

# **DARWIN TO DAMPIER VIA THE KIMBERLEYS**

## **Mike Bickell**

*(Mike and his Crealock 34 Alchemi will be familiar to all but very recent members, having featured in Flying Fish more than a dozen times since 2002/2. This account follows on directly from Northeast Australia 2014, mentioned below.*

*Mike's original, very detailed account, had to be cut for Flying Fish – visit Grandpa's Voyages (easily located via any search engine) to read his full story. Once on Mike's homepage scroll down and use the Blog Archive to locate the entry, posted in August 2015. Alternatively click on 'North West Australia' among the many 'Grandpa's Maps' listed on the homepage to follow Mike's cruise on Google My Maps.)*

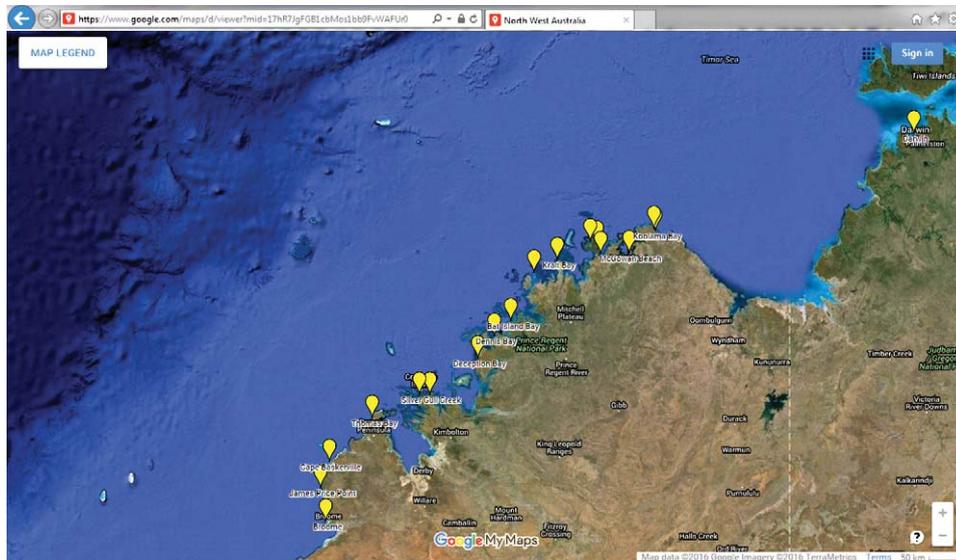
*Flying Fish 2015/1 contained an account of Alchemi's voyage from Bundaberg to Darwin. I had arrived in Australia on 2 April with an Electronic Travel Authority Visa which permitted me to stay in the country for three months (91 days), so on arrival in Darwin on 8 May after a 22 day passage I still had 56 days remaining. I needed seven of those in Darwin itself, to re-provision, get a dental crown cemented back in place and buy a new 2hp Yamaha outboard. Alchemi was ready to leave on 16 May, with just 50 days left in which to make passage along the Kimberley coast to a port from which she could leave Australia to cross the Indian Ocean.*

*A section on the Darwin Sailing Club website provides information on several Kimberley destinations, and I did some further research to decide where best to stop en route to see something of the coast, while still reaching a Port of Entry in time. That required the acquisition of tidal data, which wasn't straightforwardly available, though in the end I found what I needed on websites aimed at fishing enthusiasts, eg. <http://www.tides4fishing.com>. Careful planning based on tidal data is of paramount importance in this region because of the very large range and strong tidal currents that occur all along the coast.*

*I considered three possible ports for departure – Broome, Port Hedland and Dampier. I liked the idea of getting as far west as I could to reduce the distance of the next leg across the ocean, but recognised that Broome might be a better choice if I was close to running out of visa time when I got there.*

