhaustion. She let out 40m of chain in 3m of water, and slept.



Repairing battens, Rio Dulce, August 2014

When the tide was right she moved across to the port of entry at Livingston, where a cruising permit cost her \$150, and then motored 20 miles up the Rio Dulce to the small town of Fronteras, where she found a number of cruising yachts and a small marina where she settled in for the summer.

There was plenty of work to do here as usual, including re-galvanising the anchor chain, replacing a battery, and getting an HF receiver set up to get weather faxes, which can be decoded on the Samsung tablet, allowing her to pick up forecasts at sea. Shirley reckoned she must be getting soft.

She had to go to Guatemala City to renew her US visa, an interesting six-hour bus ride through areas of steamy jungle and mountain passes with spectacular views. In the city, she enjoyed the beautifully-restored historical buildings and local markets, as always, taking every opportunity to explore somewhere new.

From here *Speedwell* sailed up the coast of Belize, inside the barrier reef, then to Isla Mujeres and the Dry Tortugas, 50 miles off the coast of Florida, arriving in March 2015. A plan to visit Cuba was thwarted by strong northerly winds. They spent some days in the Dry Tortugas, riding out the northerlies, and Shirley explored the crumbling fort, with its amazingly detailed brickwork.

For the first two days after leaving the Dry Tortugas, they tacked and tacked again, battling to make headway against a gentle NE wind and a sea still confused after the strong winds. Shirley consoled

herself with the thought that at least they were making better progress than if they were still anchored!

They made landfall on Sanibel Island, at the entrance to the Caloosahatchee River, which leads to Fort Myers and the start of the Okeechobee Waterway. Fort Myers has a convenient, free anchorage close to the centre of town, and she gratefully settled in for a short stay. Also known as the City of Palms, it is a very clean and



Speedwell, Dry Tortugas

friendly town with an excellent municipal bus system. After a cruise up the Okeechobee Waterway, they departed from Fort Pierce for Bermuda, on 9 May 2015.

By 16 May, they were half way to Bermuda. The first two days were easy and fast, with the Gulf Stream giving them a lift. Then the wind died and they flopped helplessly about for a day, until a strong NE wind set in and stirred up a rough sea. Shirley was reminded why not everyone goes to sea in small boats, and wondered what she was doing out there. There was nothing to do but reef down and hope that nothing broke. The Navik self-steering gear managed valiantly, and Shirley retired to her bunk, with the lee-cloth securely fastened.

Over the next couple of days the wind moderated but headed them, so they ended up a long way north of the course, hoping the more favourable winds forecast by the weather fax would materialise. A graceful, curious tropic bird circled the boat a few times but retreated when Shirley aimed her binoculars at it.

Sunday, 17 May 2015: *This morning I found a small squid had expired on the leeward side deck. I cleaned him up and had a delicious brunch of calamari rings pan-fried in garlic butter tossed with spicy couscous. Yesterday it was a fair-sized flying fish which cooked up well with rice. Maybe I should start a collection of ocean roadkill recipes.*

On the 11th day, after a long, dark night of steady motoring in a flat calm and rolling sea, they were rewarded with a gentle breeze on the aft quarter. It was just enough to hold the sail out and keep *Speedwell*

moving at almost 2 knots. Now the junk rig showed its true colours. A small group of storm petrels fluttered about gathering their breakfast.

The wind strengthened as the day progressed, and soon they were running smoothly along at a comfortable 4 knots. Shirley took advantage of the easy conditions to make a big pot of vegetable stew in the pressure cooker to last a few days. Then she found that the last banana had become rather overripe - ideal for making banana cake. It turned out well, despite being a little lopsided, due to the stove's rather primitive gimbals. It was a starboard tack cake.

The wind continued to increase, with big seas developing. *Speedwell* was moving at hull speed, reefed right down, galloping through a pitch-black, moonless night. It was time for all those irrational fears and terrors to surface. By morning it was already moderating, and everything seemed easier in daylight. Once again, Shirley was glad that she had made the change back to a flat sail, with strong, rigid battens, and no added complications to go wrong in rough conditions.

The fresh, following winds held, and they reached Bermuda on Friday, 22 May 2015. Bermuda is one of Shirley's favourite places, with its quiet, narrow lanes,



St Georges anchorage, Bermuda

quaint, pastel-coloured buildings, famous pink beaches, and English-style gardens. It was especially delightful after the harsh super-highways and traffic of Florida.

The original intention was to stay 10 days and then go on to Nova Scotia, but she discovered here that her South African passport, which needed renewing, could take up to six months to be processed. She ended up flying to Washington with her Bermudan friend, Dale, to sort it out, and then sailed back to the USA.

