

a boatbuilder like no other

Chris Mitchell believes that sailing should be accessible to all and nothing will prevent him from pursuing that ideal.

KIM HOLLAMBY interviews the pioneer of Access Dinghies.



Three of Access Dinghies' range from front to back: the Liberty, the 303 and the new rotomoulded Breeze.

To say that this was a business interview like no other would not be to exaggerate.

In an hour spent with Chris Mitchell on a sunny morning in a quiet by-way of the Sanctuary Cove resort on Queensland's Gold Coast, the 57-year-old subconsciously offered wisdom that hinted at a full lifetime of experiences and yet demonstrated the raw energy of a teenager. His slight frame and modest manner belie massive inner will and self-belief bordering on what might seem arrogance to those who do not like his views. Mitchell's boat designs are uniquely placed to serve people with severe disabilities and yet much of his

focus is on attracting a new audience to boating, whatever their abilities. He has aspirations to make his company as well organised as the best builders in Australia and yet he has tried to give the business away in the past and is not at all interested in profit for profit's sake. He has no apparent interest in things of the world and yet takes obvious pleasure from the Australian Prime Minister's recognition in the 2002 Excellence in Community Business Partnerships awards.

To focus on Mitchell the man would, however, be to miss the point about what he and his supporters have achieved in the past decade. His

company, Access Dinghies, is not so much a boatbuilding business as the foundation for a belief that sailing deserves to be enjoyed by a much larger audience than is currently the case.

The germ of that belief must surely have been formed as a child when he discovered the joy of building and adapting boats with broom handles for masts and bed sheets for sails. "I'd been sailing since I was five years old," Mitchell recalls, "modifying different types of boats to go fishing. To save me rowing I wanted to sail out onto the Port Phillip Bay in Melbourne where we lived on the beach."

"I always wanted to be a boatbuilder,"

he continues, "but my mother bribed me to take university and by the time I'd completed that I was too old to apply for an apprenticeship." It didn't stop Mitchell later building a 25ft (7.6m) Illingworth and Primrose-designed Top Hat cruising yacht on which he sailed off to South East Asia. He remained in the region for 20 years, measuring, photographing and drawing Indonesian craft and then designing, building and modifying yachts in Singapore and Malaysia.

Perhaps Mitchell might still be there, but for a growing fascination with a concept. "I was living on a yacht in Singapore and I would see all these French people cruising through," Mitchell explains. "A lot of them didn't have outboard motors — they used sailing tenders like Optimists as rowing boats and you cannot get anything worse than an Optimist to row.

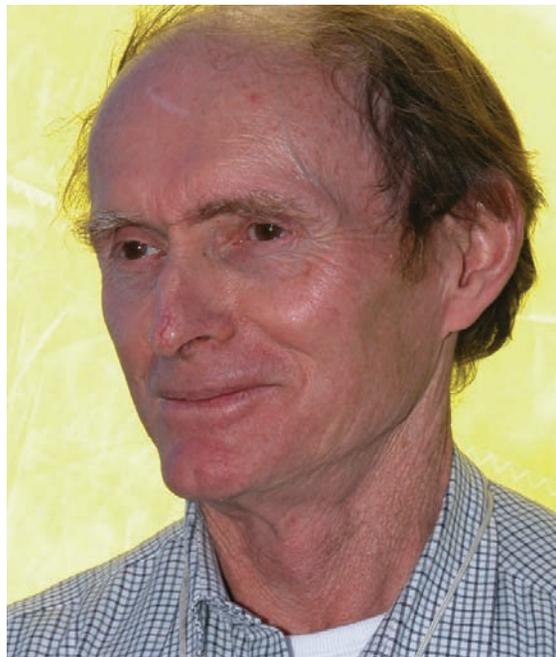
"So I said I'm going to develop the world's perfect sailing tender. This thing will have a really nice little hull with a roller reefing system and a deck chair in it that you can remove so you can sit down in comfort but it will also be a really terrific rowing boat and it will take a little outboard motor. It will have two rowing positions with rowlocks set in bushes so they don't rattle; more like a racing skull but I will try and keep it affordable and make it tough.

"I half-achieved that in Singapore but it became too difficult to stay there and so I bundled the whole lot up and shipped it back to Australia in 1991."

