

# A Steadfast Man and His Boat



## *Building a French pilot cutter in Australia*

by Ingrid Code  
Photographs by Steb Fisher

**S**TEADFAST is a French pilot cutter launched last year at Emu Point in Albany, Western Australia. She was built on the lines of JOLIE BRISE, the last of the true working pilot cutters of Le Havre. Her story is one that encompasses a love of traditional wooden boats, 16 years of construction, unique Australian timbers, a Benedictine community, and the remarkable resolve and perseverance of the man behind it all, Laurence Etheredge.

Laurence Etheredge is the captain, builder, and owner of STEADFAST. He is a tall, thin man with large, strong hands, a long stride, and a reddish beard. He is calm, casual, meditative, joyous, unassuming, resolute, and determined. You might say he is stubborn—or perhaps steadfast. He has a thoughtful, quiet manner of speaking, listens to others, and is open to suggestions. There is something of a boyish enthusiasm in the way he talks about his boat.

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**STEADFAST**, a recently launched cutter inspired by the famous French-built JOLIE BRISE of 1913, ghosts along under full sail on Tasmania's Derwent River, with Mount Wellington in the background. *Inset*—Builder Laurence Etheredge on the foredeck.

**STEADFAST's tidy galley incorporates a number of Australian hardwoods (see sidebar, page 76): the countertop and deckbeams are of jarrah and the dish lockers are of Queensland beech.**

I first heard about STEADFAST while trying to make arrangements to reach the Australian Wooden Boat Festival in Tasmania. I did not want to fly there. Tim Phillips, owner of the Wooden Boatshop in Sorrento, a two-hour drive from Melbourne, suggested I speak with Etheredge, who had decided to interrupt his journey to New Zealand to take STEADFAST to participate in the festival. Etheredge, Phillips said, was recruiting a crew for the trip across the Bass Strait. I called him, and arranged to meet at the boat.

When I first went aboard, I stood on deck for a few moments taking everything in. There were two low cabins raised above the wooden decks, three companionways, and two big butterfly skylights. The decks were wide and easy to walk around. A neat stack of timber was secured along the port side of the main cabin with a rolled-up fishing net on top of it. Ahead of the forward companionway was a hefty windlass, and beyond the



plumb stem extended a long bowsprit with a wide net beneath it. Two fisherman anchors were secured on deck near the windlass. I gazed up at the mast and rigging, mentally climbing the ratlines, noting the spreaders, the radar, and higher up still, the narrow topmast and all the lines leading through blocks and down again to the pinrails on either side.

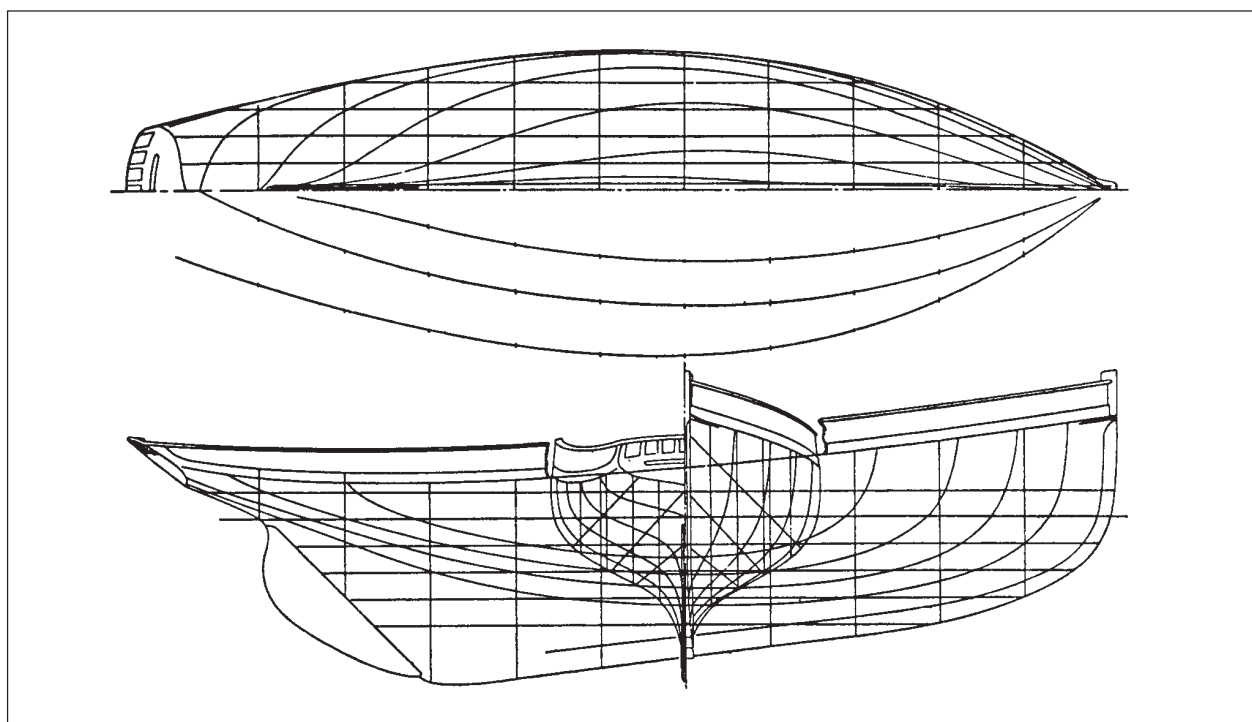
I agreed to ship aboard, and in the following weeks came to appreciate her solid construction, the beauty and grace of her lines, her simplicity and elegance, her steadiness in a sea, and the protected feeling of her high bulwarks. STEADFAST is like a small ship rather than a yacht.

