

Hall of Fame - Roger Taylor

By Graham Cox



Roger Taylor - Arctic explorer

Roger Taylor 1947 -

When your name enters the lexicon in your given field of endeavour, as in Shakespearean, then you know you have achieved something remarkable. For some time now, members of the Junk Rig Association, and others interested in small boat voyages, have started talking about *Rogering* their boats. It is a form of shorthand, suggesting that they are going to do what Roger Taylor has done - twice now - take a small fibreglass production boat, preferably junk-rigged or soon to be converted, turn it into an extremely simple, modestly-financed voyaging boat, and then sail it to the remotest parts of the ocean.

Besides his redoubtable achievements under sail, one of the reasons for Roger Taylor's high profile is that he has documented his activities in four books that are almost as extraordinary as his voyages. They are classics of the genre, evocative, witty and erudite. They also provide a detailed portrait of voyaging under junk rig. His knowledge, observations and photographic records of pelagic wildlife elevate these books to the best of naturalist writing, comparable to the work of authors like Peter Mathiessen.

When Roger bought *Mingming* she was a standard, day-sailing, junk-rigged Coribee, just 20ft 9in LOA, and he set about modifying her to create his ideal of a small, simple, cheap, ocean voyaging yacht, a development of the *Jester* principle. Having spent many days, during the 1974 Singlehanded Trans-Tasman Race, hand-steering on the deck of his 19ft yacht, *Roc*, Roger quickly appreciated *Jester's* central control station concept, where the operation of the vessel is almost entirely conducted from the central hatch, allowing one to stay warm, dry and safe in the cabin.

The modifications were completed in a remarkable 10 days, with the aid of his good friend, Darren Noonan. The boat was made unsinkable with the addition of foam flotation, fitted behind watertight bulkheads. A small, watertight aluminium-framed hatch replaced the standard companionway, and the cockpit was reduced in size. Two heavy bronze chainplates were bolted to the after quarters, to which the bridle of a Jordan Series Drogue could be attached when required, and a Windpilot self-steering gear was bolted to the transom.

Mingming was not fitted with an engine, she had just a small battery and solar panel to permit the use of high-quality LED navigation lights, and a hand-held GPS unit run on dry-cell batteries. The boat was devoid of other electrical and electronic systems, other than his cameras. Central to Roger's vision is self-reliance. He carries no radio or EPIRB.

The impetus for Roger to return to ocean voyaging, after many years working in the city, was the inaugural *Jester* Challenge in 2006. After a winter of sailing trials, *Mingming* made a slow passage down the east coast from Burnham-on-Crouch and arrived in Plymouth with only four days to spare before the start. The race started in light airs on 3rd June, 2006.

At dawn the next morning, Roger sighted Pete Hill on *Shanti* about a mile ahead. Roger and Pete had made a wager, along with Bill Churchhouse on the Westerly 22, *Belgean*, as to who would get to Newport first. These three boats were fairly evenly matched.

For the next 24 hours, *Mingming* and *Shanti* battled it out. At one stage they were only a couple of hundred metres apart, then the wind freshened, *Shanti* took a



Roger aboard Mingming - 2006



Mingming at the start of the Jester Challenge 2006

board to the south and *Mingming* ran off before the NE wind on a more westerly course.

As the wind increased throughout the night, he reefed the sail panel by panel. He noted that he was already becoming addicted to the warmth and safety of the cabin. By noon the next day he was running fast under just one panel of the sail, loping along in a lengthening, deep ocean swell, and was pleased to record a run of 95 miles. He later raised another panel of the sail but soon took it in again, preferring to keep the boat sailing softly and under full control, with minimal strain on the rudder and rig.

A moderate gale developed on the 10th. After a brief period lying safely ahull in 12ft seas, he decided to run off SSE under one panel, though he missed the worst of the weather. Challengers who'd chosen to stick to the rhumbline met with extremely heavy weather, as two F10 storms tore through the fleet, leading to most vessels retiring.

Roger also decided to retire from the Challenge when NE of the Azores, because he was concerned about progress, and the imminent start of the hurricane season. He'd hoped to average 100 miles a day, but he was to find over time that a consistent 65 miles a day was *Mingming's* norm. By their 20th day at sea, they were becalmed, and for the next 10 days battled light and fluky winds.

It took until the 25th June, their 23rd day at sea, to work their way back onto soundings, crossing the Little Sole Bank, 200 miles SW of the Lizard. Roger was forced to anchor a few times on his way up the Channel due to inclement weather, but he pressed on

and arrived back at Burnham-on-Crouch 38 days after the start of the *Jester Challenge*.

During the winter of 2006-7, *Mingming* was given a folding sprayhood over the hatch, mounted on top of fixed coamings which were fitted with observation deadlights. He hoped these additions would keep the cabin drier and make it easier to keep watch in heavy weather. He also designed and built a remote control for the windvane, to allow him to adjust it without going on deck, and a permanent bowsprit to carry his light-weather jibs.

Roger departed on Friday, 22nd June, the day before his 60th birthday, heading up the English Channel. He was not sure how far north he could get in the allotted time of 6 weeks, but he had lots of options.

He soon ran into a gale off the Yorkshire coast. With three panels of the sail hoisted, the sheet eased until the sail was almost feathering, and the windvane set at 45°, *Mingming* rode out the storm with ease, though Roger became deeply exhausted.

When the storm eased, he ran off to the north. Not long afterwards, he had to undertake the first of many rig repairs, when the leech of the second upper panel tore badly. He retched into the sea after a long and arduous job hand-stitching it back together. Then the upper batten broke, followed by the one below it. He splinted the first batten with the wooden boathook, and then lashed the second broken batten to the one below it.