Mitchell had recently received a modest inheritance from his father and a New Enterprise Incentive Scheme offered training and a mentor; it also allowed him to remain on unemployment benefit for a year after his return. That gave Mitchell the basis for creating the fledgling Access Dinghies company.

"The mentor was encouraging but wasn't able to achieve anything else for me," Mitchell comments. "For example at the start of the NEIS programme there was a seven-week small business course and all the marketing stuff was the standard terms you see on television and none of it applied because there was no market for this boat."

There were other differences of opinion too. "They kept telling me on



Mitchell: driven by a desire to create the perfect sailing tender.

the NEIS course, 'forget about the sail, just concentrate on this rowing boat,' but I wasn't interested in that," Mitchell asserts. "They also told me to go to the local yacht club and talk to them but that was the wrong place to start. Yacht club people are, I realise now, emotionally involved with existing classes and there are too many dinghy classes around in the first place. They don't want anything new — they are trying to cull some existing boats and use only international classes like Optimists and Lasers."

It was left to Mitchell to cut his own furrow. He knew he wanted his dinghy to sail but it was only after some experimentation that he arrived at what has become a benchmark combination of features — a concave hull shape, ballasted centreboard, joystick steering, roller reefing for the cat rig and a seat set low in the hull. The first of several current models, the 7ft 6in 2.3 with wide side decks either side of a single seat on the centreline, was born.

The 2.3's features all provided for the boat to be kept upright when sailing without the need for athletic leaning over the side, an obvious bonus for use by disabled people. But Mitchell was equally quick to spot the benefits for those who had never been out on the water before.

"We challenged the yachting fraternity," Mitchell states "and said you are declining — your numbers are going down by five, 10 or 15 per cent per

annum depending on where you are. If you use little boats like this you will bring thousands of new people into the sport because this type of boat appeals to mothers and their children. People that do not sail, that are outside of your system, generally look at this type of boat and say 'well I can do that.'"

The Access Dinghies claim was that this new style of boat could bring millions of new people into the sport, turn around the decline in sailing and also provide a totally integrated recreational opportunity for people with any kind of disability. But it was not well received.

"The biggest battle was going into yacht clubs and trying to get them to take an interest in the boats and no-one would," Mitchell remembers. "If they did they would say 'these are cute little things that would be terrific for the disabled.' Now that was just totally negative because disabled people aren't interested in sailing around in 'disabled' boats."

Whatever Mitchell's reservations about Access Dinghies being pigeonholed as boats for the disabled, that interest nevertheless provided the breakthrough. In 1994 the then executive director of the Victoria Yachting Council, Campbell Rose, called together all of Australia's yachting association leaders in Melbourne to introduce the Sailability concept first pioneered in the UK.

"I had four boats on display at the conference," Mitchell states, "but no-one was interested because they were thinking along the lines of integrating disabled people into yacht clubs and into existing boats." Mitchell believed that could only lead to the inclusion of able-bodied people with minimal disabilities, not the severely handicapped.

The occasion wasn't wasted however because one man emerged as sharing Mitchell's vision. University lecturer Phil Vardy was visiting from New South Wales and an agreement was struck that the two would meet in Sydney two weeks later to try and locate a venue for an accessible sailing centre.

"We found a place called Dobroyd Aquatic Club which was perfect as it was on the harbour, but in the right location with clean water and no ferries," Mitchell explains. "We

approached the sailing club and a woman called Jackie Kay came along. She was working in a home for seriously disabled people just nearby and she got involved in starting up Sailability at this club."

In fact Vardy and Kay were to have much greater influence beyond the founding Dobroyd Sailability branch. The microbiologist subsequently served for a period as director of Sailability Australia and is now on the executive of the International Foundation of Disabled Sailing. Kay, who has multiple sclerosis, left her job, initially to become secretary of Sailability New South Wales as it expanded to 15 branches; she also has had a profound influence upon Mitchell, becoming his bedrock partner in life and business.

Sailability New South Wales provided a springboard for Access Dinghies. While the aim was for the Sailability clubs to be accessible to all and while Mitchell hates media focus on the disability angle of his boat designs, he is understandably quick to relate the successes that occurred in that area, particularly with severely disabled children.