Below decks she was simple, too. There was a separate aft cabin for the captain, with a bunk to starboard, a few books, the navigation station, and the engine—a four-cylinder, 80-hp Cummins diesel. To reach the main saloon we had to go out on deck and descend the main companionway ladder. The saloon was wide, with four pilot berths, settees, and storage lockers lining the sides of the cabin. There were also tools, boxes of supplies, and a wooden table covered in a brightly colored plastic cloth. Sunlight streamed in through the skylight above and danced across the forward bulkhead in beautiful contrasts on the blond and dark-red woods. The galley was forward of the mast and ran the width of the boat. It was separated from the main saloon and forepeak by watertight bulkheads fitted with specially designed watertight doors. The forepeak was rather plain after the elegance of the main saloon and had two bunks to port, upper and lower, one to starboard, and beneath it a long paint locker. The head and shower took up the V-shaped space in the bow.

In the captain's cabin I found a much-worn book titled *JOLIE BRISE: A Tall Ship's Tale* by Robin Bryer (1982). This book, and the craft it documented, had been the inspiration for the building of STEADFAST.

**STEADFAST at King Street Pier in Hobart, Tasmania, for the Australian Wooden Boat Festival.**





The lines of JOLIE BRISE, the French pilot cutter upon which STEADFAST is based. They were drawn by Alexandre Paris in 1913.

JOLIE BRISE is the classic and celebrated French pilot cutter that first sailed to fame as the winner of the inaugural 1925 Ocean Race, now known as the Fastnet. With her long and accomplished history, she is the subject of numerous journal articles and two excellent books: Bryer's *JOLIE BRISE: A Tall Ship's Tale*, and *Deep Water Cruising*, by E.G. Martin (1928).

Designed by Alexandre Paris and built by Paumelle in Le Havre in 1913, JOLIE BRISE was Paumelle's penultimate pilot cutter, and he considered her his masterpiece. The culmination of many years of refinement in the pilot-cutter design, with her plumb stem, sweeping sheer, and fine counter stern, she was built of oak harvested from the forests of Normandy, with 2" planking on 5" grown frames. She is 56' on deck with a waterline length of 48' and a sparred length of 74' including her 17' running bowsprit. Her beam is 15'9", her draft 10'2", and her sail area 2,200 sq ft. She has an iron keel with lead internal ballast and displaces 44 tons Thames measurement.