This was followed by another gale, during which he lay ahull with no sail set for 12 hours, unwilling to stress the rig any further. *Mingming* then ran through the North Sea oil rigs, at one point under just one panel, then the sail bundle only, in yet another half-gale.

It took them just over 11 days to sail the length of the British Isles. The wind grew light and they drifted on. The early blue skies gave way to cold and damp, causing Roger's joints, in particular his knees, to ache.

After two weeks at sea, they made landfall on the Faroe Islands. It was foggy, with rain squalls, but a brief clearing gave them a good view of the islands, spread out across the western horizon. The voyage nearly came to an untimely end when a large Faroese trawler suddenly emerged from the fog, a bare 50 metres off.

Time was running out for a tilt at the NE coast of Iceland, let alone the Arctic Circle. Then a third batten broke. The battens were somewhat unusually constructed from 32mm plastic tubing, with timber cores in the upper three. The cored battens had a short length of flexible, narrow-gauge plastic tubing incorporated, to retain some flexibility. Only the two lower battens now remained intact.

Repairing battens was complicated by *Mingming's* full-length batten pockets. To remove a batten required one to work on the foredeck, an impossible task on such a small vessel at sea. All Roger could do was to splint the broken batten, using his aluminium boat hook and the handle of the deck brush, gaffer-taped together and lashed in place. The rig, as Roger noted, now looked more like a bird's nest than a sail.



Battens jury-rigged with boathooks and broom handles

The wind eventually forced them off to the west, but on their 21st day at sea Roger glimpsed the 7,000ft high Oraefajokull, Iceland's highest glacier, before turning the bows back homewards. For the next 4 days they ran before a strong NE wind, sometimes with a panel or two up, sometimes just under the squared-off sail bundle, as the wind varied from F6 to occasional gale-force squalls. They gave the shallows off Rockall a wide berth.

As *Mingming* approached the continental shelf, a deep depression formed. For 3 days Roger tacked back and forth, sometimes heaving-to, maintaining position in deep water. Then he ran up the Channel through the shipping lanes into Plymouth, in half a gale from the SW and heavy rain. It was with some relief that he finally dropped anchor in Plymouth Sound the following afternoon, after 38 days at sea.



Mingming back at Plymouth at the end of her first voyage north

For his next voyage, Roger decided to participate in the 2008 *Jester* Azores Challenge. It was the only thing that could persuade him to sail south, for by now he was enchanted by the Arctic. During the winter, he rebuilt his tired sail with material from an old sail and the assistance of his wife, Brenda. It didn't look too smart but it was strong enough, and he gained pleasure from using minimal resources.

The race got under way at 1400 on 31st May. They were blessed by good northerly winds for the first two weeks of this passage, apart from one day plugging into half a gale from the SW under just one panel of the sail.

Mingming sped on, often under just one panel of sail. She covered 90 miles one day, followed by another of 98. The seas grew large and impressive, but even more impressively, the boat continued to effortlessly ride them, with the windvane steering and Roger just sitting in the hatch observing the world.



*Queen Anne's battery Marina - 29th May, 2008.
Jester Azores Fleet*

The wind, while still from the NE, grew light and inconsistent, so that the windvane self-steering gear was unable to function. Roger resorted to hand-steering, using a whipstaff arrangement he had perfected the previous winter.

The wind, still light, then veered SE, and Roger was forced to hoist a light-weather jib once more. These sails made a tremendous difference to *Mingming's* performance in light airs, but the effort of crawling onto the foredeck, and the risks to the unstayed mast, made him reluctant to deploy them.

After two weeks at sea, they were only 300 miles from their destination, the Azorean island of Terciera, and a quick passage seemed imminent, but then the weather changed for the worse. A strong SW gale blew up, forcing them to close-reach westwards under one panel, making a course north of west. Then a NNW wind briefly teased Roger into thinking

he'd be ashore in two days, before giving way to a maddening calm, in which the ship was thrown about mercilessly in sloppy seas, setting up a cacophonous orchestra in the rigging.

When the wind returned it was once again from the SW, blowing half a gale, and they plodded on under three panels, not really going anywhere fast. Roger notes he could have eased off the wind further, maintaining boat speed, at the risk of taking the seas more on the beam and stressing the gear, without significant gain.

Small boats like *Mingming* simply cannot be forced to windward in the open sea. Roger sets the windvane at 45° and eases the sheet until the sail is not quite feathering. In a F7 this will keep the boat mooching along at 2 knots. The occasional crest comes in at an obtuse angle and slams into the topsides, but mostly the ship is comfortable and safe. It is the best one can do.

For 8 days, *Mingming* struggled against those headwinds, unable to cover the last miles into Praia da Vitoria, Terceira's harbour. At one stage they were only 60 miles off but neither tack would give them an advantage, and the south-setting current added to their woes. Finally the wind relented and they sailed into harbour, just a couple of hours short of 21 days. They were the 25th finisher out of 42



2008, Praia da Vitoria, Terceira

starters.

Two days later they were back at sea, homeward bound. After a couple of days wallowing in light NE winds, they had a fast and furious sail back to Plymouth. The wind blew at F6 and more, with numerous squalls and a rough sea just abaft the beam. Luckily, the weather relented briefly as they crossed onto soundings at the Little Sole Bank. When they were 100 miles south of the Lizard they were overtaken by a severe SW gale, giving them a day's run of 110 miles, *Mingming's* best to date. They completed the passage in 16 days.