She had to make two attempts to get back, as a named storm, the first of the season, dictated a prudent return to Bermuda when only 100 miles out. This storm

fizzled, and within days *Speedwell* was on her way once again. The wind was light for the first few days, and they were just about able to lay the course, with the junk sail managing quite respectably to windward.

As they approached the Gulf Stream, the wind picked up, and for a few days they were forced hopelessly too



Speedwell off Bermuda in rough seas

far north, being relentlessly pushed by 30 knot winds and 3 knots of current. Massive and confused waves did not make it any easier. Reefed right down, they doggedly crabbed their way across the Gulf Stream, sideways to the course.

After a few days, the Gulf Stream released them, and they were able to head in the right direction. A few calm days followed, which allowed Shirley to replace three batten parrels, which had almost chafed through at the mast. Apart from that, the rig survived the heavy weather remarkably well, and once again Shirley blessed the ability to reef so easily in difficult conditions.

Despite the disappointment of not reaching Nova Scotia, Shirley acknowledged that perhaps poor old *Speedwell* could do with some serious attention before embracing northern latitudes. The long, unexpectedly boisterous downwind run from the Eastern Caribbean to Guatemala in 2014 had taken its toll.

Shirley was running out of usable rope to replace chafed-through parrels and sheetlets, and the main halyard had a worrying, threadbare patch near the middle. Shirley had served it in an effort to prevent catastrophic failure, but it did not inspire confidence. The small blocks that attach the sheet to the sheetlets were also wearing out. Most had been acquired in an already geriatric state and were now overdue for retirement.

The sail itself was still repairable but looking rather seedy. Add to all this the dodgy state of the engine, and she felt that the disappointment of not being able



Speedwell being hauled out at Young's Boatyard near Baltimore

to explore Nova Scotia, followed by an Atlantic crossing, was justified.

Speedwell was soon hauled out at Young's Boatyard near Baltimore, where the mast was lifted off for refurbishment.

Shirley stayed ashore with an old friend, Dudley, a 92-year old, semi-retired sailmaker, who invited her to use his sail loft to repair the sail. This soon evolved into building a new sail, and Dudley showed her how to lay it out full-size, using tapes pinned to the floor. The panels were then laid out horizontally, which was more economical, and resulted in a sail with a better set than Shirley's previous sails. It goes to windward better, too.

Leaving *Speedwell* in Oriental for the worst of the winter months, Shirley visited her friend, Dale, in Bermuda, returning in March 2016. She left a heater running in the cabin to stop the engine freezing and damaging its plumbing. It was still cold when she returned, with slippery ice on the docks, but a hot shower every day helped, and she managed to get on with a variety of shipboard tasks.

These included new, higher, lee-cloths for the bunks, a new rain-catching system, replacing the drinking-water filter, throwing out loads of unnecessary stuff, and reorganising her storage system. She made a new bridle for the Jordan Series Drogue, as the original one had been too short, and found she could stow the whole affair in one of the cockpit lockers, which would make it easier to launch if needed. She serviced the winches and anchor windlass, replaced the bearings for the Navik paddle and sewed a new windsock, among other tasks.

Having satisfied her desire for cooler weather, Shirley was looking forward to returning to the tropics. She decided to sail directly from Morehead City to the Antilles, or eastern Caribbean, which can be a hard passage, requiring one to make plenty of easting before

heading south across the NE Trades. It is easier though, than trying to beat down through the Bahamas, a route that sailors call the Thorny Path.

Two days of fast sailing with the wind on the beam saw them safely across the Gulf Stream and heading east. Then the wind changed, as it has a tendency to do, and for the next three days they were thrashed by a strong Norther. Reefed right down, Shirley felt safe enough, but it wasn't comfortable, as *Speedwell* slogged doggedly on.

Waves crashed over the deck, and soon the interior was decidedly soggy. The beautiful new paper chart that she had invested in became wet and stained, despite its plastic cover. But it still gave her pleasure to mark daily progress, or lack thereof, on a real chart.

The weather eased after a few days and she had a chance to tidy things up and regroup. The yard-hauling parrel had chafed through and she hove-to to replace it. She was also sorry to see that one of her beautiful wooden oars had been washed overboard, obviously not tied on well enough.



In the Gulfstream

Many days of cloudy, sometimes foggy weather, with the solar panel unable to put out sufficient amps, had taken their toll on the battery. Shirley decided to charge it by running the engine for an hour or two. After only a few minutes, the alternator became extremely hot and she quickly switched the engine off. She suspected she knew the cause of the problem.

