

TALL SHIP ADVENTURES

THE 'HUNTER' IN PARADISE

JONATHAN EDEN

In the picturesque waters of the Whitsunday Islands, off the Queensland coast, one of Australia's longest serving tall ships is continuing her working life.

*Derwent Hunter anchored at
Whitehaven Beach, Whitsunday Island*



Caulking new planks in Derwent Hunter's hull during her 2006 refit



Derwent Hunter on the slip, revealing her underwater lines



Gaff-rigged topsail schooner Derwent Hunter under sail

With sixty years working under sail behind her, the 90-foot, Walter Wilson-designed, gaff-rigged topsail schooner, *Derwent Hunter*, is claimed to be the last Australian vessel designed and built to work under sail. Her decades of adventuring cover everything from fishing and trading, oceanographic research, movie roles and even the odd spot of gun smuggling. And her story continues as she makes her mark as a charter vessel in the marine tourism industry.

Derwent Hunter is owned by Tall Ship Adventures, a charter company offering award-winning eco sailing adventures in the Whitsundays. The successful marine tourism operation uses *Derwent Hunter* and another traditional vessel, *Alexander Stewart*, to combine a love of the Whitsunday Islands with Australia's traditional vessel maritime history.

Founder and director, Warren Ladd, is an owner/operator with enthusiasm for his company's concept. Guests combine discovery of the rich heritage of Australian seafaring with exploration of one of the world's most magnificent island chains – the Whitsundays. Warren Ladd's attitude is reflected in the crews, which not only sail the boats but maintain and even help restore them.

In the blood

Seafaring runs in Warren Ladd's blood. He is a direct descendant of Captain Henry Ford who sailed a tall ship to Australia in the 1800s carrying the precious 'cargo' of the first Governor General of Victoria. After years plying Australian waters on sailing trading vessels, Captain Ford went on to man the Cape Otway lighthouse for three decades. The now-decommissioned lighthouse is at Victoria's southernmost point and guarded the 'eye of the needle' as it was known, between King Island in Bass Strait and the mainland. Warren proudly says that during Captain Ford's time, the light never once failed. This was a significant claim because the first lighthouse keeper was sacked after three months for 'interfering' with the light.

Warren's father, Hedley, also immersed himself in seafaring, owning over forty vessels during his lifetime and inspiring an awe of sailing in his young son from a very early age. 'One of my earliest memories is sitting on

THE 'HUNTER' IN PARADISE continued



Snorkelling at Blue Pearl Bay, Hayman Island

Border Island anchorage and Derwent Hunter

the counter of a magnificent thoroughbred, pounding to windward in a thirty-knot Port Phillip chop – a great training ground!’

Sailing together on Port Phillip at the age of five, Warren’s job was to steer the yacht into the wind while Dad raised the sails. ‘My father was a gifted sailor who lived and played hard. He also had some unusual training techniques. Our safety training consisted of, first, being tied to the mast so we couldn’t fall overboard, and then being tossed off the boat half a mile from the

mooring and made to swim home.’ His father’s tactics worked well and by ten years of age, Warren was racing cadet dinghies and, by sixteen, had decided his fate was sealed. ‘I decided my future would be in timber boats, not the ‘plastic fantastics’ that most of my friends were attracted to. I was involved in the early stages of the Couta boat revival in Port Phillip and became more and more fascinated by Australian timber craft designed to work under sail. Their history, construction and design became a passion and led to my later

participation in the restoration of many timber boats, ranging in size from 26 to 130 feet.’

It took 20 years

It was during this time that Warren came across a photo of a schooner called *Derwent Hunter* in a history book of early Australian vessels. ‘I’m going to own that boat one day’, he remarked to a friend. Over twenty years later he found her sitting tied to a jetty in Southport, Queensland. For two years Warren dreamt of realising his dream. ‘She teased me every day on

my way to work until, eventually, I began negotiating to buy her. Ironically, although I purchased her, I think she has actually owned me ever since.’

Warren decided that the future for *Derwent Hunter* was in marine tourism, where her history could be shared with others. ‘The Adventure concept came easily.’ After a thirteen-month refit, Warren set sail in 1993 for the Whitsundays and never looked back.

It was aboard *Derwent Hunter* that Warren met his wife, Jo, in 1996. ‘I said I’d make her the ‘Princess of the Coral Sea’ – what a pick-up line!’ But it worked, and Jo has been helming the business alongside Warren ever since.

The couple say that despite its glamorous appeal, the charter industry is a 24-hour, seven-day-a-week job. Keeping traditional vessels working in a charter fleet means keeping them in seaworthy condition and up to current government safety codes. As Warren puts it: ‘This enables them to keep working and maintain the cash flow that keeps them and the business alive’. Jo adds: ‘The industry has grown up to be one of the most regulated in Australia with seventeen different government departments wanting their share of the action’.

Building *Derwent Hunter*

Designed and built in Tasmania in 1946 by shipwright Walter Wilson, the ‘*Hunter*’ was to be Wilson’s last

vessel. At his shipyard at Port Cygnet, south of Hobart, blue gum, Tasmanian oak, celery-top and Huon pine grew within sight of the yard and were cut and dragged by bullocks to the slipway. Walter Wilson and a team of four men built *Derwent Hunter* over a period of eighteen months, after which she was towed to Hobart for fit-out.