JOLIE BRISE has seen many owners come and go over the years, each of them making changes or improvements to some degree. She worked as a pilot cutter only in a limited capacity and only until 1917, when she was converted to a tunny (giant Atlantic bluefin tuna) fishing vessel. Then in 1923, the English yachtsman E.G. Martin purchased her and restored her to her original specifications. Martin established the Ocean Racing Club in 1925 and with it the Ocean Race (Fastnet). Under varying owners,

JOLIE BRISE has sailed in a total of eight Fastnet Races, winning three. She won the 1929 Queen of Spain Cup, and placed second in the same race the following year. She has made three Atlantic voyages and entered the Bermuda Race twice, the second time withdrawing to aid a vessel in distress. She was awarded the Blue Water Medal in 1926 and again in 1932.

She cruised the Mediterranean before WWII and survived the war in a mud-slip at Shoreham, England. She



Robin Bryer's 1982 book *JOLIE BRISE: A Tall Ship's Tale* was the inspiration for the construction of STEADFAST. A well-thumbed copy resides in the new boat's library.



**JOLIE BRISE at the start of the 1932 Bermuda Race. She's had a long and varied career, and currently sails as a training vessel for Dauntsey's School Sailing Club near Southampton, England.**

nearly made a voyage to New Zealand in 1946 under the name PLEASANT BREEZE (the English translation of *jolie brise*), but turned back at Ushant due to the inexperience of her crew. Shortly after this she was sold for scrap in Lisbon, Portugal. Fortunately, her purchaser, Luis Lobato, had no intention of scrapping her, having recognized her for what she was. In joint ownership with six other engineers he restored her to yacht condition under her original name. Ultimately, Lobato became sole owner and maintained JOLIE BRISE for 30 years as his family's boat. In 1975, revolution and two arson attempts, as well as the 50th anniversary of the Fastnet Race, prompted him to sail JOLIE BRISE to England, where he made arrangements to sell her to the Exeter Maritime Museum in Devon. Dauntsey's School Sailing Club put up the money for her purchase. The school, located in Hamble, near Southampton, has since become her sole owner.

Thanks to the school's efforts, a significant piece of maritime history has been preserved and many continue to enjoy JOLIE BRISE today. As a training vessel she has circumnavigated the United Kingdom, sailed 200 miles inside the Arctic Circle, and competed in many tall-ships events and races, including her third transatlantic, for which she was named Overall Winner of the 2000 and 2002 Transatlantic Tall Ships Races. At some point late in her long life, JOLIE BRISE made an indelible impression on Laurence Etheredge.

**L**aurence Etheredge is a California native. In the early 1970s, he joined a religious community founded by one of his college professors and based on Benedictine precepts of communal living, daily worship, meditation, hard work, and service to others. As I got to

know Etheredge in the lead-up to the trip, I found that any concerns I harbored about the nature of the voyage and its potential religious element were quickly dispelled. My conversations with Etheredge were refreshingly open and practical and, unless I brought up the subject, we didn't talk about religion at all.

Somewhat skeptical initially, I went online to find out more about the community and found only such wholesome phrases as "quality through attention to detail" and "remember, dreams can become reality"—something Etheredge impressed on me in conversation several times, particularly in regard to my dream of a bluewater passage. No, these people were not a cult. At worst, they could be accused of being idealists. They are simply a group of people who have chosen to live quiet, examined lives (think of Thoreau) in service to others.

Through his work with the community, Etheredge has lived and worked in many parts of the world. He helped found a school for foster children, refurbished a castle in Austria, and restored an old topsail schooner in England. He then sailed that vessel halfway around the world, ending up in Western Australia, where the community has spent the past two decades.

It was in Western Australia that Etheredge decided to build a boat. As he explained it to me over breakfast one morning in Hobart, he had been going through a difficult time after arriving in Australia, and he felt he had reached something of a low point in his life. A shortage of funds had meant that the community was unable to keep the schooner into which he had invested so much of himself, and the loss of the boat hit him hard. Then, out of a period of deep questioning had come the thought, "If I don't do anything else with my life but build a boat, at least that would have some value."

His first impulse was toward a Bristol Channel pilot cutter, but, after coming across Bryer's book, his interest shifted to the French pilot cutter. She was similar to what he wanted—a boat big enough to go to sea and not have to run for shelter, but not so big that it would take him forever to build. As Etheredge said, "I erred on the big side." Besides, he had been aboard JOLIE BRISE several years earlier in England and had a good feeling about the boat.