### **Darwin to the King George River**

*There are several possible places to visit and explore all around the coast of the Joseph Bonaparte Gulf, but lack of time ruled these out so I headed direct for Koolama Bay near the mouth of the King George River. The river is known for its dramatic, high-sided gorge, a highlight for many cruising this coast. There is, however, a bar to be crossed before reaching deeper water farther in, and as my arrival in Koolama Bay coincided with the top of spring tides I was concerned I might become neaped. I couldn't afford to wait two weeks to get out, so decided not to risk potential entrapment and moved on after enjoying a second calm night at anchor in Koolama Bay.*



### King George River to McGowan's Beach, Napier Broome Bay

Inshore sandbanks and shoals force a boat to round Capes Londonderry and Talbot a long way offshore, with the prospect of strong adverse tidal flows if the timing is wrong. To give myself the best chance for making that passage in daylight and with a favourable current, I decided first to stop at Butterfly Bay, just over 20 miles along the coast. There were 25 knot winds that day and the current tended to pile up on the coast beyond the entrance, so entering the bay was quite exciting. Once inside I found swell penetrated as far up the eastern wing as I dared to go, so there was good shelter from the wind but a fair amount of movement.

To catch the tidal stream round Cape Londonderry I left the anchorage at 0530 next morning in very little wind, but by 0800 it had picked up to 15 knots and *Alchemi* was sailing fast with a fair tide under her. Consequently we rounded Cape Talbot earlier than expected, and instead of anchoring in its lee as I'd originally intended I kept going in towards Napier Broome Bay. Approaching McGowan's Beach, deep within the bay, I was surprised to see a large motor boat at anchor but had no difficulty in finding

a spot nearby for *Alchemi* to come to rest.



*The local 14ft foot croc didn't chew on this 'teething ring' when I went ashore for fuel*

The following morning I launched the dinghy and went ashore, pleased at the performance of the new outboard. The attraction was a note in the guide book saying there was a campsite nearby frequented by 4x4 drivers at which it was often possible to buy diesel. I hadn't used much since leaving Darwin, but was able to squeeze 40 litres from cans into the boat tanks and thought refilling the cans at the first opportunity would be a good idea. My hopes were enhanced by the sight of a 5000 litre road tanker parked on the beach!

Soon after landing a figure appeared in a dune buggy. His first words were: "What's that thing you've dragged up the beach?" – my introduction to locals' contempt for what they call 'teething rings for crocs'. He went on to explain there was a 14-footer that cruised up and down this beach from time to time. He did fill my two cans with diesel, though, whilst explaining that no 4x4s had yet made it through this year due to floods blocking the tracks further inland.

After returning to *Alchemi*, and hoisting the dinghy aboard before it got munched by a hungry croc, I established VHF contact with the motor boat, *Melita*. It wasn't long before Dave appeared in a large and croc-proof 'tinny' and took me back to *Melita* to meet Lyndell. They told me they had been cruising around Australia in *Melita* for many years, including several visits to the Kimberleys. We were pleased to make contact in this remote place, and stayed together for several days during which their knowledge of places to visit and/or anchor was enormously helpful. My time in their company was the most enjoyable of my entire cruise along this coast.

#### **Napier Broome Bay to Freshwater Bay, Vansittart**

For those cruising this coast from north to south, passage from Napier Broome to Vansittart Bay presents the first of many similar planning dilemmas. It is of course possible to go well out into the ocean to clear all the offshore islands and reefs between one bay and the next, but that entails long distances and still requires tidal flows and timing to be taken into account. This is because the continental shelf lies at such a shallow angle that huge volumes of water rush to and fro between each major bay and the Indian Ocean. These flows occur at slightly different times in each bay, so strong transverse currents are also created between one bay and the next.

It is about 40 miles from McGowan's Beach in Napier Broome to Freshwater Bay in Vansittart. The crux of the passage is about two-thirds of the way along the route, where it passes through a narrow channel between Long Island and Mary Island, past Middle Rock which lies between the two. It needs to be traversed at or close to the turn of the tide to avoid the very fast currents and turbulence that occur at other times. *Melita* had made the passage several times before, so she went first with *Alchemi* following. This allowed me to see how she was affected, although in practice I relied more on *Alchemi*'s own instruments than on watching her.

