

Port Underwood Cruise – Labour weekend 2019

By Keith Murray

The club's cruise to Port Underwood was held over Labour Weekend. Sixteen boats were registered for the cruise and two planning meetings held to explain the route, probable tide and weather effects. As Labour weekend drew near the weather forecasts were not promising. At the 0900 briefing on Saturday morning the crew of only six boats appeared. At that time there was a moderate northerly wind, clear sky and slack water at Sinclair Head predicted for 1444.

The clubhouse was busy, as a breakfast had been supplied for the crew of the Wine Race boats and any of our own sailors.

Summer Lightning (Beale 33) with sole crew of owner Martin Scott departed a little after 1000. It was rather early for the tide but he felt it was wise to use the gentle weather as winds from 20 to 30 knots were expected for the afternoon. Wayne McEwen was also single-handed on Muffin (Trojan trailer sailer). He left at 0630 and had the best passage on any of the boats. Many of the race boats left at the same time and arrived at Sinclair Head at slack water just before the current started its journey south and southeast. Difficult for the race boats to go northwest to Tory Channel but this proved easy for Wayne to go to Port Underwood. By the time the current was moving he was well clear of the North Island and had up to a knot of west going current. Wayne reported only a couple of splashes of water on the deck!

Freedom (Haag 40) was the next to leave the marina at 1100. It was far too early to expect slack water, but Theo Muller and crew did not see the need to wait. The rest of the race boats departed at the same time and were company as far as Sinclair Head. It was an easy ride down the harbour with most of the headsail and two reefs in the mainsail. By West Ledge five rolls were put into the headsail, as the wind was rather more than 20 knots. There was some adverse current abeam of Sinclair Head but after half an hour that vanished. Once clear of the land the wind increased to an average of 32 knots and most of the

headsail was rolled away. Despite the small sail area it was hard work on the helm and there was a lot of spray flying over the deck and helmsperson. The sea was lumpy, irregular and about a metre high.

Quetzalli the Commodore's flagship (Raven 31) departed near midday and had similar conditions to Freedom. Being lighter the ride was more boisterous than on Freedom. Three reefs in the mainsail and several rolls in the headsail was at times more than required. Surfing was practised at times.

Robertson Point is at the entrance of Port Underwood. Within four miles of it, the sea became a mess of steep short waves and overfalls caused by wind against tide. The sea was still not more than a metre high and by then the wind had eased considerably.

Freedom was motoring up into Port Underwood a little before 1800 and came to anchor alongside Muffin in Whangakoko Bay where it was glassy calm. The puzzle for the navigator on Freedom was the whereabouts of Summer Lightning who had not been sighted on passage. An hour later Quetzalli joined the raft and after another half hour Summer Lightning was seen motoring up the harbour heading for Hakana Bay. The VHF radio was used to call Martin across to the calm side of the harbour.

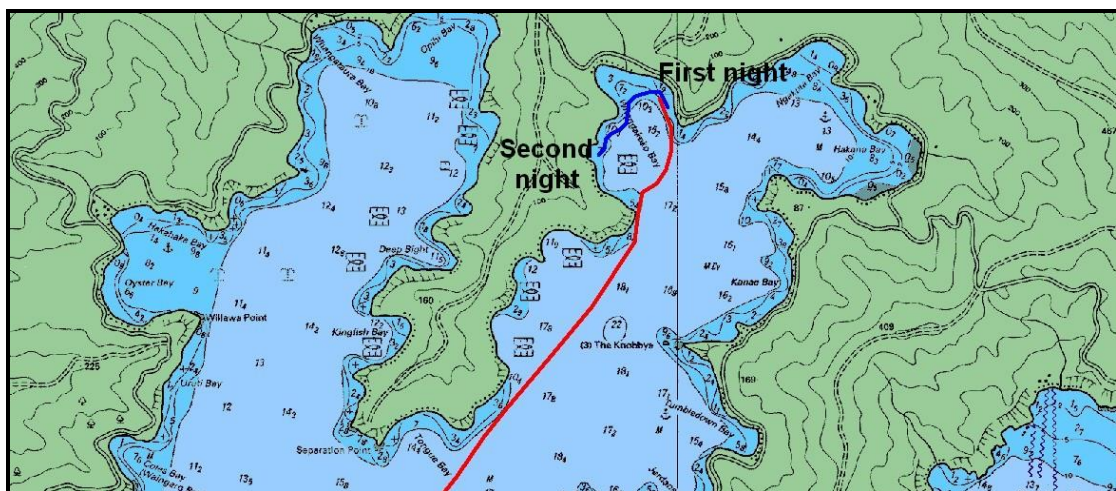
With the club boats rafted together there was time to relax, discuss the passage and establish whether there would be reception for the semi final of the Rugby World Cup. The puzzle over, Summer Lightning came with a tale of woe. Being on his own gave Martin an excuse for following the race boats for some time after clearing Sinclair Head. He sailed a distance to windward before pulling to the south and during that time Freedom and Quetzalli had overtaken. In the wind and murk Summer Lightning had been invisible and probably below the horizon.

