TWO ANCIENT SAILORS

After a very successful winter cruise to Tonga and Fiji, Peter Fromow needed to get his yacht Britta from Opua back to Seaview. Andrew, his main crew had urgent family reasons to depart ship after clearing customs in Opua; was I available? The answer was of course, "Yes." Thus on Tuesday 13 October I was driving north to Auckland. Louise and I had been to a birthday luncheon in Waikanae and on the return I had collected a one way car rental from the centre of Wellington. My departure from home was around 1600 hours so the road was at first busy but from Levin deserted. I stopped overnight at Ohakune and was away by 0730 Wednesday morning. That should have meant arrival in Auckland around 1300 hours.

The initial drive was unhurried and easy. At Otorahanga Google maps suggested I take a detour to avoid road works. It seemed a long and circular detour and waiting for the stop/go person would have been quicker. I missed the turnoff to Tamahere and the Expressway and met the Hamilton morning traffic. Just as I passed east of the Hospital I had an uneasy feeling that I had left my toilet bag (complete with blood pressure pills) in the ski lodge. I stopped, ransacked my two bags and of course the toilet bag was missing. I sat and thought. Only the pills were necessary and because of the weather forecast there was no urgent need to get to Auckland. I drove back to Ohakune, stowed the toilet bag, took the rubbish bag I had left on the curb to the dump, and then again drove north.

When I was at Waitomo I looked at the fruit store with their sign for Avacados at 49 cents each. It had not been open on the first pass, on the wrong side of the busy road on the return and now was closed as it was after 1700 hours.

At Otorohanga I decided to use the normal bypass road through Pirongia and that resulted in another detour because a bridge had been washed away by floods. It was a little after 1900 hours when I arrived at my sister's house in Somerville, Howick. I was in time for dinner.

Thursday was not a sailing day. It was cold with a fresh northerly wind that would have made the passage to Cape Colville difficult. I drove to the Half Moon Bay marina, found Britta and with Peter purchased stores for the trip from the Highland Park "Pak n Save". After lunch I delivered the rental car to the depot at Auckland airport. The plan was to follow my sister and she would then deliver me to the marina. I followed Kay as far as the first round about. I had to wait for traffic and thought I saw her car take the third exit. 200 metres later I knew that was wrong and made my own way the airport to find Kay waiting there. Back to the marina we went.



The forecast for Friday was still not desirable. The northerly wind had changed to the south with gusts to 40 knots in the Hauraki Gulf with rain. Peter had minor jobs to complete and I met Ian Warman and we arranged the change of authorised signatories for the ski club.

We were awake just before 0600 on Saturday and took Britta to the fuel berth to top up the diesel tanks. Finally we departed around 0645. There was still a cold southerly wind but the strength was below 20 knots and the sky had cleared. We motored down the Tamaki estuary expecting to take the passage between Browns Island and Musik Point. It was low tide and the mud did not like Britta's 2.2 metre draft. We backed off and left Brown's Island to starboard. The sails were soon hoisted and the motor off for an easy passage across the Gulf to Cape Colville. The overall weather forecast was for a High to linger over the country. For sailors wanting to head south that can be a challenge. If the centre of the High lingers on the west side of the country it creates wind from the south on the east coast. As it moves over New Zealand the wind vanishes and then creates wind from the northeast. The latter is desirable for a sailing machine.



Our initial plan had been to spend the night in Port Charles but we had made such good time crossing the Hauraki Gulf we continued the passage. The wind became light and the motor was required to assist the sails. We anchored for the night by Shakespear Cliff at the west end of Cooks Beach. It was a calm and peaceful night after sailing for thirteen hours.



Sunday was a day of light winds. We mostly motored from Cooks Beach as far as Whangamata and from there had enough wind to sail to Tauranga harbour entrance. Tauranga is a busy commercial port. Four large cargo ships were anchored about six miles from the entrance that is narrow with at times a strong current.

“Shall I get the sails down? Peter asked.

“The headsails, “Yes”, but leave the mainsail as we may need its horsepower,” was my reply. The sea was rather rumpled as the outgoing tide was hitting the small waves created by the northerly wind.