He wrote to the Exeter Maritime Museum, which then owned JOLIE BRISE, to ask about plans, and received by mail a full set of lines drawings lifted from the boat by Jack Laurent Giles in the 1920s. Although Etheredge had no prior boatbuilding experience, he had built a house and supervised the extensive refit of the topsail schooner in the early 1980s. Unfazed by the daunting task ahead, he embarked on his mission to build the 56' French topsail cutter through what he termed "trial and effort!" This he said with much good humor.

He rented an old wool shed outside Albany for a month and, using 65' fiberglass battens, lofted the hull in chalk on the asphalt floor. He made plywood patterns, as well as a full-sized body plan of the boat on several sheets of plywood. These he took back to the property at Hare

## — STEADFAST's Australian Timbers —

STEADFAST's settee-back and bulkhead panels are of Queensland beech; the frames are of karri and jarrah, respectively. The emergency tiller at the photo's top edge is yate.



### Jarrah (*Eucalyptus marginata*)

Jarrah is one of several hundreds of species of eucalypt in Australia. Once known as Swan River mahogany after the river system that runs through its native area around Perth, and for its similarity in appearance to Honduras mahogany, it is now known exclusively by its aboriginal name. It is a very tough, beautifully colored, dark-red timber with a long, straight grain. Although jarrah is workable when fresh, it becomes so hard with age that traditional woodworking tools are ineffective. Extremely durable in all kinds of weather and resistant to rot and termites, it has been used extensively in Western Australia for outdoor purposes such as railway crossties, telephone poles, ships, bridges, and wharves. Etheredge made jarrah the primary timber in his construction of STEADFAST. He planked her with 1¾" jarrah planks on 4" × 8" double-sawn jarrah frames using galvanized fastenings. He also chose jarrah for parts of the interior, including the laminated deckbeams, the coach roof beams, the cabin sides, and the dark-red framework of the bulkheads I had first noticed when I went below.

### Queensland Beech (*Nothofagus moorei*)

Queensland beech is the blond wood in the main saloon and galley. Also called "Antarctic beech," it is an evergreen from the northeast of Australia, most commonly used for cabinetwork. Simple and

STEADFAST's varnished sheoak skylight, with Douglas-fir spars rising above it.



elegant with a gentle swirling, wavy pattern across the tall panels of the bulkheads, Queensland beech contrasts well with the jarrah framework at either end of the cabin. It is also the wood used for the lift-out panels in the settee backrests set into a karri frame.

### Karri (*Eucalyptus diversicolor*)

Karri is another long-grained Western Australian hardwood. It is a dark-red mahogany color, though lighter than jarrah, with a grainier appearance. According to Etheredge, karri is a springy, dense hardwood that doesn't like to get wet (it is dimensionally unstable) and is often termite-prone, but bends well without breaking and gives excellent strength to the inside of the hull, which is no doubt why he used it for the beam shelf, clamp and stringers, and settee backrests. The spreaders, high in the rigging, are the only karri pieces exposed to the elements.

### Sheoak (*Allocasuarina fraseriana*)

Sheoak is a hardwood with a lovely, mottled reddish brown appearance and is lighter than both karri and jarrah. The sheoak on STEADFAST has been treated in three ways with significant differences in its appearance: the beautiful brightwork of the companionways, skylights, compass binnacle, and wheel box; the oiled blocks in the running rigging, which have a reddish matte finish; and the untreated, gray, weathered decks, which were laid over the plywood subdeck and caulked with black Sikaflex deck caulking compound.

### Swamp Yate or Flat-Topped Yate (*Eucalyptus occidentalis*)

"Yate" is a dense, southwestern Australian hardwood reputed to have a tensile strength almost comparable to wrought iron. It was traditionally used for axe handles and as spokes for wooden cart wheels a hundred years ago. Etheredge discovered yate growing in granite country outside Albany and used it for the deadeyes, belaying pins, and cavit bars (large wooden cleats bolted across several stanchions inside the bulwarks).

Brazilian mahogany and Douglas-fir were also used in building STEADFAST. The former was used for the caprail, mast cheeks, and 1½" counter stern planking, while the bulwarks were planked with Douglas-fir. The mast, bowsprit, and spars are also Douglas-fir, referred to in Australia as "Oregon." With the exception of the boom, which is of solid laminate construction, they are all hollow with long plugs at both ends, and glued using a bird's mouth joint (see WB No. 149).