In 2009, Roger returned to northern waters, with the ambitious plan to sail to Jan Mayen, inside the Arctic Circle, west until he met the sea ice off Greenland, then back home through the Denmark Strait between Iceland and Greenland.

His major task for the winter was to line the interior with insulating foam and carpet. In addition he added a pair of oars, realising that on this voyage, if he achieved his objective of sailing into the ice, he might need to row. He also decided to renew the top two panels of the sail, since these were *Mingming's* storm canvas.

For this voyage, and all of his future voyages into northern waters, Roger left from Whitehills Harbour on the shores of the Moray Firth in Scotland, which would allow him to range much further north than



Mingming in Whitehills

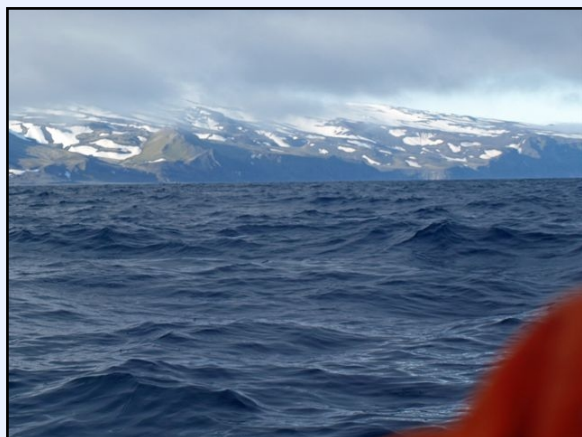
otherwise would have been possible.

After being towed out to sea in the early hours of the morning, he set off northwards with a light heart. With clear skies and fair winds, they passed close to Fair Isle, with Foula, the westernmost Shetland isle, visible on the horizon. By noon on Wednesday, 1st July, having been at sea for just over 5 days, they were already further north than they had ever sailed.

The temperature dropped as the wind picked up from the ENE. With one panel of the mainsail reefed for easy balance, *Mingming* loped north. Roger closed the after porthole and decided the time had come to husband warmth. The long hours spent insulating the cabin the previous winter were now paying off handsomely, as he continued to stay snug down below, despite the freezing temperatures on deck.

On 4th July, the wind picked up further, still from the ENE, and Roger reefed down to three panels as the boat tore northwards. By 0800 the following day they were in the Arctic. The weather now became very

unstable, as squalls, calms, rain and fog competed to keep Roger constantly attending ship. They made landfall on Jan Mayen after 12 days at sea. He'd hoped to get a view of Mount Beerenberg, but only caught glimpses of this 7,000ft volcano in the swirling cloud cover. Roger decided to head a bit further north before heading west towards Greenland. He thought a latitude of 72°N sounded grand, and just 24 hours later, having achieved it, he pointed



Sailing NE along the base of Mt. Beerenberg, Jan Mayen

Mingming west towards the ice, close-hauled now in a veering NW wind.

For two days *Mingming* sailed on through unsettled weather, with Roger reefing and unreefing the sail every few hours. Just short of 48 hours later, he sighted his first ice floe, then another. The wind hauled NNE and Roger reefed to just two panels, easing along slowly while he took a brief nap. When he awoke, the entire western horizon was littered with ice floes, even though they were still 120 miles off the Greenland coast.

After a thrilling sail among the floes, caution bid a hasty retreat in a rising northerly. During a brief visit to the deck, Roger caught a glimpse of the pack ice on the southern horizon. With three panels of sail raised in a F6 northerly wind, *Mingming* raced east, more hard-pressed than usual, thankfully into a sea that was now free of ice, with the rain still slashing heavily down. A couple of hours later, feeling more relaxed, Roger reduced sail to one panel and ran gently off to the SE. They were homeward bound.

For the next 48 hours, Roger allowed *Mingming* to run off to the SE, feeling depleted, but then, almost at the point of no return, he pulled himself together and altered course SW for the Denmark Strait between Iceland and Greenland. The voyage was back on track. He was elated to approach Iceland from the north. He decided to stand in close to the NW cape, Straumnes, and take some photographs if the weather was clear



2009 - Leaving Adalvik

enough. Also, just south of Straumnes, there was a bay called Adalvik, and he decided to explore it.

Roger now sailed to within 5 miles of the coast and was enthralled by its majesty. All of his seaman's instincts told him to stand back out to sea, and he briefly did, but then he turned back. Unfortunately, *Mingming* was becalmed inside the bay and Roger had to row furiously until a light breeze allowed him to escape back out to sea. But he did get some great photos!

They ran out into the Denmark Strait before a strong wind, initially with just a few inches of sail up, then under bare poles, with the sail bundle lashed amidships, but the gale was short-lived and soon the sky cleared. For two days, their passage south was dominated by the Snaefellsjökull, the Snow Mountain Glacier, 4,500ft high, which glistened in the sunlight. After skirting the Reykanes Ridge, a patch of shoals and skerries that extend SW of Iceland, Roger gybed



Under the lee of Snaefellsjökull, SW Iceland

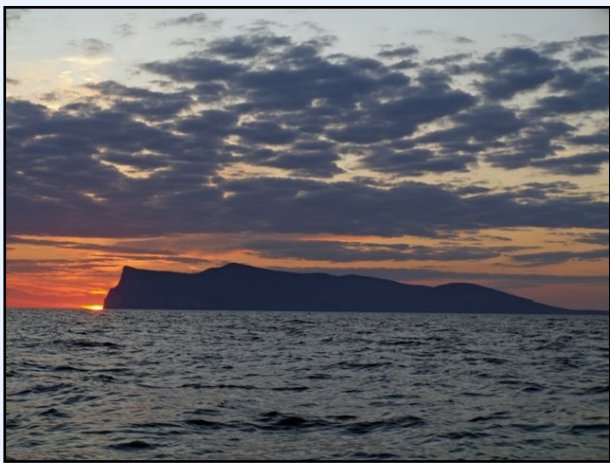
back and headed towards Scotland. An ENE wind soon sprang up. He steadily reduced sail until he was essentially hove-to once more, fore-reaching under two

panels of the sail. He was sitting in the hatch, wondering whether he should run off under bare poles, when he was shocked by an almost vertical wave that careened past. He knew that if *Mingming* had been in its path they would have capsized.