By 0600 Sunday the wind had changed direction a few degrees to the west and freshened. Freedom's anchor had been the ground tackle for the fleet and the chief navigator's worry about

the holding was confirmed. The anchor had dragged about 50 metres and the fleet was a little close to the shore. Everyone was roused and as the yachts separated, Freedom's anchor was raised.



The fleet moved to the opposite side of the bay where there were three large coves out of the main wind stream. The boats wandered a bit at anchor but it was a pretty and peaceful place. The sea bottom was clay and mud that gave secure holding for the rest of the day and evening.



There were jobs to do on all the boats. On Freedom the reefing lines were moved so that the number two and number three reefs could be pulled down. On Summer Lightning there was the main halyard to retrieve. After lowering the sail at the entrance to Port Underwood, Martin had taken the halyard to clip onto the aft end of the boom. The boat had jiggled and the halyard flew out to leeward. Unfortunately, he had then decided to haul the errant end up to the masthead. Martin got out the bosuns chair and then there was a thought. The boat had a three-quarter rig and there was no topping lift. Using the jib or spinnaker halyard would mean dangling three metres below the halyard. The job was cancelled.

On Quetzalli there was water behind the instrument panel that had upset the stereo system.

On Muffin Wayne spent some time replacing slides on the mainsail.

Sunday passed and the wind strength out in the main channels reduced. Quetzalli went for a short cruise about the east arm and quickly agreed with the cruising guide that the west arm was very exposed to the wind. There were the usual snacks and drinks at 1700 hours.



Monday was the day to return and the forecast seemed favourable. Fifteen knots from the northwest was predicted to ease during the day. The boats were moving by 0800 with 45 miles to cover. Provided they managed the first 33 to Sinclair Head before 1500 there would be a benefit from the tidal streams.



All the yachts motored from the anchorage to Robertson Point. Sails were set to fifteen knots of wind and it was lovely sailing on a calm sea. The log and GPS indicated a gain from the tide of about a knot thus meaning that for most of the passage Freedom covered the ground at about seven knots. The wind was a bit feeble for the first ten miles, but all too soon started building. Theo had wanted to make the passage with the third reef and it proved the right amount of sail with about half of the headsail. It was totally different sailing to Saturday. The deck and cabin top was dry, the helm was balanced and the crew of all boats happy.



Off the North Island there was no sign of any disturbed water. Wind and tide were in unison, there was no swell and all was calm. However, there was wind waiting. Instead of the wind easing it freshened.



At West Ledge the wind was from ahead so sails on the three larger yachts were lowered for the seven mile drive up the harbour. The wind was over thirty knots and against the current of the incoming tide making the yachts bounce over the waves.

Wayne delayed his departure for an hour to wait for the easing wind. He had hoisted only the headsail and kept the motor running at 1900 revolutions so Muffin had comfortably made the passage. In Chaffer's Passage he went to lower the headsail so as to anchor in Breaker Bay and wait for the wind to ease. The wind, lack of crew, and a dead autohelm made it impossible to keep the yacht head to wind so the hanks kept jamming and the sail would not lower. He changed plans, tightened the jib halyard and continued on over to Day's Bay where things were a bit quieter.

It had been a successful cruise with great company. The conditions were definitely at the top end of what is acceptable but with the sail area properly reduced the yachts all made a safe passage.