One dark night during the height of the bad weather, she had accidentally knocked the ignition key for the engine to the stop position while the motor was running. It gives off a piercing shriek when this happens and she can normally hear it, but in the wet, stormy weather she was not wearing her expensive hearing aids, and the noise of the wind drowned out everything else.

It looked like she would have to go into St Martin to buy a new alternator. Until then, they would have no engine. Not knowing what else to do, she wiped down the alternator once it had cooled, and sprayed it liberally with WD40. At this point, the wind died completely.

They were a long way east of Bermuda, almost where she was hoping to meet up with steady NE trade winds. Instead, the sea undulated gently, gleaming like the smoothest, silkiest satin. The butter had melted and Shirley was rapidly shedding her warm clothing. *So this is what it would be like to be a purist and dump the engine*, she thought. *Hmmm*. After 48 hours, she'd had enough. She'd read all the books, and there was a danger that she might be tempted to hit the rum stocks.

While having her first caffeine shot one beautiful morning, she saw an enormous, smooth and shiny black shape surface a few hundred metres off. A whale! As she watched, it dived, displaying its enormous tail. It was too late to grab the camera, but she felt it was a good omen. She decided to try the engine again, just to see how much time she would have if she needed it to get out of trouble. It ran perfectly, with no sign of overheating.

They were off again. Shirley decided to head for Guadeloupe, about 270 miles away. There was no need now to go to St Martin. A few days later she was passing Barbuda and Antigua, then St Kitts, and soon Nevis popped over the horizon. Volcanic Montserrat, looking ashy, appeared next, and at last, they were looking for a place to anchor in the sheltered bay at Deshaies. After exactly three weeks at sea, Shirley cracked out the champagne and had a quiet celebration.

This was followed by a quick trip down island, via Dominica, Martinique, Bequia, Union Island and Carriacou, to Tobago and Trinidad by the middle of June, 2016. She stayed here for the hurricane season, and then, early in 2017, set off once again up island, to Grenada and Martinique initially.



In Soufrier Bay, Dominica, May 2016

Speedwell left St Pierre, Martinique, on a calm and sunny morning, heading for English Harbour, Antigua, 150 miles away, a leisurely two-day sail. The weather was kind, and a bright segment of moon helped them along for a part of each night, with brilliant stars and sparkling phosphorescence. Shirley was in her element, delighted to be back at sea on her little ship.

The channel between Guadeloupe and Antigua was quite rough, and the wind had picked up somewhat. She needed to slow down to avoid arriving at the entrance to English Harbour, which is difficult to spot at the best of times, in the dark. She did her usual trick of heaving-to about 5 miles off and waiting for dawn. It was only 0300, so she was able to have a short nap. A well-lit cruise ship was also holding its position some miles off. As soon as it was light, they were on their way again, and easily negotiated the tricky entrance to the harbour, with grateful thanks to the Navionics app on her tablet.

There is a good anchorage at Freeman's Bay, close to the entrance, but it looked pretty crowded. Shirley hastily dropped the sail while in the channel and motored in, looking for a usable space to anchor. The ease of dropping sail is one of the things she loves most about junk rig. Just release the halyard and the sail crashes down in seconds. Then, haul in the sheet and that's it. She finds that the sail furls best if done this way, rather than easing it cautiously down.

After settling in, she rowed across to Nelson's Dockyard to clear in, and wander about the historical site, which was once the Royal Navy's Caribbean base in the days of sail. It is a fascinating place, but was pretty crowded with cruise-ship tourists, wandering around like lost sheep. After a quick look around she left the herd behind and took an interesting path to Fort Berkeley, overlooking the entrance to the bay. A few goats gazed curiously at her, but there were no tourists in sight.

By March 2017, she had sailed to St Maarten to restock the ship, as this island is good for stores and services. There was a wonderful variety of stuff, practically all imported, but no tax was payable and the prices were reasonable. This entailed a number of trips, carrying as much as possible each time, until at last the big food locker under the port saloon bunk was full to the brim, and the credit card exhausted. It was time to move on. Next stop, the Virgin Islands.

Shirley had to wait out a few days of strong westerly winds before leaving St Maarten, which made the anchorage extremely uncomfortable. But the rough weather also brought some rain which filled the water tanks. At last things calmed down and she had superb weather for the 80 mile sail to Virgin Gorda in the BVI, a gentle F4 SE breeze, with calm seas and sunny skies. This must be just about as good as it gets. The dark,

moonless night was lit by brilliant stars and sparkling phosphorescence.

