

BOAT

25
YEARS

INTERNATIONAL

SAILING
SPECIAL

SPEEDBOAT
COOKSON'S
30-METRE
FLYER

TOP 50
SAILING YACHTS
IN THE WORLD
UNDERWATER
PROFILES

MONACO SHOW PREVIEW



words: **Oliver Dewar**



Frank Blair has spent more than two years circling the globe – and the story of the design and construction of his sturdy schooner is as intriguing as his adventures along the way

To the uninitiated, a 'fusion schooner' may sound like something Han Solo would use for a relaxing weekend after five days of strenuous hyperspace piracy in *Star Wars*. The reality is a great deal less far-fetched but just as intriguing.

The 18.9 metre fusion schooner *Maggie B*, designed by Nigel Irens, has just completed an extraordinary circumnavigation of the globe lasting slightly under two years and two months and covering 38,400 nautical miles. While details of the voyage itself could fill a trilogy of books, the story behind the yacht's construction at Covey Island Boatworks in Nova Scotia and the overall design are as unorthodox as her owner and captain, Frank Blair; for although Blair is far more grounded than the hair-triggered skipper of the *Millennium Falcon*, there is a suspicion that he may originate from (or at least have visited) a galaxy far, far away...

Covey Island Boatworks is becoming renowned for building custom and semi-custom, classical and traditional niche motor and sailing boats, applying modern techniques and methods and composite, wood and epoxy materials. Apart from their obvious visual appeal, the boats are also phenomenally robust. This heritage is clear on boarding *Maggie B* during the Antigua Classic Yacht Regatta before the final leg of her circumnavigation – normal seagoing

scuffs and chips and slight damage to the mast tables are the only evidence of a tough round-the-world voyage. She's a tangible example of sound boatbuilding, design and crew handling.

'It's gone really well,' says John Steele, head of Covey Island Boatworks. 'Frank has sailed hard for two years but he occasionally sent me panicked e-mails about being a



The unconventional Frank Blair: experiencing the planet's 'must see before you die' locations

tramp, coming to Antigua Classic Yacht Regatta and mooring near *Eleonora* and the others with all their slick varnish work.' However, when Steele visited the regatta he discovered that Blair's concerns about lowering the tone on the pontoons were unfounded. 'When I got down here, she was fine,' says the highly satisfied boatbuilder.

For Blair, one initial, ecological feature had immense appeal. Steele recalls: 'I was building my own boat, a 56 foot schooner constructed from Douglas fir roof beams salvaged from an old aircraft hangar.' This was a defining moment for the future captain of *Maggie B*, and old growth Douglas fir for the frames and planking was soon sourced from another former military structure, a 1932 US Army armoury in Philadelphia. 'It's a beautiful wood with a close, straight grain,' says Steele. Then a global communications link was established between the owner, the yard and the designer. 'An "e-mail triangle" was set up to provide weekly updates and a constant flow of ideas,' says Steele.

For one point of this triangle, located in England's West Country, the prospect of becoming involved with the project was mildly alarming. 'If you're a Brit going into the schooner heartland, it's quite daunting,' says Nigel Irens. However, a number of the project's characteristics were in his favour. 'Fortunately, we were able to escape the



breaking gracefully...

'Things break. You want your boat made of things that will break gracefully and hopefully give you lots of warning. It is hard to trust steel – cracks, say in rigging fittings, are pretty undetectable. Fibre will warn you. Mast hoops break but are easy to fix. Slides or cars or track, much less so'



Stormy weather at Paraty Bay, near Rio de Janeiro



A giant tortoise at Fernando de Noronha, Brazil

Below: Praia do Leão on Fernando de Noronha is a favourite shore for nesting sea turtles



Maggie B tied up to the Armada Yacht Club in Puerto Williams, Chile

Pacific Ocean



Bora Bora



Far left: Maggie B at sunset in Bora Bora. Below: the spectacular blue ice of Seno Glacier, Chile



paranoia is good...

'Paranoia is good in a navigator. Some people with multiple GPS and chart plotters aren't paranoid enough. We ran aground where the latest chart showed 22ft of water. Integrated GPS and autopilots can put you exactly where you select, including running aground at the foot of a lighthouse you have selected as a way point...'