“The AIS says there is a dredger working in the entrance,”

“Bother,” was my reply, “but there will be room for us. I cannot see the dredge.”

As we got closer I hugged the Mount side of the channel as there is often a back eddy during an outgoing tide. Sure enough close to the port side markers it was easy going. Soon I could see the dredger which was reasonable sized coastal boat.

“The dredge is moving,” Peter advised and we watched it up anchor and moved over to the Matakana Island side of the channel. That meant I had clear passage for a couple of minutes and concentrated on the buoys, swirling water, and mainsail.

The reason for the movement of the dredge was soon apparent. A very large fully loaded large container ship poked it nose out from behind The Mount with a tug attached to its stern. I brought Britta’s throttle back to idle and marked time between two of the port side channel markers. As soon as the container ship passed us, the dredge powered across the channel, back into my approach route. Britta was headed to starboard around the stern of the dredge and after clearing the last rock outcrop turned to port and anchored in Pilot Bay. It was around 1800 hours so after cooking dinner we retired to sleep. It had been a 12 hour sailing day. There was a worry in the weather forecast. Just as should be expected from a large stalled high pressure area, fresh southerly winds were predicted for the Castlepoint and Portland areas for Monday and Tuesday. That meant there was no point in trying to round East Cape until those winds eased. The anchorage at Hicks Bay would not be tenable in a fresh southerly wind. Peter had wanted to anchor at Whale Island for a night. The anchorage there would be open to southerly winds, so we decided to have a rest day in Tauranga. I then had a thought and phoned Gerald Gibbard. Denise and Gerald were at Ohakune for the night and not back until Monday afternoon but they gave us clear instructions of how to get to a grocery store. With that settled we had another restful night.



After breakfast Monday we first took Britta to the fuel wharf in the Sulpher Point marina. The diesel and water tanks were filled to the brim as well as some clothes were washed. We then we motored back to Pilot Bay and anchored this time at the southern end near to the grocery store. The dinghy was launched and ashore we found the 4 Square Store and bought the necessary comestibles. There is nothing like having twice as much food as you need.

Denise and Gerald arrived back to their home sooner than expected and gave us an invitation to dinner that we eagerly accepted. Their new home was in a quiet street a little further away than the grocery store. Late in the afternoon Gerald collected us from the foreshore. I had suggested that so that I would know the way to walk back to Pilot Bay. We were ashore earlier than planned and sat on a bench and watched the sunset, dog walkers and tiring parade of runners. It was a little early in the year for swimmers.

After a lovely meal we walked back to Pilot Bay with Gerald as guide as he wanted to show us a 500 year old Pohutukawa tree. It had a huge diameter of large diameter spreading branches that curled down to the ground and then upwards.

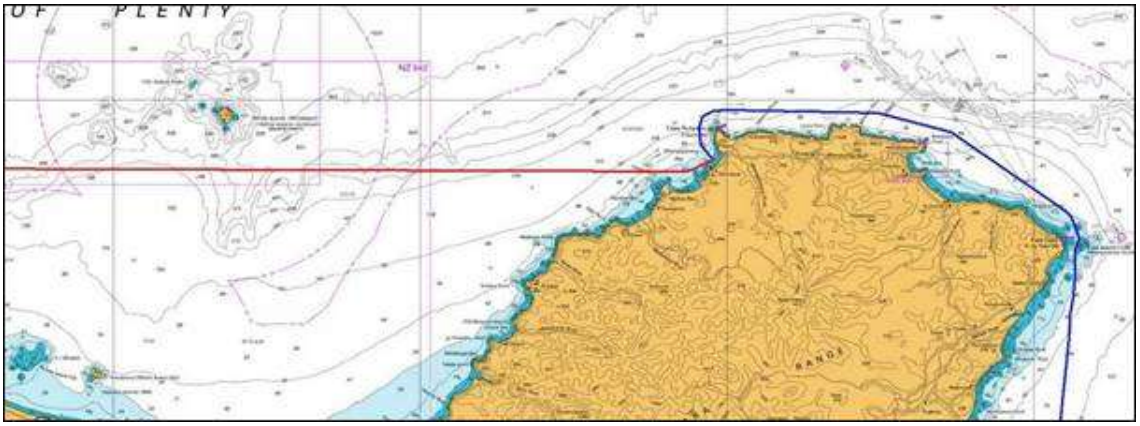
For Tuesday we planned to sail directly to Waihau Bay that is in the Bay of Plenty just south of Cape Runaway. It would be 86 nautical miles and I estimated a journey time of about 14 hours. Leaving, yet again at 0600, would mean we would arrive just on dusk and another long day. As predicted there was a southerly wind overnight. It was light but freshened as we hoisted sail just out of the harbour entrance. For about 90 minutes we had the engine off and were sailing fast. Although the wind on the coast from Palliser to East Cape was predicted to continue to blow from the south for the Bay of Plenty the wind died and then was gentle from the north. It did increase with the day and from 1400 the engine was again silenced.