It was time, finally, to deploy the Jordan Series Drogue. As soon as the drogue was out, *Mingming* felt completely at ease, softly riding the breaking seas while Roger rested below. Conditions were now worse than Roger had ever known at sea. Water was somehow getting below through the cockpit floor and through the main hatch seals, forcing him to wear his oilskins as he lay on the cabin sole.

In his haste, and due perhaps to unfamiliarity with the gear and the severity of conditions on deck, Roger made a grave mistake when deploying the drogue. He tied the drogue to the bridle with a bowline, rather than a hitch, allowing it to slide around. After 12 hours the line chafed through and the drogue was lost. He then deployed a second, home-made drogue off one quarter, which was less comfortable but it did the job and they survived the storm.

The wind remained relentlessly in the east, sometimes light, sometimes almost gale-force. At one stage they had to run back out to sea off the Faroe Bank, back into deep water, due to the approach of another severe depression. Roger did not want to get caught in shallow water without his primary drogue. Finally,



The sun rises behind Foula, in Shetland

the wind relented and allowed them to make landfall, after 48 days and 3,000 miles.

In 2010, the second *Jester* Atlantic Challenge coincided with the 50th anniversary of the inaugural OSTAR in 1960. Roger initially registered *Mingming* as a participant, but eventually decided to make a voyage towards the Davis Strait instead, with a provisional goal of reaching Cape Dyer on Baffin Island.



Back at Whitehills after 48 days at sea

For this voyage, he built stowage lockers in the cockpit for his replacement Jordan Series Drogue, using the space freed up below to carry a small inflatable dinghy. He thought it unlikely he would make it ashore at Baffin Island, should he ever get there, but to do so would surely be a grand thing.

He was persuaded to start with the *Jester* Challenge fleet. It took 5 days to work their way to the edge of soundings, where, as always, he crossed paths with a Spanish trawler. Then a strong southerly wind blew up and *Mingming* sped off to the NW under just half a panel of sail.

They continued to be plagued by periods of calm, along with rain squalls. On the 5th June, their 14th day at sea, they reached 55°N and turned the bows west towards the coast of Labrador, 2,000 miles ahead. They were sailing close-hauled for the most part, occasionally experiencing heavy bouts of rain.

The wind also hauled around, first to the SE, then ENE, as it often does in these higher latitudes, though it was still fickle and the daily averages for this voyage remained low. It also grew colder, and Roger pulled on his track suit pants and started sleeping inside his sleeping bag for the first time on this voyage. He slept in snatches of 30-40 minutes, hauling himself to the hatch in between snoozes to look for threats and to observe the sea.

The wind hauled round once more to the SW and they plugged slowly away, covering less than 60 miles a day in grey and foggy conditions. Just after 0600 on the 11th June, their 20th day at sea, Roger was standing in the hatch, fiddling with the rig and self-steering, trying to make the most of the capricious conditions, when he noticed a darker than usual shape in the fog astern. He was shocked when a large ship, the *Cape Baltic*, all 289 metres and 177,536 tonnes of her, rumbled past, a mere 200 metres to starboard. There was no time to do anything except watch her go

by and reflect on the fickleness of fate. It was the last vessel they would see for 34 days.

They were now only about 300 miles south of Greenland and began to experience fierce storms from the W to NW, each lasting about 12 hours, during which they forereached slowly under just one panel of sail. A large swell had been building from the SW and these local storms increased it further, making the seas steep and chaotic.

At times Roger estimated the seas to be greater than 20ft. He was forced to keep the hatch closed and only make brief horizon scans every 20 or 30 minutes. The rest of the time he spent lying on his back on the bunk, as he had wrenched his back badly. For a week he found any movement slow and painful.

Between storms, the wind fell suddenly and left *Mingming* hobby-horsing in a confused sea. He noted with dismay that the yard-hauling parrel had once again chafed badly at its upper end, despite being replaced with new, heavier rope for this voyage. He



Heavy weather in the Labrador Sea

was unable to repair it in these conditions but resolved the issue temporarily by tying a figure-of-eight knot in the frayed section.

The wind now went into the south and *Mingming* scurried NW. Within an hour or two they were down to three panels, then one panel, then half a panel. Soon they were running under the sail bundle alone before a SSE gale. The waves from this new storm imposed themselves over the heavy SW swell, and *Mingming* was being thrown around mercilessly.

Roger debated for several hours whether or not to deploy the Jordan Series Drogue. He was reluctant, partially because of the cross-swell and partially because he was worried about recovering it. Eventually he launched it after going through a set of large, steep, waves.

The drogue did a good job of holding *Mingming's* stern into the advancing storm crests, but unfortunately this locked her beam-on to the heavy SW cross-swells, and the boat was slamming her aft quarters as she violently rolled away from them. Roger lay on the cabin sole, wedged between the galley and his bunk. Besides the slamming, the entire hull creaked and groaned as the pressure came on the drogue's bridle and chainplates.