A thunderstorm over Baia de Todos os Santos, Brazil



Maggie B against a spectacular sunset at Iles des Saintes, south of Guadeloupe

The boat anchored on a sandbank off the island of Bora Bora



run like hell...

'Good weather forecasts have made big trips much, much safer. In five days we can go 1,000 miles, which gives us the ability to position in a good breeze and away from trouble. Our fast passage from Mauritius to Freemantle was due to help from a 145 knot tropical cyclone to our north east, which dragged the normal SE Trades north. Ten years ago I would have been nuts to do anything but run like hell...'



A ceremonial dancer dressed for the new king's coronation on the island of Maupiti, French Polynesia



Dramatic seas off the Cape of Good Hope – first known as the Cape of Storms



Above: Old River at Port Davey, Tasmania. Right: Maggie B in the Heads at Knysna, South Africa





tyranny of replica building. She is not a replica, which is a great relief.'

This freedom from conventional classic schooner building practice is a fundamental part of the *Maggie B* story, and allowed intelligent design and the use of modern materials in areas that would normally be avoided by traditional, old-school replica

builders. However, design authenticity was assured through close liaison between Irens and Fairlie Restorations in Hamble on the English South Coast, whose knowledge and extensive archive of classic yacht design proved invaluable.

For Irens, the spirit of the project and the owner's experience and background were

instrumental. He believes that these days people avoid risk by buying what they have already seen: 'They don't want to gamble by choosing something from a drawing on paper.' As a venture capitalist, Blair is familiar with risk, but Irens believes there are deeper reasons for his willingness to take a chance. 'People with new money are cautious and



Worst case scenario...

Sitting in the cockpit on *Maggie B* after racing at the Antigua Classic Yacht Regatta, Frank Blair recalls the worst moment of the yacht's circumnavigation:

'We were in the Chilean Channels in calm weather and beautiful scenery, surrounded by mountains and glaciers. Suddenly, we got a 20 knot tailwind with rain squalls of 20 to 30 knots. It wasn't a problem as *Maggie B* is a nice stiff boat with a 145 degree righting angle and it was fine. But one darker cloud appeared when we were just 100 yards from a choke point in the channel. The wind went instantly from 22 to 62 knots with a 40 degree windshift. We had a crash gybe, but still had rudder authority. Then we were surfing and it was raining so hard I couldn't see the bow. But the crew were really competent and we had one person down below on the radar giving hand signals – you couldn't hear anything – guiding us through the gap. They were strong conditions, but we were never out of control.'



Trust your crew and keep them safe: in total, about 20 volunteers, from experienced sailors to raw recruits, took part in the voyage



tend to follow the latest trends, but Frank is old money and was confident enough to use a designer who had never built a schooner,' he explains.

With design and build flexibility assured, work began. The enlightened approach was also favourable for Covey Island Boatworks. 'We find that many yards that claim to be in the custom business actually give you something standard,' says John Steele. Provided with a great opportunity, his company built a unique yacht, down to the finest details including the black walnut interior trim from a tree felled on the Blair family farm in Illinois.