After sailing through the US Virgins, *Speedwell* went on to Culebra in the Spanish Virgins, and then to Ponce, Puerto Rico in May. It was a long walk into the town centre in Ponce, about 8 miles, with no bus service available, but there were some charming historical buildings. But time was moving on and she was keen to sail across the Caribbean Sea to Cartagena, Colombia, as soon as there was a break in the weather.

Having read so many dire warnings about the rough sea conditions along the NE coast of Colombia, Shirley was feeling anxious. She had a reasonable weather forecast, but in order to reach her first safe harbour at Cabo de la Vela, 500 miles away, in good weather, she would have to maintain at least 100 miles a day. Seeing as she usually estimates trip times using an average speed of 3 knots, or 72 miles a day, she felt she might have to push it.

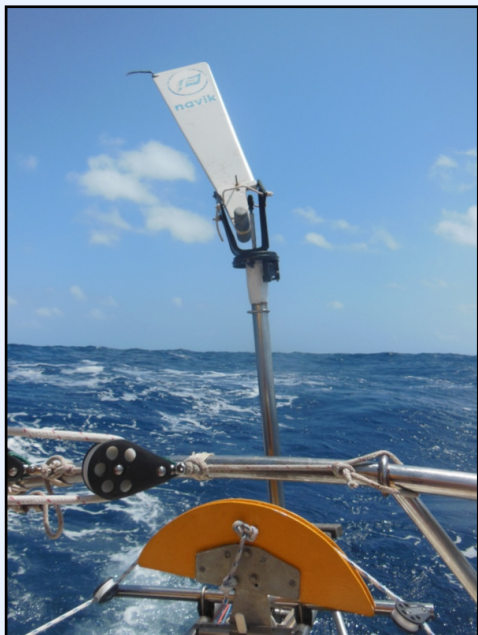
When she left Ponce, the wind was blowing 15-20 knots from the east. They raced along with the wind on the beam, despite a rough and bouncy sea. The ocean swell rolls in from the NE and crosses the wind waves coming from the east, causing a nasty, confused sea-state. Shirley took a seasick pill just to be safe.

The first day went well and they managed to maintain an average speed of 5 knots. But the strong conditions were starting to take a toll on the rig. Over the next three days she had to heave-to four times in order to fix small breakages. Two batten attachment lashings chafed through on separate occasions, a stitched tab for the attachment of yet another batten pulled apart, and a small saddle screwed to the boom for the tack line came adrift.

Each time she ventured on deck she clipped her harness on, using one hand to replace lashings, stitch the sail, or screw something back together, trying to ignore the rather exciting movement of the boat, and hanging on for dear life with the other hand. One hand for yourself, one hand for the ship, as the old salts say. Once again she was thankful for the ease with which it is possible to heave-to with *Speedwell*.

A rather more serious breakage happened just before sunset on the third day, while Shirley was below taking a short rest. The movement was quite rough but steady. Suddenly, there was a change and things seemed ominously quiet. Then *Speedwell* gybed. Shirley dashed up on deck, and saw that the long connecting rod on the Navik self-steering gear had come adrift.

Oh well, it had happened before, and she had a spare. *Speedwell* was hove-to once again, while Shirley perched on the stern rail and unscrewed the Navik to bring it inside. Fortunately, she was able to remember where she had stowed the spare, and they were soon



En route to Cartagena, Colombia - Navik back in action

back in action. She thanked her lucky stars that all these mishaps occurred during daylight.

By the fourth day they were approaching the other side. *Speedwell* could stop at Aruba if the weather turned nasty, but Shirley really didn't want to do this, because Aruba feels that South Africans should have a visa (which she didn't have) and their harbour fees are exorbitant. She steered towards the small archipelago of Monjes, which is part of Venezuela and which could provide refuge in extremis.

But things didn't look too bad when she got there, so she kept going, heading along the coast of the Guajira Peninsula. There was a fairly big swell, but nothing too horrendous. As the sun came up, they rounded Cabo de la Vela and anchored in the flat water of Ensenada Huaritcheru, in Colombian waters at last. Fishermen were out in their open boats. It was a beautiful scene.

Shirley tidied up the sail and slept for a few hours. It was too windy to even think about rowing ashore, so she spent the rest of the day sorting out things aboard. Kite boarders were enjoying the breeze and the flat water. Some whizzed by really close to have a look at *Speedwell*. She was the only cruising boat there. What a change from the Caribbean.

