

# Getting Through the Rip

by Nick McGuigan

Port Phillip is a vast salt water lagoon providing relatively safe sailing in sheltered waters while allowing us to still sail long races. Races such as the Lady Nelson at 90nm are regularly run entirely in the Bay. For cruisers, there is a choice of destinations within easy reach including Geelong, Mornington and Queenscliff, to name a few.

**H**owever, when the pleasures of Port Phillip pale, the ocean in form of Bass Strait beckons and that is where the trouble begins. If I could remind you for a moment of the definition of a lagoon:

*A lagoon is a body of comparatively shallow salt or brackish water separated from the deeper sea by a shallow or exposed sandbank, coral reef or similar feature.*

In our case the "similar feature" is a narrow channel known affectionately as the Rip. Most problems are caused by the tides as they try to empty the Bay out through this narrow gap and then suck it back in again. Between each of these tides is a short period of calm and quiet, known as the slack, when the tide is changing direction. The time of these slacks corresponds closely with the high and low tides at Williamstown.



The Rip arcing up

Photo: Nick McGuigan

It is during the slack that yachts like yours and mine make our hurried entry and exit from Port Phillip. Between times, there is not only the current, which can run up to 6 knots or more, to contend with but waves, whirlpools and overfalls. When the tide runs in the opposite direction to the wind, the waves heap up making the Rip a very dangerous place to be. In some cases, a standing wave can develop in the middle of the Rip. Going over this is not recommended. I lived but swore I would never do it again.

While it is possible to make the passage in between the slacks, I suggest getting a bit of experience first and developing a good understanding of the Rip and all its dangers. One of the best ways to do this is through the ORCV's much praised Rip Tour. I went along on one recently and met up with some RBYC members tak-



RBYC members enjoying the tour

Photo: Nick McGuigan

ing their first look. What I found really interesting was after around 80 passages myself, I still found stuff I didn't know.

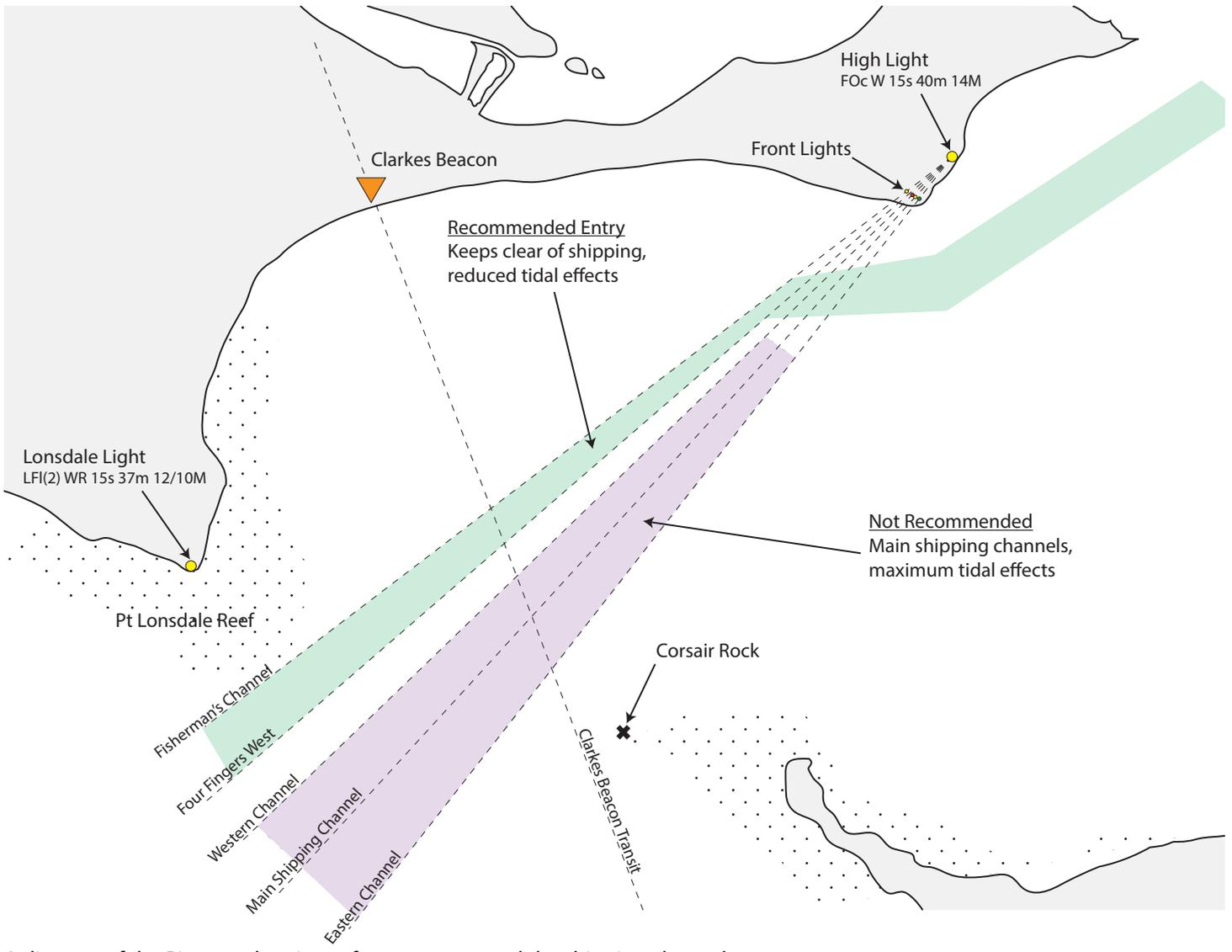
Apart from picking the right time to enter and understanding the currents and how they set, another focus of the Rip Tour is picking the right approach channel. On top of Shortland Bluff are a number of lighthouses and how these line up defines the various approach channels, the Eastern Channel, the Main Shipping Channel, the Western Channel, Four Fingers West and the Fisherman's Channel.