The seaward side of Freshwater Bay is encumbered by another hazard that is repeated many times along this coast. In the past, people in Broome and nearby made a living by collecting pearls from naturally-occurring oyster beds. Nowadays this is done on an industrial scale, with man-made farms occupying very large areas in many places along the coast. The periphery of such farms is usually marked by buoys and netting, often unlit, preventing yachts – or any other craft not involved in the farming operations – from entering the areas. So it was in Freshwater Bay as I approached in the rapidly



*The first pool in Freshwater Bay  
at high tide...*

fading light, steering by instruments and hoping the farm boundaries marked on the chart were accurate. They were, and soon *Alchemi* was able to anchor not far from *Melita* in a cove off the southern shore.

We stayed there together for two days, enjoying new experiences that I would not have found without Dave and Lyndell's prior knowledge. The first was an expedition in *Melita's* tinny to a shallow and rocky area near the mouth of the cove, each equipped with a bucket, a hammer and a metal tent peg. Dave pointed out the Pacific Blacklip Oysters growing prolifically on the rocks and becoming exposed as the tide receded, and the purpose of our equipment became obvious as we inserted the tent pegs between shells and rock, hammered away and put the resulting oysters in our buckets.

It all seemed very tranquil until Dave advised me to keep a watch over my shoulder every now and again in case the croc known to be resident in the cove was creeping up. He tried to settle my anxieties by saying I could probably move faster than a croc over the rocks and boulders, but I didn't really relax until we were back on *Melita* enjoying Oysters Naturel and Kilpatrick with a glass of wine!

For many years early explorers failed to find any fresh water in Vansittart Bay – it was only relatively recently that the creek running into the cove where we were anchored was found, giving rise to the name Freshwater Bay. The mouth of the creek is hidden behind mangroves, and the approach through them is so narrow and shallow that, even in the tinny, entry was only possible a couple of hours either side of high tide. Once inside there is a pool at the foot of a series of rock ledges, with enough water flowing down the creek to permit laundry to be done and even a full-length, if shallow, immersion to be enjoyed.

### **Jar Island, Vansittart Bay**

Jar Island lies at the head of Vansittart Bay, and is so named because primitive pottery was found here by early explorers. It has since become famous for the many aboriginal cave paintings subsequently discovered. As a result the island is often visited by smallish cruise ships which anchor off its northern tip, but Dave and Lyndell, having



*... with swimming and laundry pools higher up*

been here before, knew it was possible to get round to the southeastern corner of the island, between its rocky shore and the nearby edge of yet another pearl farm – provided one went cautiously. This time I did follow the route taken by *Melita*, because she was moving slowly and not far ahead. The anchorage was a big improvement – better wind protection, less swell and shallower water – though later we did see bull sharks coming to the surface nearby, hunting for scraps – or perhaps for an arm or leg!

*Ascent to the plateau becomes more difficult farther up the creek*

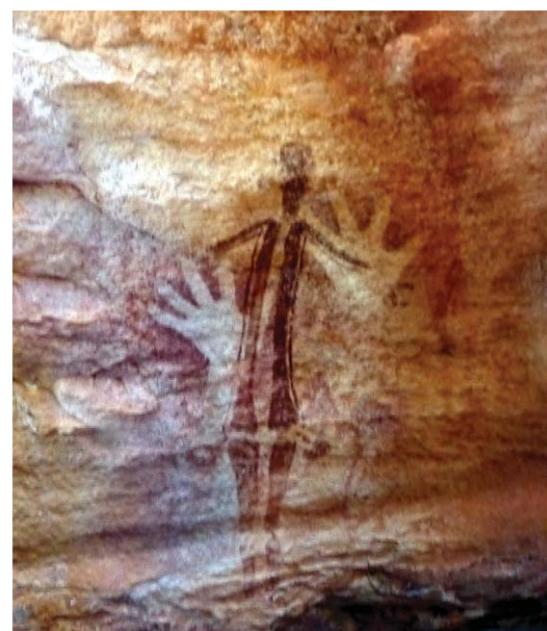




*Aborigines were fishermen as well as hunter-gatherers*

*More than one generation used the same rock face at Jar Island*

The following day we used the tinny to return to the northern tip of the island, near which most of the paintings are situated. There we found one of the small cruise ships that tour the Kimberley, so our viewing of the paintings was partially accomplished in private and partially as hangers-on, eavesdropping on the guided groups and benefiting from their explanations of the provenance and character of the paintings.