"The 2.3 is a fantastic thing," Mitchell quietly claims. "You can take a child who has, say, cerebral palsy, who has never sailed in his or her life and never thought of sailing. As long as they can move the joystick you can reef the sail, pull in the mainsheet, put a bow in it, tie it off and send them in 20 knots of wind out on a reach to a buoy and back. A kid aged 7-10 who is in a wheelchair just gets in the boat, takes it around that buoy and comes back. The mother just stands onshore, crying and cannot believe it. The kid comes back with this great smile and 'wow!'"

"Then you take it from there," Mitchell continues. "The next lesson typically involves showing the child how to use the mainsheet to achieve different courses into the wind and downwind. Mitchell says that it is possible to teach a child who has never sailed before, to negotiate a triangular course after just one hour of instruction.

The inclusive mission of Access Dinghies is never forgotten, however. "All disabled kids have able-bodied brothers, sisters and parents — why shouldn't they all go sailing together?" Mitchell challenges. "Disabled kids invariably beat their brothers and sisters

out on the water and they've never been able to do that in anything before."

Mitchell rises at 4.00am and goes to bed at 9.00pm. The time in-between is spent working on accessible sailing in its broadest context and on Access Dinghies specifically. The result of 10 years of

"The whole philosophy is a couple of paradoxes: the more that you give away the more that you'll receive and if you don't want anything you can have everything. They are our company tenets and the basis of the whole thing."

intensive invention is a variety of models, all based around the foundation concepts but in different sizes up to 12ft (3.6m) and with a unique mainsail and foresail arrangement using a separate foremast on the larger examples. The designs are kept simple, the prices are low and the company benefits from a sponsorship arrangement with shipping giant P&O Nedlloyd that underwrites overseas transportation costs.

Beyond the boats themselves there are further innovations, both for onshore support in terms of keel and person cranes, cradles, trailers and pontoons and afloat, most tellingly the invention of low-cost servo controls and more recently even the ability to install a ventilator. "We use to say 'if you can breathe you can sail an Access Dinghy,'" Mitchell recalls, "but the inclusion of the ventilator means even those needing assistance to breathe can sail now."

Production remains centred around a small Melbourne factory that typically builds five boats per week but can increase production as required. Mitchell values ethical strength in his employees over everything else.

Access Dinghies have also been built in the UK since the late 1990s by former Fairline apprentice Steve Sawford with assistance from father Ron and cousin Jason. The origin of that arrangement came when John Morley, the person

responsible for Sailability in Rutland, UK, raised the money for six Access Dinghies without ever seeing them, in 1996. John asked several boatbuilders to put in a proposal to build the boats. By chance Steve and Ron sail a Dart 15 at Rutland. "It was pretty obvious who was going to build our boats," Mitchell remembers, "because it was someone at our level who we could talk to."

Around 1,000 Access Dinghies have been built to-date, all in GRP. Of that number 350 have been made by SSM Ltd in the UK and a small number by a further licensee, Composites 3D in France.

At the time of IBI's visit Mitchell was showing his latest development, the Breeze dinghy. It maintains the usual Access Dinghy concepts but breaks new ground for the company by being rotomoulded for added durability. The Breeze was subsequently launched at July's Sydney Boat Show and is aimed squarely at the holiday market.

"The Breeze has been developed, along with a modular pontoon system, to be used at a resort along with a one-day training scheme run by accredited instructors," Mitchell explains. The training scheme has its roots in the many experiences of teaching people to use his boats but he wants it to be adopted by the Australian Yachting Federation and other organisations such as the UK's Royal Yachting Association with whom he has already had talks.

"We also need a network of Sailability clubs, or clubs that use our type of boat," Mitchell continues. "A child that does a course at a resort and gets a certificate for it will want to take the next step," he asserts, believing that next step to not necessarily be the traditional route of Optimists or Lasers but further experiences in friendly boats that do not tip over, with membership of the clubs open to all abilities.

Coming from anyone else you would put such a claim down to a major attempt at commercial leverage but Mitchell disarmingly continues: "someone will copy the Breeze but that's all right. Go for it, let them, I don't care — you can't worry about it."

No surprise really for a man who once tried to give away his company. "I never really wanted to own Access Dinghies," Mitchell states. "I just wanted to build it, not work for it. I always wanted it to be a not-for-profit operation that would

employ me. If it's worthy it's going to continue on after I'm gone and I'm not going to want to retire so I'll work for it until I die."