—JC





**STEADFAST** sailing on the Derwent River. Unlike *JOLIE BRISE*, she has a loose-footed main, which allows for greater control of sail shape than an attached foot. Beneath the boom is the author, with fiddle.

Street in Albany, where the community was living in an old hostel. There was a sizable backyard and a two-car garage. Here he installed a bandsaw and took delivery of the heavy framing timbers, mostly jarrah. From the garage, he could just see King George Sound in the distance, an enticing reminder of his time at sea aboard the schooner. In June 1990, Etheredge laid the keel and with the help of two community members began what would be 16 years of construction. In actual fact, he spent closer to half that time working on the boat.

The community moved twice in those years, the second time buying a piece of land, planting a vineyard, and establishing a winery—Zarephath Wines. Etheredge worked on *STEADFAST* when he could, but years would go by between times. Once, fairly early on, when the vessel was still in frame, he had to shift the whole project to a new location because the community had moved and he couldn't continue in the backyard where he'd started. He rented a property from the port authority and in a delicate operation trucked her there. Finally, in 2005, Etheredge became determined to complete *STEADFAST* and see her sailing. An intense effort saw her launched on February 18, 2006. She was still incomplete belowdecks, and work continued for most of the year. On December 14, 2006, *STEADFAST* set sail. Nineteen days later, including a brief layover in Portland, Victoria, she sailed through the Heads at Port Phillip Bay and anchored off Sorrento.

Although built to the same lines as *JOLIE BRISE*, *STEADFAST* differs from her in a number of ways. Etheredge wanted to charter his vessel in New Zealand and consequently had to build her in compliance with the Uniform Shipping Laws, New Zealand survey standards, and the safety requirements for a passenger-carrying vessel. As a result, she has four watertight bulkheads, two of which have been fitted with watertight doors. However, the bulkhead separating the main and aft cabins does not allow through passage as it does on *JOLIE BRISE*. One of the most obvious differences on *STEADFAST* is the helm and wheel box with block-and-tackle steering rather than the traditional tiller and thwart seat found on *JOLIE BRISE*. According to Etheredge, *STEADFAST*'s trunk cabins are also wider, taking up more deck space, but providing convenient seating on deck as well as more headroom below.

When I was sitting in the main saloon one afternoon in Hobart, Etheredge pointed to the long horizontal timbers that form the framework of the backrests above and below the Queensland beech panels. "These pieces are karri," he said. He used these same pieces for ribbands when he was building the hull, helping to keep the bulwark stanchions fair and acting as a safety rail until such time as the railcaps went on. They weathered six or seven years outside during construction and when he removed them, they kept their curved shapes, bent with the sheer

## — A New Twist on an Old Problem —

Laurence Etheredge had an innovative method of serving the shrouds, which certainly takes the tedium out of a lengthy job and adds an element of danger. “There were times,” he said, “when we did things that certainly carried an element of risk, but this exercise, while being a great time-saver, was probably at the top of the list.”

He had an old Mazda van with some 300,000 miles on it, which he parked so that one of the back wheels lined up with the door of a long shed. He jacked up the wheel, attached one end of the shroud to it using a rolling hitch and a “handy billy” (tackle), and anchored the other end to a beam or post in the shed, using a swivel. After painting Stockholm tar into the lay of the wire, he started the engine, put the van in reverse, and let out the clutch, causing the wire to rotate while he walked down its length with spools of 2"-wide, 82'-long strips of cotton toweling held firmly at an angle to the wire rope. As he walked and the wire rope rotated, the cotton toweling wound itself into place, the cloth overlapping by about 50 percent each time. He would always start at the lower end of a shroud, near the wheel, so that the parceling would shed water rather than collect it. After the whole thing had again been thoroughly coated with Stockholm tar, the operation was repeated with synthetic marline and a serving



**Don't try this at home: Builder Etheredge served the shrouds by turning them with the back wheel of a Mazda van. The risky technique saved considerable time.**

mallet. Etheredge told me he was able to complete 40' of wire in one hour, with excellent consistency and tension. This procedure saved a considerable amount of time and, in the end, he didn't even have to tar the completed shroud since so much pine tar had seeped through with the pressure of the marline that it had coated itself. He did caution me, though, that this operation requires extreme caution and attention since the marline can get crossed and there is the danger of losing a finger. “If things go wrong, turn off the car!” is his simple advice.