By Monday, 29th May, they were in Cartagena. There were quite a few yachts anchored off Club Nautica, where you are allowed to use the dinghy dock. It was only a short row, although Shirley had to keep a sharp eye out for the fast water taxis that were constantly speeding about, creating an enormous wake. It is easy to tip over a small, light dinghy like *Bokkom*. The port captain refuses to deal personally with arriving yachts, making it essential to use an agent for

the clearing-in process, but the woman in the club office helpfully phoned an agent, who arrived within half an hour. Apart from the US \$120 cost of the service, it was quick and painless. Shirley did not get a cruising permit, as this would have cost an additional \$120, but if she cleared out again within 12 days she could make short stops along the coast to Panama.

On the way to Sapzurro in June, they were intercepted by a large vessel that was not transmitting an AIS signal. It turned out to be a Colombian Navy patrol boat, and they came over to inspect *Speedwell*. Despite limited communications in a mixture of English and Spanish, it was a friendly exchange. Shirley's passport and ship's papers were photographed with a smartphone and the details transmitted to headquarters.



Speedwell anchored at Sapzurro, Colombia

They were astonished by the fact that Shirley was sailing alone, and even more astonished when they noticed the date of birth in her passport. Not only was this woman sailing alone, but she was an ancient crone! Then the motor on their inflatable boat broke down and Shirley had to tow them back to their ship. They parted with smiles all round, and to this day there are probably legendary tales being told about Shirley Carter in the Colombian Navy.

In August 2017, *Speedwell* was in the San Blas Islands, another stunning archipelago of clear waters and white beaches beneath shady palm trees. Lying in the shade one day, watching some bees buzzing around small flowers on the coconut palms (and keeping a wary eye out for crocodiles, since a woman had been badly attacked by one recently), Shirley was only vaguely able to recollect another life, when she'd spent her days in an office gazing at computer screens.

Ocean voyaging on a small, elderly timber boat, making do as best you can with limited resources, taking the weather as it comes, while trying to stay ahead of maintenance issues, takes courage and determination. It is not the easiest life one could choose, but the rewards, if you have the right attitude,



San Blas Islands



Bokkam ashore at Green Island, San Blas



Chichime, San Blas

are incomparable, and Shirley is living proof that it is possible. Her curiosity and enthusiasm for life, combined with her warmth towards other people, plus her spirited response to challenges, have resulted in one of the most vibrant cruising sagas on record.

From the San Blas Islands, Shirley went to Portobello, Panama. In Puerto Lindo, a local launch smashed into *Bokkom*, narrowly missing *Speedwell* but extensively damaging the dinghy. Shirley was able to patch it up with materials she always carries on board, but the poor thing was badly scarred!

Leaving *Speedwell* in Panama for Christmas 2017, Shirley visited her son and his family, and paid a flying visit to Cape Town. In mid-February she returned to Panama, ready to voyage onwards. They began their transit of the Panama Canal on the evening of April 17, 2018, rafted up to an Amel 55, called, ironically, *Little Fish*. *Speedwell's* four expensive line handlers had little to do, apart from eat huge amounts of chicken curry that Shirley had prepared in her pressure cooker, and try not to trip over each other on her miniscule decks. They stopped for the night in the Gatun Lake, mooring to a large buoy. It was not the most comfortable night, with five people squeezed into the tiny cabin.



Speedwell ashore in Panama

The next morning they started out in pouring rain, with the line handlers hiding in the cabin, but by the time they passed through Gaillard Cut it had cleared to a fine day. With a following wind, *Speedwell* had no difficulty maintaining the required minimum speed of 5.5 knots. The advisor even told her to slow down! They rafted back up to *Little Fish* for the downward locks, and emerged into the Pacific Ocean in the late afternoon without incident. The advisor and line handlers were dropped off at Balboa, and *Speedwell* went off to anchor behind the Amador Causeway, a huge breakwater made with rock from the canal excavations.

Later, Shirley moved around to the other side of the Causeway, to escape the endless ferry wakes. Then she set to provisioning for the long haul to the Gambier Islands in French Polynesia, almost 4,000 miles away, as she did not intend to stop in the Galapagos Islands.

Provisioning was quite an expedition in itself, requiring numerous trips. She had to row ashore in her small dinghy, negotiate the 5 metre tides and the overcrowded dinghy dock, catch the bus into town, lug it all back, and then row home. Each tin had its contents written on the top, in case the label got wet and came off. But, as usual, she enjoyed every moment of it. The view from the Causeway on both sides was spectacular, with the city skyline in the distance and an

endless parade of cargo ships coming and going from the canal.



The Amador Causeway

Speedwell has a 100 litre water tank, supplemented by another 100 litres in plastic bottles. A number of these are recycled 1.5 litre fruit juice bottles, which can be tucked into all sorts of odd spaces. The others were stowed between the bunks and lashed down. Canned beer added a little more to the tally.