One design requirement was a shallow

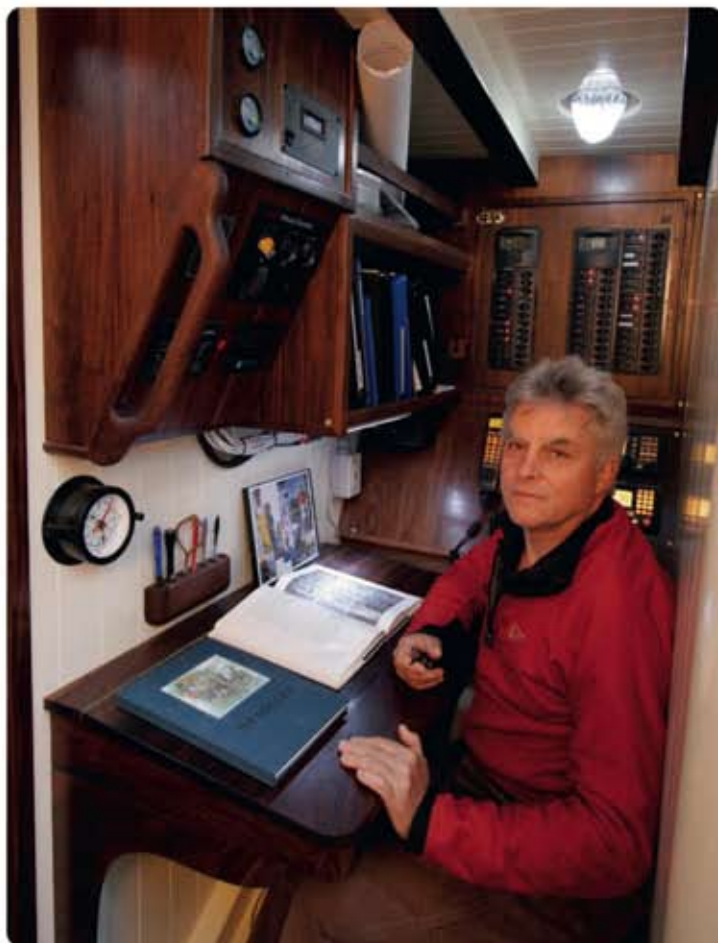
draught to allow *Maggie B* access to some of the most beautiful anchorages and rivers on the planet – a goal achieved through a centreboard of 3.8 metres length below the waterline when lowered and just 2 metres when raised. To compensate for the lack of keel weight, a light rig was vital to provide righting moment, so carbon spars were fitted.

The choice of rigging also veered from the usual replica 'tyranny'. 'Frank was keen to use textile rigging, which is light and cost-effective,' says Irens. The use of fine Vectran rope also saved weight in the type of mast and deck fittings.

'The rigging angles of thick, galvanised steel are enormous, and the weight

customer service...

'Every boat has lots of systems, which will have problems. If you have saved and can find the installation or operating manual, your chance of fixing it increases 300 per cent. *Maggie B* probably has 1,000 different manuals, wiring diagrams or parts catalogues. Often, the phone number for customer service is the most valuable...'



Blair, who says he is always learning, claims he can make anyone a 'decent sailor' in a couple of weeks – and never asks a crew member to do a job he wouldn't do himself

advantage effectively saved 7,000 kilos in the keel,' he says. *Maggie B* draws two metres with the centreboard up and four with it down. The centreboard allows the yacht to track about four degrees closer to the wind when close-hauled. While relatively shallow, the fact that 39 per cent of the weight is in the lead keel gives the vessel a relatively stiff 145 degree righting angle. The lightweight but strong carbon fibre mast and 'soft' rigging were cheaper than conventional methods because of not needing the extra lead in the keel to balance the extra weight.

To conform to the boat's distinct lack of window dressing, the carbon spars were painted white rather than disguised. 'You can

you pay peanuts, you get monkeys...

'A boat built carefully by sailors will pay off again and again, even if there are skilled ship fitters available cheaper somewhere else. Having every wire documented and labelled has saved us thousands of hours...'

clad a carbon mast with wood or scumble it, but it really defeats the object,' says Irens. 'Both the deckhouse and skylights are wood but are simply painted white, which works well within the language of the boat.' This decision to avoid delicate and labour-intensive varnish work suits the yacht precisely, and gazing across her decks – even with prior knowledge of her oceangoing pedigree – the impression of long-haul, offshore capability is distinct.

The decks are, superficially, classic planking, but between the exterior Douglas fir and the internal tongue-and-groove deckhead, a high-density foam core is sandwiched between structural glass fibre, which allows the retro-fitting of deck gear. All existing custom bronze fittings are mounted on carbon fibre plates for additional strength. One important deck feature is not obviously apparent: 'The wooden deck doesn't go all the way to the bulwarks,' says Irens, pointing out a 10 centimetre gap. 'So if



The simple but warm interior is trimmed with black walnut from a tree felled on the Blair family farm



there's a collision, you can actually see the pressure cracks.'

The yacht's 214.6 square metre sail plan also breaks with convention, schooner or otherwise. While the main mast has a boom, the fully battened, laminated North Sails foresail is loose footed – the one decision by her owner that led to universal criticism from the design, build and sailmaking teams. 'Everyone had a go at Frank about this,' Steele remembers. The thinking behind the design was stunningly simple, and with frequent daily runs in excess of 200 miles throughout the circumnavigation, it appears to be highly successful. 'He just told them that he had an overlapping genoa, so why not have two?'