"I tried to give it away to people," he muses, "but they all went mad and started dollar signs flashing; that was never the concept. I know if I drive this thing I don't have to worry about how I'm going to eat or clothe myself; that will always work. The whole philosophy is a couple of paradoxes: the more that you give away the more that you'll receive and if you don't want anything you can have everything. They are our company tenets and the basis of the whole thing."

Steps have however been taken to protect the growing enterprise and Access Dinghies is now owned by the Access Dinghy Foundation chaired by Jackie Kay. "It has a little group of trustees who are there as a kind of backstop," Mitchell explains, wryly adding: "it's a sort of benevolent dictatorship really, but one day it will be a committee."

As Access Dinghies has become more established so Chris and Jackie have become more and more influential across Australia, promoting their own vision of freedom on the water regardless of ability. For example, in an attempt to influence matters in Victoria where he did not believe Sailability to be heading in the right direction, Mitchell incorporated an organisation called Sailing For Everyone along similar lines to Sailability New South Wales and it quickly grew to five branches. Last January it got rolled into a relaunched Sailability Victoria as an incorporated committee of the Victorian Yachting Council with a 'sailing for everyone' remit. It now has 18 branches and a paid employee funded by the Victorian state government.

"People might have looked at me in the past and said 'that rat-bag is working outside the system,'" Mitchell observes, "but the only way to change the system was to set up an example and make it work."

Mitchell talks with satisfaction about the fact that Sailability is now in every state in Australia and also that Sailability Australia is being reformed to give it fresh focus. But he clearly cannot rest there.

"Jackie and I have been busy for the last four or five years touring around

the world promoting Sailability International and accessible boating," Mitchell relates. One typical example came in 2001 with the running of the fourth Sailing Summit in Portugal. "We bought a Ford Transit van in France and decked it out with a bed in the back,"

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he continues. "Jackie and I drove it to the sailing summit. While we were there we set up three branches of Sailability in Vilamoura, Porto and Lisbon. The yachting association in Portugal is right with us.

"Now we're trying to work out what to do with the US," Mitchell states. "We see there should be 300 branches of Sailability in America. Just looking at disabilities there are probably 4,000 disabled sailors in the US, which is a disgrace because in New South Wales, Australia alone there is 10,000. We have one club in Gosford just north of Sydney that sails five days a week with 14 Access dinghies undertaking 10,000 sailing experiences a month.

"In America we have a van and a trailer of demo boats," Mitchell continues. "We visit periodically and have been around the US three times. It's easy there; it's very accessible for Jackie wheelchair-wise, I like driving and the freeways are fantastic."

Japan is another example of many countries visited, both to work with the local yachting association and also, increasingly to work with 'Universal Design' committees. Mitchell believes that his boat designs are perfect examples of the seven principles of Universal Design developed by architects, designers, engineers and researchers at the North Carolina State University. Mitchell and Kay are also regular presenters on the subject of integration and inclusion in sport.

The immediate future for Access Dinghies is to see the establishment of

the Breeze and its associated resort and training programmes. Mitchell also wants to see his largest dinghy, the 12ft (3.6m) Liberty, accepted as an international class in time for the Beijing Paralympics set to take place in 2008. Mitchell states that he doesn't want to build any larger Access Dinghies than that but then starts talking about a yacht.

"One thing is missing," Mitchell asserts. "I want to create a fully accessible, reasonably heavy displacement, full keel inboard engine charter boat around 28ft (8.6m) long; a modern version of a Top Hat but larger. It will have a hoist on the back, with a fold-down transom. It will also have a hoist to take you below and a ceiling hoist in the cabin for use in harbours, thanks to a deck-stepped mast. It will feature a big double berth, a large head, and a 3.6m (12ft) quarter berth, half of which will convert to a settee. The boat will sleep three people and it will be sailed using a joystick. We will use it to create a new low cost, accessible charter market."

So would the yacht represent the point where Mitchell hits the top of his steep personal hill or will the summit continue to shift upwards? "People say you must feel proud or you must feel so satisfied when something great has happened," he responds. "But you could see it had to happen, it was just a milestone really, a little part of the picture."

And what does that picture look like? "There will be millions of newcomers into the sport dressed in nice colourful clothes with kids playing around on the one side," Mitchell responds, "and on the other side there will be a lot of boozed-up yachties looking in the mirror talking about how it used to be in the old days. But that's not going to happen. We don't bother fighting the guys with their heads in the sand anymore. The next time we look they are gone anyway." **IBI**

Further information

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