Four hours later, the wind suddenly dropped to F5, although the barometer was still falling. After some hesitation, he hauled the drogue in. It took over an hour and caused severe damage to his hands. When the drogue was in he raised a couple of panels of the sail and ran off to the west.

On the 18th of June, after 27 days at sea, they were due south of Cape Farvel, just 180 miles off the coast of Greenland. Once more, the wind subsided and *Mingming's* progress fell behind schedule. On Roger's 63rd birthday he sailed a mere 24 miles.

Then a gentle SSW breeze came in, backing into the SSE and rapidly building to a severe gale. The wind ratcheted up until it shook the mast so violently that the entire boat shuddered and groaned. On the 25th June, their 34th day at sea, they ran 85 miles, much of it under bare poles.

Just after midnight, *Mingming* was violently knocked down. The boat survived intact but Roger broke a rib, ending his outward journey. He turned the ship for home on the 26th of June, after 34 days at sea, painfully raising one panel of the sail, mostly using his left arm. Later he raised another panel.

Once the boat was settled on its southerly course, he lay down and tried to find the least painful position to rest in. He had hardly slept for the previous two days. Dispensing with his usual 30 minute horizon scans, he slept for 5 hours straight.

He found he was able to raise four panels of the sail when needed, using his left hand to haul and his right hand just to hold the halyard between heaves. The ship was almost back to full cruising mode, and they steadily worked their way to the south.

It took some time to get south but eventually *Mingming* found a steady NW wind and bounded SE, making excellent daily runs of between 70-90 miles, once even making 100.

The mainsail was starting to show signs of wear, with vertical tears appearing at the leech. For the first time in his voyaging career, he was unable to effect repairs, due to his damaged rib.

Luckily, there was plenty of wind at 50°N and they sped on, day after day, under just one panel. They

made another 100 mile day, and over an 11-day period averaged more than 80 miles a day. There was just one day of calm, and Roger took advantage of it to press gaffer tape over both sides of every split in the leech he could reach. It looked slovenly but it brought them home.

On the 25th July, they came onto soundings, with its inevitable shipping. Roger was dismayed to find that his battery no longer had enough power for his LED navigation lights. He had to sail unlit, occasionally shining a torch on the sail. They arrived back in Plymouth after 67 days at sea.

In 2011, Roger set off from Whitehills once again. If ice conditions permitted, he hoped to reach 80°N, by following a tongue of the Gulf Stream, whose warmer waters push up NW of Spitsbergen during summer months. Along the way he hoped to revisit Jan Mayen and possibly finally see the summit of the elusive Mount Beerenberg.

They left Whitehills on the 23rd June. After a slow start, a fresh SW wind hurtled them north under just one panel of sail. Later the wind veered SE. The sea was getting up, but Roger found that his experience of high-latitude storms and their resultant seas had recalibrated his senses. This boisterous sea no longer filled him with the anxiety it would have in earlier days.

At 1000 on the 30th June, less than a week after leaving Whitehills, *Mingming* crossed the Arctic Circle. The wind eased and hauled round to the NW, so that they were now close-hauled on their course to Jan Mayen, marking the beginning of a couple of months of light winds and calms, as the Arctic High settled over them.

The stitching on two vertical seams in the third panel down began to fail, one near the leech and the other by the mast. After lowering the sail to the damaged panel, Roger tried to sew up the aftermost seam in a bucking sea, but it was too difficult. The simplest solution was to lash two battens together, thus taking the damaged panel out of play.

The wind grew lighter. One day *Mingming* only covered 14 miles. Roger's only concern was that the murky conditions held out little prospect for sighting the summit of Mount Beerenberg.

Landfall was made on Jan Mayen on their 14th day at sea, and they worked their way up the eastern side of the island, closing the land near Bratvika Bay. Mount Beerenberg remained shrouded. The next day he pushed on NNE, close-hauled to a NNW breeze.

The wind was building, and soon *Mingming* was plugging along under only one panel of sail in a rising sea. It didn't seem particularly threatening, and Roger settled down for an hour or two of rest. *Mingming*



Headland Eggoya, central Jan Mayen

was suddenly knocked down, almost to full inversion, before quickly righting herself.

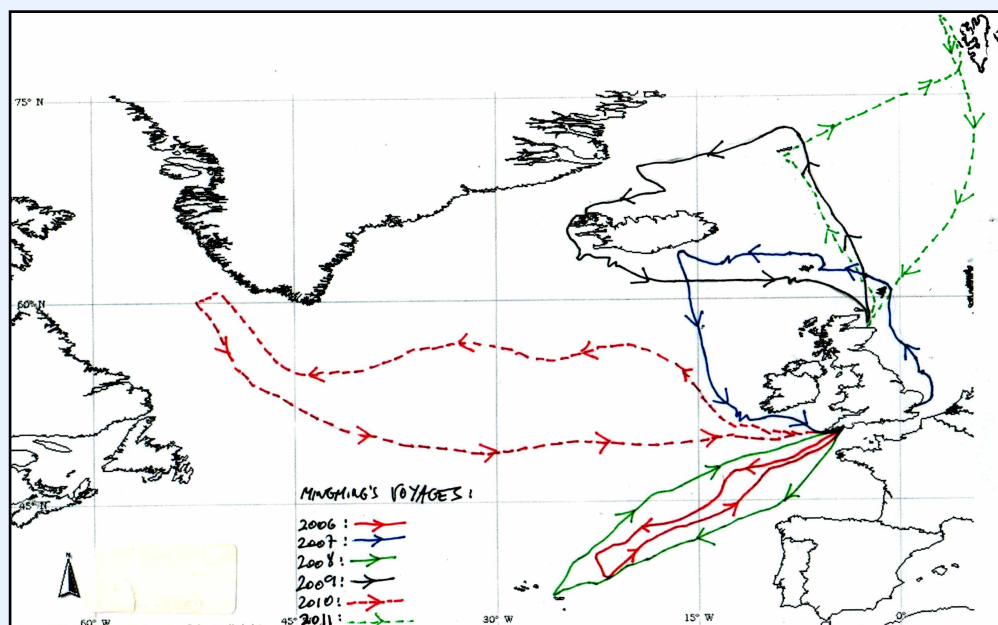
Roger lowered the single panel of the sail, lashed the bundle amidships, and ran off downwind, with the self-steering gear set at 135° to the wind. Eventually conditions eased and he was able to raise one panel of the sail and work the ship around to windward again.