Each tin has its contents written on top



Crushed cranberry juice bottles can be re-inflated to hold water

Shirley was expecting the passage to take up to 60 days, possibly more. She knew, from vast experience, that they were likely to average about 3 knots, assuming all went well, but was confident that she had enough supplies to get there. Anyway, every available space had been crammed with food and water. To save space, she only carried 20 litres of diesel fuel.

Speedwell cleared out of Balboa on 5th May, and anchored that evening at Contadora Island, in the Las Perlas archipelago, about 35 miles away. The passage started out with a fine F3 following wind, but when it

petered out, she used some of her precious diesel fuel to motor into the anchorage before dark. As she headed in, she was surrounded by numerous seabirds, mostly pelicans and cormorants, with the occasional brown booby, also heading in to roost for the night.

She celebrated her 70th birthday here on 8th May with friends on the yacht, *Dakini*, before visiting other islands in the group. On 15th May she left the southernmost island, Punta Cocos, and set off for Mangareva, in the Gambier Islands, about 3,800 miles away.

Her plan was to pass north of the Galapagos Islands, before altering course for the Gambiers, but light, fluky winds, squalls, and a strong, adverse current made progress slow. She decided to alter course more to the south, which rewarded her with better winds, before tacking west again. The occasional weather report, downloaded onto her tablet from the HF radio, showed that the SW winds would persist until she was well south of the equator.

It took almost a month to work their way down close to the Galapagos Islands, sailing slowly and in some discomfort, lurching along to windward. They passed to the north of the islands, as planned, then continued further west for another few hundred miles. In the vicinity of the islands, they were surrounded by birds, mostly masked and red-footed boobies. The latter liked to roost on *Speedwell*, and at times there were 10 to 12 birds on the deck, all squabbling over the best locations. One even got down below, and Shirley had some difficulty getting the big, heavy, awkward bird, with its large, flapping wings, back up on deck.

They turned south at 95°W, and were able to lay the course directly to Mangareva. For some days the weather was delightful and they made good progress. Shirley began to hope they might make up some time and have an easy passage from here on. But then the wind became fickle again, with intermittent squalls and calms, followed by strong NE winds that she made the most of, driving hard downwind.

One on of these occasions, when *Speedwell* was hammering along, Shirley heard a very loud crack, despite not wearing her hearing aids. A look around revealed that the second batten from the top had broken cleanly in two, about one third of the way in from the leach. She reefed the sail and tied the broken batten to the one below, then continued on with the reefs in place, as the wind had risen further and the sea became quite rough.

The boisterous weather continued for a few days, but when it eased, Shirley hoisted full sail again, with one panel taken out of play by the broken batten, and they continued to make acceptable progress. The calmer weather also allowed her to take a look at the Navik windvane. There seemed to be a lot of play in it, and she had been having

difficulty getting the boat to hold course for some time. She suspected wear and tear, but closer examination showed that the linkage to the paddle had broken once again. She'd had it welded back together not that long before, but the repair had not held.

Shirley realised that making a repair at sea with the resources aboard was not possible, so she brought the paddle inboard and stowed it in the cabin. She would have to find a way to make the boat self-steer without it, or hand steer, and there were still 2,000 miles to go.

She attached a strong bungee cord to one side of the tiller and a rope to the other, and then sheeted the sail in further than she normally would. This allowed the boat to steer itself with the wind abeam. *Speedwell* was not sailing as efficiently as it otherwise would have been, and they were not laying the course, but at least Shirley did not have to sit at the helm all day long.

When they strayed too far from the rhumb line, she gybed the boat and headed back. It took some time, whenever she did this, to get the boat settled down again, but mostly she was able to carry on as usual. She wrote a detailed log, baked bread and cookies, tried out new recipes in the pressure cooker on the one-burner Primus stove, read voraciously, became deeply absorbed in a sudoku app on her tablet, and spent hours, when the weather permitted, just sitting in the cockpit, watching the sea roll by.

She was only using 1.5 litres of water a day, had ample provisions, and was not in the slightest bit concerned about how long the passage was taking. She was aware that others might be wondering what had happened to her, but there was nothing she could do about that, and she was happy in her small ship.

Once past the Galapagos, the birds disappeared, apart from the occasional shearwater or petrel. She saw some dolphins shortly after leaving Las Perlas, but other than that, her only companions were a group of Mahi-mahi, or dolphin fish, about one metre long, iridescent blue with yellow fins, that stayed with *Speedwell* all the way. At night, they swam close alongside, apparently attracted by *Speedwell's* bright cockpit light, and left spectacular phosphorescent wakes.