Blair says: 'When I went to the North Sails headquarters to argue for the overlapping foresail, I had with me a print of the sail plan of the original *America*. She also had a free-footed fore.'

Sailing on *Maggie B* during the Antigua



Classics gave some insight into the yacht's offshore potential: very nimble for 35 tonnes displacement, comfortable in the long swell, with clearly laid out sail systems, a deep cockpit and an interior that is easy and safe to move around in and where freefalling from windward to leeward is unlikely.

The most valuable clue to conditions on board the yacht during a circumnavigation lies in her captain. For the inshore racing in Antigua, Blair and his core crew gave a short



safety briefing before leaving the dock in Falmouth harbour, followed by a reading from Tennyson and a swift toast to the sea, with each crew member providing an individual salutation in turn. To some, this sort of pre-departure ceremony might be unnerving, but such eccentricity disguises a deeply committed, highly experienced and extremely knowledgeable sailor.

As a former US Navy pilot in single-seat aircraft and with 20 years' experience of teaching sailing for an Outward Bound scheme, Blair has both a grasp of command and people management skills that many would envy. 'I'm always learning, but I'm comfortable with being a skipper,' he says, resisting any idea that experience brings superiority. He made the circumnavigation with a crew of three. 'Over the 38,400 miles we had a regularly changing crew – a total of about 20 during the two years. All were volunteers and mostly they were eager, smart and fun to be with.' Some were highly

experienced, some were raw, but this was no setback as far as sailing aptitude was concerned. 'I can make anyone a decent sailor in a couple of weeks,' he says.

The success of the voyage pivoted on eliciting trust from his crew, an essential relationship when sailing with amateur crew who have minimal offshore miles logged. 'When sailing, I have a list of conditions for safety,' he explains. 'They number Conditions One to Three, where Condition Three is General Quarters – when things are very hard or there is a big chance of trouble. Not just weather – it could be a tricky harbour at night, for example.'

'Condition One is all plain sailing. Two is in between – which could be due to lack of sleep, changing weather, new shipmates, damaged gear etc. That's the time when trouble creeps up on you. I emphasise understanding the whole situation – boat, weather, crew and environment – and adjusting for it.'

To ensure that the crew felt able to question any manoeuvre, navigational plan, decision or merely to indicate unease, Blair introduced what he refers to as the 'magic word'. Should any of the three crew say 'I'm uncomfortable' he would instantly stop what he was doing and reassess the situation. He also operated a fairly liberal captaincy: 'Jobs like cleaning the head or going upside down in the bilge – I would never ask someone to do something I haven't.'

A solo watch system of three hours on, nine hours off, was maintained, and with *Maggie B* often remaining on a single tack for three weeks, much of the helming was under autopilot as the yacht cruised between most of the world's 'must see before you die' locations, including the Seychelles, Mauritius, Bora Bora and the Fernando de Noronha Islands off Brazil.

With this much of the world passing beneath the yacht's keel, does Blair have a favourite spot? He says the beaches in the



getting out there...

'Your boat is never ready for a trip. Things always have to be worked on, the weather isn't quite right, there are lots of unknowns ahead. But you have just to get out of the harbour. And when something breaks or things become more complicated, you just have to work around it. Otherwise you'll never go over the horizon...'

Seychelles are among the most beautiful in the world and the scenery in the Chilean Channels – where they encountered the most horrific weather of the circumnavigation – is exceptional. But an attractive location is not enough. 'It's all subjective, really,' he says. 'For example, Madagascar is very cheap. The beer is the cheapest in the world and everything is for sale. But in reality, you can't get hold of anything.' The answer is what he

calls a 'sailor port'. 'You want three good restaurants and a decent chandler,' he explains – but then adds: 'It does exist but I'm not going to tell you where because you'll publish the name and it'll get ruined...'