The wind hauled eventually into the NE and freshened, allowing *Mingming* to make landfall on Spitsbergen on their 28th day at sea. That evening the sky cleared and the mountain peaks gleamed in the sunshine. The wind took off, and he lowered the sail and slept.

Mingming pressed on. Passing 79°N, Roger decided not to keep sailing while he slept, in case of meeting ice. He was also wary of sailing into a trap, and when the wind hauled to the SW and freshened, he lowered the sail to two panels and gently forereached west, rather than running north. Eventually the wind eased and veered to the west. He raised one panel and headed north, with a perfect beam wind and a following sea. From here on in he would not sleep.



Landfall, Spitsbergen



Mingming's voyages

together well enough to get them home. Eventually the headwind eased and a WNW wind came in, before which they scooted for 11 days. It was a fast passage, but Roger had to work hard, as constant shifts in wind direction and speed kept him forever hoisting and lowering sail. He was also running almost square, with the windvane set at about 135°. The sudden wind-shifts caused regular gybes, which had him scrambling to unpick the tangle and get *Mingming* back on course.

The wind eased and soon he had five panels up. The fog cleared too, opening up the horizon and making it easier to see if there was any ice about. The wind, blowing straight off the pack ice, was dense and cold. At 1142 on the 24th July, after 34 days at sea, they reached 80°N.



2011 - 80°N

Roger kept on for a short distance, and then turned around, recrossing 80°N at exactly midday, which allowed him to enter that latitude as his noon position. South of Spitsbergen, they were becalmed beneath a surprisingly hot sun. Then the wind came in, initially from the SE before settling into the SW, and they began the long, hard haul home. For a week the wind pinned them down off the SW coast of Spitsbergen. On one day they made just 16 miles.

Another seam at the leech of the sail parted, this time in the fourth panel down. He could hardly take out another panel of the sail by lashing battens together, but by partially lowering the sail he was able to stitch it

On their 50th day at sea, only 500 miles from Whitehills, the fair wind quit. Light and variable winds slowed progress as the weather grew more unstable. A deep depression with northerly winds was forecast but its timing was unclear. He approached the Moray Firth with unease. This would be no place to be caught in a northerly blow. Eventually he hove-to just 30 miles north of Whitehills, where he still had some sea-room, to await developments.

At 1800, he decided to make a run for port. Despite the forecast, a fine easterly breeze had sprung up and the weather bureau was now predicting a delay in the storm for a few hours, long enough to get in, with a bit of luck. A few hours after his arrival at Whitehills, the entrance to the harbour was impassable. He had been at sea for 65 days.

Roger now decided to replace *Mingming*. Besides the fact that she had sailed over 20,000 miles and was in



The entrance to Whitehills harbour 24 hours after the end of the voyage.

need of a refit, a slightly larger, faster boat would allow him to venture further afield. He had built his first boat and had a hankering to build another, incorporating all the lessons he had learned. However, after much research he bought a run-down, 'triple-keeled' Achilles 24, which was as close to the lines of *Mingming* as he could find. It had a fine pedigree, designed by Oliver Lee and built by Chris Butler, an OSTAR veteran.

Mingming II took two and a half years to rebuild, following the same principles as he had used on *Mingming*. He added an observation pod, a small, heavily-constructed timber doghouse on top of the existing cabin top. This gave him standing headroom and all-round visibility at sea.

He also designed and built a cambered junk sail, using broad-seaming to add camber to the top four panels, and cloth hinges to attach the bottom three panels to the battens. The camber of the lower panels was built into these hinges. One advantage was that these three panels could be removed and, if necessary, replaced individually.

He dispensed with the luff downhauls he had on *Mingming*, but fitted the reefing lines he uses to avoid fan-ups. These lines are attached to the top batten and the one below it, on both sides of the sail, and are tied

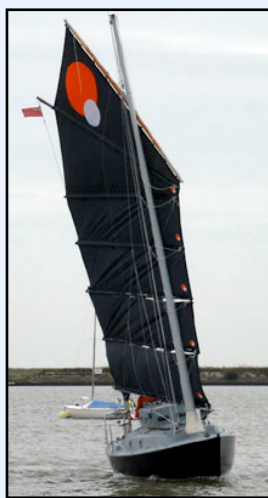
around the sail bundle once he has reefed down to one or two panels.

During trials, Roger was delighted to find that *Mingming II* sailed beautifully. She was well-balanced and surprisingly fast in light airs, often passing larger, bermudan rigged yachts to windward in smooth water.

By the end of May, 2014, *Mingming II* was ready for her first ocean passage. He decided to sail to Bjørnøya, on to Hopen Island, and then to Kong Karls Land, a group of islands that lie to the east of Spitsbergen at 79°N, in the Barents Sea.