After a few weeks, the broken batten began to chafe the sail, so Shirley hove to and removed it. She also noted that the sail was chafing where it rubbed against the lazyjacks, despite covering the latter in plastic hose.

The engine had not been in use since the start of the passage, as it would have been of little use against the strong currents and lumpy seas north of the Galapagos, and also fuel was limited. But now the wind eased and the sea calmed, with just over 1,000 miles to go. Shirley decided to motor for a short distance, just to pass this psychological milestone. 999

miles sounds like a lot less than 1,000, as any salesman will tell you.

When the engine started, there was no cooling water coming out of the exhaust. Barnacles had apparently blocked the water intake. Reluctant to dive overboard in the open sea, Shirley just waited for the wind. It didn't really bother her, as she had become accustomed to the leisurely pace of life aboard and was in no particular hurry. It meant, however, that she would have to sail in through the extensive coral reefs that surround Mangareva.

With only 50 miles to go, bad weather stopped them in their tracks for two days, but when it cleared, the island of Mangareva was visible on the horizon. At 1600 hrs on 4th August, 81 days after departing from Punta Cocos, they turned into the reef pass and made their way cautiously under sail into the lagoon.

They still had 10 miles to go to the first possible anchorage, and there was no way they would get there before the swift tropical sunset engulfed them in darkness. The lagoon is deep but is scattered with numerous coral heads. Shirley decided to put her faith in the Navionics charts on her tablet, which to date had proven to be very accurate, and crept along in a dying wind, until she was able to drop anchor in 20m of water. Then she broke out the bubbly and celebrated life.

The next morning, she dived over the side and cleared the water intake, cleaned the prop, then motored the remaining 10 miles to the village of Rikitea. It was a Sunday, and she had to wait until Monday to clear in, but other yachts in the anchorage visited her and reported that she was well and happy. The sail-training barque, *Picton Castle*, sent a message to relieved family and friends that she had finally arrived.

This passage is one of the most difficult in the world for sailing vessels without auxiliary power. A number of boats have failed to complete it, or arrived with sorry tales to tell. It may have taken Shirley and *Speedwell* a long time, but they arrived without major incident, in good condition, and in good spirits. It is a great validation of a simple, robust, flat-cut junk sail, of the legendary Vertue design, and small, simple boats in general. It is also a tribute to the spirit of her skipper, one of the truly great small boat voyagers.

Her self-steering gear was repaired aboard the square-rigger, *Picton Castle*, that was anchored nearby. The broken upper batten was repaired with epoxy and glass cloth that Shirley carried aboard. One calm day, she raised the sail and repaired the chafed areas of the tired old sail, by glueing patches on with contact cement. While the sail was hoisted, she took out the lowest batten, which was in good shape, and replaced it with the repaired batten, given that it only needs to be used in light winds in this position. The good batten was fitted in the upper position.



Picton Castle anchored at Rikitia

She spent her time at Mangareva scrubbing off the black algae that had almost covered the yellow topsides, and scraping tenacious goose barnacles off the bottom. She did not have time to see much of the island, but enjoyed the beautiful anchorage and gorging herself on fresh fruit, a welcome change from months of tinned food.

She was able to re-provision, at some expense, at the local store, and treated herself to a selection of fine French cheeses etc. She noted that rum was an eye-watering \$30 a bottle, which came as a shock after the famously cheap and excellent Caribbean rum she has enjoyed for so many years. But, as usual, Shirley remains upbeat, making the most of every day and eager for the adventure that lies ahead.

After a short stay, Shirley hauled her anchor up from 27m (always hard work) and reluctantly departed Mangareva. It was a place she could happily have spent months, but the authorities were intransigent. She had 15 days from arrival to leave French Polynesia.

The wind was blowing fresh from the SW, so she anchored for the first night at Taravai Island, on the other side of the lagoon, after picking her way with difficulty through the unmarked reef that bore little resemblance to her Navionics chart. At one point she bounced off the bottom when the chart showed 9m, before anchoring in a clear patch in 15m of water.

During the night the wind picked up and it rained heavily, but *Speedwell* lay snug enough. Shirley was dismayed to discover the burner on her primus was leaking, and had to resort to using her emergency gas stove to finish cooking dinner.

The next day, after repairing the stove, she had to wait until afternoon to nervously pick her way through the reef and head out to sea. The SE wind and seas were well developed, and *Speedwell* ran off to the NW under one panel of sail for the next

two days until conditions moderated. The wind then backed to the NE and they continued to log 90 NM a day.