#### **Vansittart Bay to Admiralty Bay and on to Krait Bay**

Dave and Lyndell planned to return to Freshwater Bay, but I had only 36 days left in which to reach a Port of Entry and depart the country. So with some sadness we bade each other farewell and I left the anchorage at Jar Island at 0645 next morning, 28 May.

Making passage around Cape Bougainville is comparatively straightforward, but it still needs to be timed to catch both the outgoing and incoming tides. My early departure did that, and *Alchemi* reached Parry Harbour on the northern coast of Admiralty Bay that afternoon without incident. There are many islands and anchorages in Admiralty Bay and I would have liked to explore some of them, but pressure of time again forced me to move on.

The next convenient anchorage on the route south is at Krait Bay, near the tip of the peninsula which forms the west edge of Admiralty Bay – but to get there without going miles offshore requires one to go through the Voltaire Passage. This is another narrow channel between offshore islands, where extremely strong currents flow at most times except for a short period when the tide turns. Weighing anchor at 0530





### *Mining scars on Koolan Island*

To make good time and avoid all these obstacles, particularly difficult for a singlehander, I elected to make for Shelter Bay in the Prudhoe Islands, northeast of Bigge Island. These can be approached either from north or from east and south. There are uncharted areas in both approaches, but I chose the latter as it looked more open. Another early start from Krait Bay saw *Alchemi* anchored in the almost completely enclosed Shelter Bay soon after noon. From the Prudhoe Islands one can soon turn south towards the Coronation Islands, and seek anchorage in many places including, as I did, off Cape Brewster.

### **York Sound to Yampi Sound**

As one continues south, Augustus Island and its neighbours again create obstacles with their narrow, rocky and current-swept channels and many pearl farms. Again it is possible to go outside them, but in a small and short-handed boat this will take longer and probably require forays towards the mainland to find anchorage. That was certainly the case for *Alchemi* with her next stop at Dennis Bay – a well-sheltered and pleasant anchorage followed by another at Deception Bay.

Here one is faced with yet another choice – to enter Camden Sound, which contains the Montgomery Reef where the tide goes out so quickly that it's said one can watch seawater waterfalls coming off the reef, and south of that Walcott Inlet, or to bypass the area. Purists say you haven't really visited the Kimberley unless you have cruised this area, yet again time pressures led me to choose the bypass route and head straight towards Yampi Sound. Evidence of modern industry in the form of mining scars becomes apparent even if approaching from the ocean side, and once inside the Sound itself, after passing between Koolan and Cockatoo Islands, it becomes even more obvious with

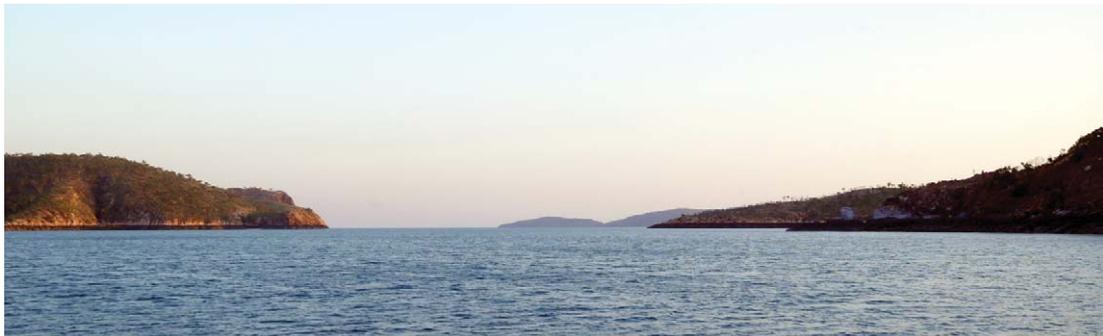
### *An ore carrier awaits its load*



anchored ore carriers and piles of spoil on the hillsides. There are several anchorages available, but I chose to pass through the outer entrance to Silver Gull Creek and anchor in the pool outside the creek itself. It was peaceful there, though I did see a catamaran at the entrance to the narrower part of the creek.