There was a fresh SE wind blowing when Roger left Whitehills on 4th July. With two panels reefed, *Mingming II* rapidly drew away to the north. After clearing the coast, the SE wind was replaced by a NW wind, forcing them hard on the wind, before leaving them becalmed in a vicious calm, where the boat was thrown violently about.

When the wind returned it was from the NE, just a faint breeze, but, with 6 panels hoisted, *Mingming II* ghosted north with ease, something the old boat could never have done. It was obvious this boat was going to do well in the light airs of an Arctic summer.



Mingming II, above left to right: sailing close hauled through moorings on the Crouch; showing her cloud of sail; sailing with one panel down; showing the sail-ties on the first and second battens. Below left to right: *Mingming II* powers ahead under eased sheets; Roger in *Mingming II*'s cabin.





Mingming II departing Whitehills

The wind then switched to the ESE and picked up, bringing with it low, broken cloud. Roger's sixth sense, honed by so many miles at sea, was alerted to the potential for a storm. He decided to alter course to pass downwind of the Shetland Islands.

It was the right decision, for the night brought brutal squalls that had them down to one panel of the sail at times. The wind eventually eased to a perfect, quartering F5 and the sky cleared. Under just three panels of sail (which always gives the rig a rock-solid feel) the boat loped north.

Eventually the sky clouded over and for the next two weeks they scarcely saw the sun. The wind backed and freshened, putting them hard on the wind. Using the GPS to determine relative speeds, Roger experimented by sailing at different angles to the apparent wind. *Mingming II* would sail happily at 37.5°, making 3.5 knots. Easing off to 45° increased speed to 4 knots. More importantly, it reduced the likelihood of stalling when cresting the waves, since she took them at a better angle.

For a while an easterly wind blew up, forcing them down to one panel, with the occasional sea delivering a thundering blow to the beam. Eventually, at 70°N, on the 16th July, they were becalmed in weak sunshine. Roger lowered the sail and lashed it to the boom gallows. Feeling happy and snug, alone in the Arctic, he had a sweet sleep.

They were becalmed for 20 hours, and when a faint breeze came up from the south, Roger raised all 7 panels of the sail. The last panel is only raised in very light conditions, so as not to put too great a wringing

load on the mast. It is *Mingming II*'s turbo-charger. When the sail is fully up, the yard is almost at the masthead and it required considerable effort to hoist, because the boat has no winches.

But once the sail was up, *Mingming II* glided off northwards, despite the fact that there was no apparent wind at deck level. Light winds, fog, and occasional clear patches continued as they worked north.

Roger had been told it was unlikely he would sight Bjørnøya because of the fog, and as he made his approach it seemed this might prove to be the case. But on the 22nd July, after 17 days and a bit at sea, he awoke from a short sleep and stuck his head out of the hatch to discover the fog had gone.

It was just before 0200 and the southern cliffs of the island were clearly visible. He worked his way inshore. Fierce squalls forced instantaneous reductions in sail from 6 panels to 2; then he'd hoist them back up again in the lulls. He was thankful for the ease of reefing his junk sail.

North of Bjørnøya, the wind came in fresh from the SW, and *Mingming II* bounded north with just a panel or two of sail set. It was biting cold. Roger succumbed to a mug of hot bouillon and dug out his favourite pink blanket to put over his sleeping bag, then retired for a sleep.

The fog was relentless. The time came when he was forced to heave-to under one panel of sail, gently fore-reaching beam on to the seas, due to the risk of sailing into stray ice floes.

For 3 days, in strong SW winds, they ranged gently NE, sometimes on port tack, sometimes on starboard, edging towards Hopen Island. By midnight on the 24th July, their 20th day at sea, they were 20 miles to windward of the island. The fog was as thick as ever, but Roger began slowly closing the coast. He was rewarded by clearing conditions and a good view of the island, before pressing on to the north.

The wind and fog came and went. Sometimes he lowered the sail and slept, sometimes he had several panels up. A strange, growling sound, like an engine, so slight it was almost imaginary, had him puzzled. Later he realised it was the groaning of the icecap on Edgeøya. On the 28th July, their 25th day at sea, they made landfall on Kong Karls Land. Shortly after, they were becalmed for 12 hours. Occasionally, in a thinning of the fog, they sighted Kongsøya.

The breeze eventually picked up and they ran east for a while under 4 panels. The fog began to clear and the black cliffs of the island dominated the northern horizon. To the south, an ice floe appeared, justifying his cautious approach over the last few days. Roger

knew now that the outward leg of his voyage had almost reached its conclusion.

Mingming II continued working NE up past Abeløya, on which a sizeable iceberg was grounded. They were



Mingming II - furthest north

only 3 miles south of 79°N. On the 30th July they reached that latitude and Roger turned the bows homeward.

For one thing, he'd found some damage to the sail, where the after end of the second batten down had poked through its restraining pocket. For another, the northern horizon was littered with icebergs, and frigid squalls were blasting through. He later learned that they were less than 60 miles south of the pack ice. In an extremely cold half-gale, they quickly reached south under a single panel of sail. Roger did not want to meet ice in those conditions and was glad to be leaving it in his wake. The gale soon eased, as they do in the High Arctic, and the next morning they were becalmed, allowing Roger to make a temporary repair to his sail, by gouging a hole in the carbon-fibre batten and threading it with a line which he sewed to the webbing tabling of the leech.

It took some time to reach Edgeøya. Roger was determined to sail in close to the island's glacier, despite his usual aversion for getting too close to land in an engineless boat. He achieved it, but on his second run in they were becalmed, with the current setting them in towards the cliffs. It was now, with all 7 panels of the sail set, that *Mingming II* showed her true mettle, her astonishing light-weather performance, slowly drawing them away from the cliffs in spite of an almost imperceptible wind.