Later, the wind shifted to the north, and a slog to windward followed. Coming up to a bank of heavy cloud, *Speedwell* experienced a sudden SW windshift, with squalls interspersed with calms and heavy rain. With the wind continuing to build, Shirley hove-to under two panels of sail and drifted slowly and comfortably through the night, holding the course. There was no moon, the classic dark and stormy night.

The next morning they managed to get underway, easing the sheet and sailing at 4 knots with the wind on the quarter, but soon the wind picked up and they hove-to again. By 2nd September, they had been hove-to for four days and it was becoming a bore.

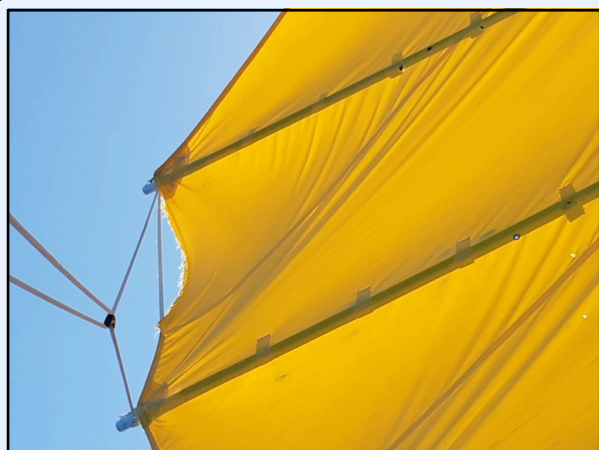
To make matters worse, Shirley discovered damage to the Navik windvane paddle attachments. She attempted to repair it with epoxy putty and washers, but would have to wait for calmer weather to reinstall the paddle. Also, a lot of water was getting below through the sliding hatch, as waves swept the boat. The bilges kept filling with water and required constant pumping. *Speedwell* has an electric bilge pump, but it was activating so frequently it threatened to flatten the batteries. Shirley's bunk was constantly wet and she would doze off only to be woken by water splashing her face.



Speedwell in rough weather after leaving Mangareva

The primus got soaked and refused to light, no matter how much methylated spirits Shirley used. She had to drink cold coffee and meals. She discovered she could soak couscous in water then mix it with tinned vegetables. She also had a good supply of almonds, luckily, and bananas from Mangareva. The wake was strewn with banana peels.

At times she despaired of the stormy weather abating, imagining the entire boat slowly falling apart and succumbing to the seas. She had felt like that a couple of times on the trip down from Panama, but consoled herself then that she would go down drinking her bottle of champagne. Now there was only rum left. She decided to head for Raiatea, in French Polynesia's Leeward Islands, despite her visa problems.



Sail damage en route to Raiatea

On 5th September the wind and seas moderated a little, and Shirley got *Speedwell* going again under two panels of sail. It was still too rough to reinstall the Navik paddle but she was able to get the boat self-steering again using her earlier methods of shock cord and lashings.

The paddle was reinstalled the following day in a calm (during which she lowered the sail to stop it slamming). Later she found the windvane wobbling, and concluded that perhaps the old Navik self-steering gear, veteran of so many miles, was ready for retirement. The sail was also showing signs of wear and tear, with the leach of the upper sheeted panel tearing.

With the wind and seas easing, Shirley was able to dry out the boat, get the stove working again and change into clean dry clothes. She sat out in the sunny cockpit reading *Emma*, made some delicious raisin bread, and a brown rice dinner. Things were looking up. On the 10th, they were circled by an

aircraft that asked Shirley if she had seen another sailing boat overdue after the storm.



Speedwell approaching Raiatea in the morning

A frustrating day of calms, rain squalls, and shifting winds were followed by a perfect 3 days of sailing. *Speedwell* sailed close past the islands of Tahiti and Moorea, admiring the dramatic scenery. At 10.30 the next morning, 15th September, 2018, they were approaching the barrier reef surrounding Raiatea's lagoon. Sailing fast downwind, they transited the pass, revelling in the marvellously flat water, and picked up a vacant mooring off the marina. In the distance, the magical spires of legendary Bora Bora provided a beautiful backdrop to mark the end of another adventurous passage.

Visa problems have caused yet another change of plan. Because it would take at least 30 days to get a New Zealand visa in the Cook Islands, and the cyclone season is now imminent, Shirley has decided instead to spend this period in Vava'u in Tonga, where there is a secure place for *Speedwell* should the island be struck by a cyclone. From there, *Speedwell* will make her way towards New Zealand, where the very active JRA community will give her a rousing reception in due course.