### **Yampi Sound to Broome**

King Sound, the last of the great Kimberley Bays on the way south lies between the southwestern end of Yampi Sound and Cape Leveque. Again it has many places worth visiting, but with my time pressures I once again had to take the quickest route – across its wide mouth and past the many islands, taking account of the fast tidal currents generated by this enormous bay. But first I wanted to get as far west as I could before leaving the protection of the islands around Yampi Sound. So I moved from Silver Gull Creek to Conulurus Island, which turned out to be one of the best-protected and most appealing anchorages in the entire voyage.



*Looking west from Conulurus anchorage*

It is possible to anchor close to Cape Leveque, on the southwest side of the entrance, but the waters are shallow and current-swept so I decided on a 0430 start to catch a favourable tide round the Cape and get as far as Thomas Bay. Care is needed to enter and leave, because there are rocks on both sides of the entrance and a patch in its centre. As these can be awash at low tide, entry an hour or two after high tide is recommended. Thomas Bay proved to be fine, but the same cannot be said about the next two anchorages at Cape Baskerville and James Price Point. Both were safe enough and sheltered from the strong southeasterly winds, but subject to some swell and tidally induced restlessness.

### **Broome**

Broome is a Port of Entry and, as I discovered later, would make an excellent arrival or departure port were it not for the difficulty of finding an acceptable anchorage and getting ashore. This problem arises because the town sits at the landward end of the peninsula which forms the northwestern boundary of Roebuck Bay. This is a shallow expanse of open water edged by mangroves, in which significant waves are set up by the strong southeasterly winds, often accelerated by the effect of high pressure systems that track from west to east south of the Australian continent. The Bay is named after the ship in which William Dampier first explored this coast.

There are big ship mooring and wharf facilities, but these are exposed to the waves and impractical for yachts because of the large tidal range. The recommended solution is to go up the creeks near the town and either anchor for a short time around high tide and dinghy to a pier, or go far enough into the mangroves to gain protection and then settle on the mud at low tide.

In the past it was possible to anchor off the south end of Cable Beach on the ocean side of the peninsula, where there is good protection from the wind and swell, but by 2014 this area was occupied by moorings for local boats and the small cruise ships that offer tours to the Kimberley. Consequently *Alchemi* was compelled to anchor so far up the coast that swell could be seen breaking on the shallow beach, creating conditions that would have made it difficult to land or relaunch a dinghy without it being overturned. So although I stayed at anchor for two comfortable nights off Cable Beach, I decided to press on south and west in order to shorten the length of the long passage across the southern Indian Ocean.

### Broome to Dampier

There is a choice to be made when sailing between these places – to hug the coast or go offshore. The offshore passage is about 350 miles and the inshore one slightly longer. There are a small number of places along the coast where it is possible to anchor, but many fewer than might be supposed because the tidal range necessitates anchoring well away from the shore. The few indentations and creeks are coral encumbered. That is no deterrent for strongly-crewed yachts where the crew can stand anchor watches, but is much more problematic for short-handed boats.

The offshore route is much more exposed, with no protection from the wind and a long enough fetch for significant waves to develop. Nevertheless that is the way I decided to go, both for visa reasons and because I was reluctant to risk sailing close inshore in darkness. I didn't get caught for the first couple of days, but the wind grew stronger as I neared the waters offshore from Port Hedland and Port Walcott. This is where I first experienced the heavy traffic to and from the offshore rigs,