“It was actually quite dangerous,” says Etheredge, “and we were extremely diligent not to get our fingers in the wrong place; you wouldn't get a second chance if they got caught.” Upon reflection, he added, “I also thought that it would have been much better to use an electric motor to drive the thing instead of the back wheel of a car, since it would then be easy to set up a switch that is always at hand where you are working, instead of 20' away behind the wheel of the car. If something did go wrong, you would at least have a chance to turn the thing off.” —IC

*Warning: While we admire Laurence Etheredge's resourcefulness, we do not recommend our readers attempt the risky procedure described above. —Ed.*

and the sweep of the rail. He selected four of the best pieces, each approximately 12' long, cleaned them up, varnished them, and installed them in the main saloon. He found their curve conformed to the interior shape almost perfectly without him having to bend them at all.

STEADFAST was built of a variety of remarkable local Western Australian hardwoods (see sidebar), which are generally denser than what JOLIE BRISE's builders used, making STEADFAST's hull approximately 10 percent heavier. To compensate for this and retain

her original center of gravity, Etheredge added six tons of lead to the keel, which altered the hull's underwater profile. There are other small variances, but overall the similarities outweigh the differences.



**Vaughan McGillivery brings some magic to the ship with his fiddle while Reuben Kent sits astride STEADFAST's sturdy bulwarks holding open a music book. Vaughan and Reuben are both apprentices at Tim Phillip's Wooden Boatshop in Sorrento, Victoria.**





ANTOINE GRÉGOIRE


**STEADFAST at French Pass, New Zealand, at the north end of the south island. She will operate charters and sail-training trips in this area.**

STEADFAST's standing rigging (see sidebar) is served galvanized wire rope, though some stainless steel has been used for the lower deadeye straps. All the running rigging is three-strand polyester. The sails, made by Brian Shilland in New South Wales, are Oceanus, a synthetic sailcloth that has the feel of heavy canvas. Etheredge says the mainsail, which is made of 13-oz Oceanus, weighs close to 200 lbs.

**S**TEADFAST was truly a joy to sail. There were seven of us on board, and we reveled in the pure pleasure of sailing this magnificent cutter in the conditions to which she was most ideally suited. Her great white and red sails curved in wide arcs across the sky as her bow surged ahead and the waves dissolved around her sleek hull. She heeled to starboard in the easterly wind as we headed south across Bass Strait, along the east coast of Tasmania, and up the Derwent River to Hobart in a voyage of seven days.

On a Friday morning in February, as the Australian Wooden Boat Festival began, we hoisted all the sails and brought the fiddle on deck one last time. Yes, we had a fiddle on board, just as E.G. Martin had on JOLIE BRISE during his voyage in 1926. A purple-hulled sloop appeared close by and Steb Fisher, the photographer, called out a greeting before raising his camera to STEADFAST's sails. We had been

expecting him. Fiddle tunes picked up by the breeze wafted across the water, spreading a grin from boat to boat. The wind strengthened and STEADFAST leapt ahead, attempting to bury her scuppers and bow her topmast once more.

We weaved our way through the fleet, passing the replica ships DUYFKEN and ENDEAVOUR in all their massive splendor. Looking out at the vast array of wooden hulls with their squaresails, yardarms, topsails, jibs, gaff and marconi mainsails, all in just about every shape and color imaginable, including bright green and blue, I couldn't help feeling like a kid in a candy store. "I'll have one of those and a pilot cutter and...." Later, after we had tied up at the end of the King Street Pier, we shared a farewell vodka and reminisced on our all-too-short voyage and how finely STEADFAST had handled herself in the Parade of Sail, as well as her many merits as a cruising boat. And when I asked one of the crew, "How do you think she sails?" he replied, "She sails true to her name." 



*Ingrid Code (left), a classical violinist and freelance writer, is first mate aboard the Joel White-built scow schooner NINA. She is originally from Australia, where she spent last winter.*

*Learn more about STEADFAST's movements at <[www.zarephathwines.com](http://www.zarephathwines.com)>.*