On the 4th August, a faint breeze had *Mingming II* once again ghosting south under all 7 panels, making 3 knots to windward, despite there being no apparent wind on deck. On the 6th August, their 34th day at sea, Roger noticed the forward lashing of the top batten had partially loosened, so he dropped the sail,

stood up in the forward hatch, and temporarily re-lashed the batten.

Soon they were running fast to the SSW before a rising NE wind, first under two panels, then one, then just half a panel. The NE breeze eventually faltered and died. Roger lashed the sail bundle to the gallows and slept for 8 hours straight, the longest sleep of the voyage.

Later, a light westerly breeze made up and they ghosted south under full sail. The wind continued fickle, with *Mingming II* under two panels in the squalls at one moment, and slamming about in the swell during calms the next.

Eventually it settled into the north and remained there all the way to the Shetland Islands. At times, approaching Jan Mayen, it was up to F7. The boat raced south under one panel of sail in a rising sea. The heavy cloud cover did not look promising for a sighting of Mount Beerenberg.

On the 15th August, their 43rd day at sea, they made landfall, and soon could see something of the lower slopes of Mount Beerenberg ahead. Later, a clearing of the cloud showed parts of the upper slopes, and eventually he realised he was looking at the summit, the cone of the volcano.

In an ideal NE wind, he sailed in to the Nordkapp, the base of the mountain, having a close look at the Weyprecht Glacier before running off to the south. The clouds finally cleared and for the first time he was able to see the entire volcano, apart from some light cloud obscuring the cone.

Leaving Jan Mayen, *Mingming II* ran fast to the south before a wind that was often up to F7. The boat frequently gybed, despite setting the self-steering at an angle of 135°, and the wind alternately gusted up and dropped off, so that he never had the right amount of sail up for long. A heavy cross-swell from the NE added to the challenge.

The difficulty with holding course continued to tax Roger, until he realised the servo-pendulum of the self-steering gear had slipped and was no longer in a vertical position, reducing its power. Annoyed with himself for not noticing it earlier, but relieved it was not an inherent fault of the boat's design or balance, he exited the hatch with a spanner and tightened the bolt holding the servo-pendulum in position.

The northerly gave way to a strengthening ESE wind and *Mingming II* raced south, slamming for the first time as she crashed through the seas with two panels of sail hoisted, heading into the Moray Firth, hoping to get home before the weather changed. In the lee of the hills, the wind eased. Roger raised all 7 panels of the



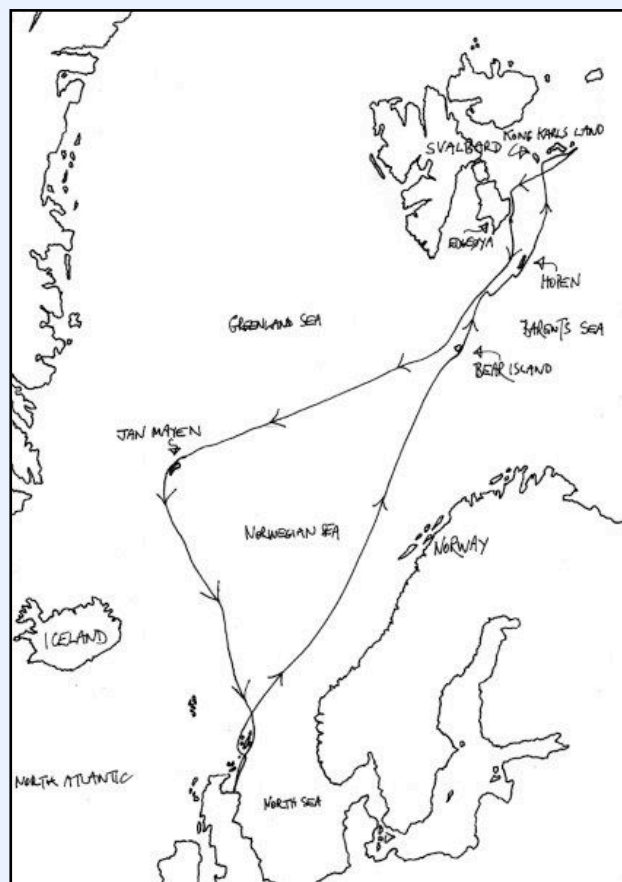
Mingming II sails past Mt Beerenberg - 2014

sail and raced on. They arrived off Whitehills in the late afternoon, 55 days after leaving.

Since returning, Roger has moved to a remote croft in NW Scotland, where he has been busy establishing his property and completing writing projects, including a translation of *Rogue Waves: Anatomy of a Monster*, by Michael O'Leary and Janette Kerr (Adlard Coles 2017). *Mingming II* has been laid up in a shed on Roger's property, awaiting further adventures.

Roger Taylor is the recipient of the Ocean Cruising Club's Jester Medal (2009), 'for an outstanding contribution to the art of single-handed ocean sailing', and the Royal Cruising Club's Medal for Seamanship, 'for exploits of legendary proportions'. He is the author of four books, *Voyages of a Simple Sailor* (2008), *Mingming and the Art of Minimal Ocean Sailing* (2010), *Mingming and the Tonic of Wildness* (2012), and *Mingming II and the Islands of the Ice* (2016). All books are still in print and are available in hard print and digital versions from most on-line booksellers. They

can also be ordered from the author's website - www.thesimplesailor.com - and his videos can be viewed on Youtube.



Mingming II - 2014 voyage