The Shortland Bluff lights are organised, looking from the



The High Light, one of only three dark towers in the world.

Photo: Nick McGuigan



A diagram of the Rip area showing safe entry zones and the shipping channels.

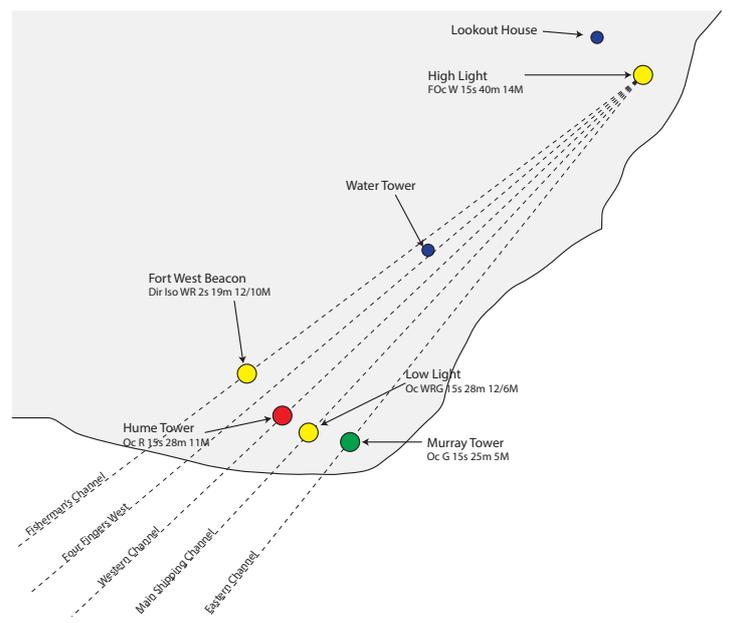
seaward side, with three lights in front and one light at the back (see the diagram below). The back lighthouse is a tall bluestone structure, one of only three “dark” lighthouses in the world, called the High Light (see the photograph on the previous page). It is higher than the front three although this is difficult to see from a yacht. The centre light of the front three is a white lighthouse called the Low Light. To its left and right are two open structures (towers), the Hume Tower, red, on the left and the Murray Tower, green,



The three front lights, (l-r) Hume Tower (red), Low Light and the Murray Tower (green).  
Photo: Nick McGuigan

green, on the right (see the photograph below).

The front towers when combined with the High Light as a back lead define the three major shipping channels. When the



A diagram of the lights on Shortland Bluff showing the various transits.



**The Eastern Channel transit. The High Light can just be seen behind the Murray Tower (green) on the right.** Photo: Nick McGuigan

Low Light aligns directly in front of the High Light, you are in the Main Shipping Channel. Similarly, when the red tower is in front of the High Light, you are in the Western Channel and when the green tower, the Eastern Channel (see the relevant photographs).

We are still not home as we actually need to keep clear of these channels. Basically, ships go through them and ships and yachts don't mix. Ships have very little freedom of action in the



**The Main Channel transit. The High Light is right behind the Low Light.** Photo: Nick McGuigan

the four lighthouses being seen equally spaced, like four fingers held up, with the High Light on the left (see the photograph below).

Another useful channel is the Fisherman's Channel which is used by the pilot boats as they go out through the Heads to meet ships. The Fisherman's Channel is defined by the transit of the High Light with another light on Shortland Bluff, the Fort West



**The Western Channel transit. The High Light is right behind the Hume Tower (red) on the left.** Photo: Nick McGuigan

Rip and if we get in their way, mayhem ensues. In addition, these channels feel the full effects of any tides if you are trying to get through between slacks. Instead, most yachts will opt to go through on Four Fingers West. This is the channel defined by all



**Four Fingers West. The four lights are evenly spaced like four fingers pointing up.** Photo: Nick McGuigan

Beacon. This approach runs very close to the Pt Lonsdale Reef, so much so that in rough weather it takes a lot of nerve to stick to it. For this reason, the recommended approach is between the Fisherman's Channel and Four Fingers West, using each transit as



**The Fisherman's Channel transit. The High Light is behind the white Fort West Beacon in the car park.** Photo: Nick McGuigan



**Clarke's Beacon/Marcus Hill transit. The Marcus Hill lead is very hard to see.** Photo: Nick McGuigan

a clearing bearing. This is shown as the green area on the large diagram near the start of this article which is the recommend area for a passage through the Heads.

We have mentioned Lonsdale Reef which is on the port side of the Heads coming in. The other danger you need to keep clear of is Corsair Rock on the east side off Pt Nepean. This little nasty sits just under the water and is close enough to the surface to do the average yacht quite an injury. Keep away.

Sticking to the green zone will help and of course even the Eastern Channel bypasses it. Approaching the Rip from the east, lining up Clarkes Beacon with the lead on Marcus Hill and staying to the left of it will keep you off Corsair. The Marcus Hill lead is a little hard to see (see photograph at the bottom of the previous page) so sometimes it is better to just use a clearing bearing on Clarkes Beacon.

Lonsdale light marks the western side of the rip and provides the beacon marking the Heads. It can be used to organise your approach. The best yacht approach is from the west, keeping clear of the Pt Lonsdale Reef. Remember the effect of the Heads is felt up to 5 nm out. Line up the Fisherman's Channel and Four Fin-



**The Lonsdale Light is situated at the entrance.** Photo: Nick McGuigan  
gers West and come in between them, in the green sector in the diagram. Once through the Rip proper, bear off around Shortland Bluff keeping clear of all other shipping.