Wilson’s client was a wealthy grazier and hotelier who wanted a fast sailing vessel based on the lines of a Grand Banks schooner that could be used for ‘gentlemanly’ pursuits, but could also be used to supply fish to the client’s restaurant at Wrest Point on the Derwent River.

Derwent Hunter was finished just after the end of World War II and her new owner, fearing that she may still be commandeered by the armed forces as a transport vessel, had her refitted as a lobster fishing vessel – fishing was an exempt industry – and despatched her to Port Davey on Tasmania’s wild south-west coast.

“First oceanographic research vessel”



Derwent Hunter

First oceanographic research vessel

In 1950, the ‘*Hunter*’ came to the attention of the CSIRO, her fine seakeeping abilities and strong construction making her a good choice for the role of Australia’s first oceanographic research vessel. After a refit in Sydney, she worked for ten years under sail, roving from Antarctic waters in the Southern Ocean as far north as Noumea and the outer Pacific Basin.

Life aboard the ship was spartan and hard during her research years, but the *Derwent Hunter* Sea Mount and *Derwent Hunter* Trench located off Australia’s East Coast are two of her research legacies. *Derwent Hunter*’s sailing ability – and that of her crew – was tested during her decade of research work, when she twice lost her rudder in storms, but was successfully piloted back to port under sail.

In 1960, it was time for a reprieve from the hard work of her earlier years – and a stint in the movies. Paramount Studios purchased the photogenic vessel, renaming her *Pacific Lady* and giving her the starring role in the long running TV series ‘The Rovers’.

Her glamorous sojourn eventually came to an end and she sailed north, carrying passengers from Darwin to Timor and the Philippines, her voyages reputedly involving the odd bit of gun-running and smuggling.

Continued over



65-foot ketch Alexander Stewart under sail

Rescued from the mud

By 1977, the future was looking bleak. *Derwent Hunter* lay neglected and deteriorating in a mud berth in Cairns. Thanks to the intervention of Tasmanian marine enthusiast Bern Cuthbertson, who purchased the ship and sailed her back to her Tasmanian home waters, she was given a new life. After a major refit including replacement of around 40 planks below the waterline, *Derwent Hunter* resumed her role of fishing vessel under Bern Cuthbertson's command.

The next chapter of her life involved another refit to put *Derwent Hunter* into commercial survey, enabling her to make a living under sail in the eighties, carrying cargo and passengers to Lord Howe Island.

Australia's Bicentennial Tall Ships' Race from Hobart to Sydney saw *Derwent Hunter* representing Australia, having been bought at auction and prepared for the event. She out-performed many of the one hundred-strong fleet. From Sydney,

Derwent Hunter circumnavigated Australia, then found herself in Perth in 1986 having been chartered for the Americas Cup.

Saved again

Yet another sale found the ship relocated to Queensland's Gold Coast, now owned by a development company intending to use her for sail training. But the late eighties recession hit and *Derwent Hunter* became a victim, left to deteriorate at that jetty in Southport – until spotted by Warren Ladd in 1991.

The first of several refits followed, with the latest completed in 2006, as *Derwent Hunter*'s \$400,000 sixtieth birthday present. Yet again, hull replanking was carried out, along with new wiring and plumbing and general upgrading of accommodation. The project involved a team of shipwrights who used traditional methods wherever possible.

When she arrived in the Whitsundays in 1993, *Derwent Hunter* was the largest traditional timber sailing vessel in the islands. Warren skippered the boat himself, six days a week, for the first five years. 'As I explored the islands, I began to expand my knowledge and appreciation of the unique ecology of the area. I wanted to combine eco tourism with adventure tourism to give everyone the chance not only to experience traditional vessel sailing, but also to gain a greater appreciation of the magnificent World Heritage Marine Park which was my backyard and paradise.'

Warren's approach has evolved and the company is now recognised as a leader in the field of eco tourism, including scooping the Eco Tourism Award three years in a row and recently being inducted into the Eco Tourism Hall of Fame as a result. Australia's Eco Certification Program is a world first and involves rigorous ongoing assessments to ensure a company's contribution to sustainable tourism.

Sailing the Whitsundays alongside *Derwent Hunter* is the 65-foot ketch *Alexander Stewart*. Built with a cold-moulded timber hull, she is believed to be the biggest cold-moulded vessel built in the Southern hemisphere. Constructed over seventeen years by three generations of the one family, *Alexander Stewart* is based on a hull design made famous by single-handed sailor and adventurer Joshua Slocum. 🌿

Tall Ship Adventures has supported the Sydney Heritage Fleet's Art Union and one prize winning couple, Peter & Wendy wrote in Derwent Hunter's log in December 2006: 'What a great trip! Thanks guys for your fantastic hospitality and for a marvellous three days.... Feeding the fish while snorkelling at Blue Pearl Bay was awesome, inspiring and fun.'

For more details about the eco tourism cruises run by Tall Ship Adventures, refer to the back cover of this magazine.