Maggie B arrived in Lunenburg, Nova Scotia, on 10 May just ahead of a northeasterly gale that would have made an uncomfortable final few days to the circumnavigation. Blair already has plans for

the yacht. 'Getting hauled out in a week for a refit, then off on the next adventure,' he reports shortly after making landfall. As expected, the route is far from the normal cruise. 'It will probably be a retracing of Aeneas' voyage as described in the *Aeneid* after the fall of Troy.' □

To follow the exploits of Captain Blair and the schooner *Maggie B*, visit www.schoonermaggieb.net

MAGGIE B

LOA	LWL	Beam	Draught	Displacement
19.29m	17.1m	5.1m	2m	35 tonnes
Rig Schooner	Engine Yanmar 92hp	Communication/ navigation electronics Furuno	Paint HMG 2 part	Builder/year Covey Island Boatworks/2006
Mast and boom GMT/ Covey Island Boatworks	Speed under engine 9 knots	Entertainment systems Sony	Construction Hull, laminated Douglas fir using considerable recycled material; decks, straight laid, vertical grain Douglas fir	2 River Road Petite Riviere, Nova Scotia B0J 2P0 Canada Tel: +1 902 688 2843
Sail areas 214.6 sq m	Fuel capacity 984 litres	Owner and guests 8	Naval architect Nigel Irens	E-mail: communications@coveyisland.com Web: www.coveyisland.com
Sailmaker North Sails	Range 1,200 nm at 7.5 knots	Typical crew for circumnavigation 4	Exterior styling and interior design Nigel Irens	Price guide Not available
Furling system Pro Furl	Generator Onan 6.5kW	Tender Custom clinker row/sail dinghy		
Winches Lewmar	Freshwater capacity 1,325 litres			

Maggie B lost to fire

Following our feature last month, owner Frank Blair brings us the devastating news of his yacht's destruction during a refit at her build yard, just days before her re-launch



'I am crushed to report the loss of *Maggie B* on 12 August at Covey Island shipyard, due to a fire that apparently started during the night in a remote electrical panel. She was completely destroyed. She was to be re-launched on 18 August after a brief, mostly cosmetic, refit following her successful two-year, 38,400nm trip around the world by the way of the great Capes. She was fully insured.

Fortunately no one was hurt in the fire. Covey still has its most valuable asset – the skill of its workers. The only good thing about the loss has been hearing from hundreds of people all around the world of how *Maggie B* affected them. For me, as Captain, it has been a bit like listening to my own funeral oration.'

From my son Alden, who was with us around the Horn:
'One of her praises that I would constantly sing was how she was a fusion schooner: In building *Maggie B* you essentially brought back a dying style of ship, using modern technology to make schooners feasible again. It is ironically beautiful that she found her end in the womb of her birth.'

From Kath in Australia (with us from Tahiti to Chile):

'*Maggie B* was so much to so many people. To me, she was awe inspiring and stunningly beautiful. A dream, a challenge and a home – wind and water made solid. I think to all who sailed her, she became something living and breathing ... a part of themselves. ... All those who knew her know that something magic has been lost ... but the trail she left behind remains.

I want to thank you, Frank, from the bottom of my heart. Not just for the opportunity you gave me, but for the magic you provided by having a dream and having the belief to carry it through to the end.'

From Bill and Claudie in Bay of Islands, NZ:

'We are all coming to grips with a loss that is the loss of beauty and fleeting dreams ... the Mona Lisa could be so lost, but has not quite the same free, kinetic beauty.'

From Bill in Maryland:

'She was like a thoroughbred horse, who carried you so far and so well, and then was lost just after the finish.'

From Curtis in Cadiz, Spain:

'She was a friend, a protector; a mother for all of those who sailed on her; a vicarious adventure and a symbol of hope for all who followed her travels. To have such an inelegant end for such a singularly graceful craft is

beyond my notions of right and wrong. That she was to be launched next Monday adds only acid to the ashes.'

From Warren in Rockland:

'A vessel like *Maggie B* is built not only of many parts over many months but of many miles, many shipmates, many hard-won experiences and tangible memories.'

From Mikalya in Nova Scotia:

'I am 14 ... and for 25 months the beautiful *Maggie B* took me all around the world through our computer.'

From Aaron at Wooden Boat in Maine:

'She was one of the most remarkable boats I have ever sailed and I salute you for having the persistent foresight and hunger to orchestrate her creation and to have used her so well. In my brief experience, losing a boat is ... like losing your bearings on a map of dreams you had.'

And, perhaps closest to my sentiments, from Theresa in New South Wales, Australia:

'F***!'