The rig was full mainsail, jib, and staysail, our course from the north end of Motiti Island was due east and took us within three miles of White Island. It was difficult to see White Island until quite close because of the soft warm fuzzy air. I could see that the island was smoking and we read from the news reports that an eruption had occured. By the mid afternoon the

wind direction had moved to the northeast meaning that Britta was close hauled. As the wind eased the motor assisted.



As the day ended we came to Waihau Bay. It is wide and open to the northwest but wind from the northeast to south comes off the land meaning a calm anchorage. At 0800 we anchored in seven metres of water near the north east end of the bay. The engine was checked and one of the 20 litre cans of diesel carried on deck was emptied into the main tank. We had already enjoyed dinner and once the ship was settled it was early to bed. Our plan was to leave at 0300 so as to round Cape Runaway and East Cape in a predicted north to northwest wind that would rise to 15 knots.



At 0300 Wednesday the northeast wind was still coming from the shore.

"This wind will be against us once around the Cape," was Peter's comment.

"We need to get out there to find out and we can always come back," was my reply. I thought that the valley ashore might be acting as a funnel for the light wind and that conditions at sea might be as predicted. The anchor came aboard and we carefully followed the course on the chart plotter to give a careful clearance of the land and rocks. The two thirds size moon was low to the west and covered by cloud so ahead it was black. By 0400 when we rounded Cape Runaway my hopes proved correct. The sea was glassy, there was

slight boost from the tide and an hour more so later a light draught of air from the northwest. Britta's fine engine worked to give us a steady six knots through the water and continued to do so for many hours but it had to be stopped for fifteen minutes. Two wires had come off the back of the alternator and their terminals needed attention.



Daybreak came when we were abeam of Lottin Point. Daybreak is a magical sight on a calm day. The sky just above the horizon turns orange red and after a while the orb of the sun appears. It was too early to provide much heat but in Britta's covered cockpit conditions were comfortable. The sea was flat and there were a couple of small craft nearby. We did not make the passage between East Cape and East Island until 0900. That was a little later than I expected and my mind was wondering if we might make the direct passage to Wellington rather than Napier. The decision for that could wait until we were by Mahia Peninsular 84 nautical miles away.



For all of the passage to Mahia there was little wind, the sea heaved from a southerly swell that slowly decreased, the sky was clear and the day warm. The engine worked but at times was stopped to check oil and again attach wires to the back of the alternator. They were connected with spade terminals that disliked the engine vibration.



On the distant east horizon there was one ship. It was dark by the time we were seaward of Gisbourne and as usual from there until clear of Mahia the sea was bouncy. There was no wind and the bouncy waves slowed our progress. As we crossed Poverty Bay it was difficult to see the Kahutara lighthouse. It finally appeared through the light mist but when I took over the watch at 0200 both Kahutara and Portland lighthouses were visible. The AIS had some interesting information. It showed a cargo ship to the east of our course and heading north. Directly ahead of Britta was a 16 by 10 metre catamaran. Sometimes it headed directly at us and after a while would turn 90 degrees to port. No lights were visible and that vessel eventually passed about a mile away from our starboard side.

By the end of my watch at 0600 it was daylight and we were 43 nautical miles from Napier. At that position there is silence from cell phones and also from Starlink unless the offshore expensive edition is active. I had already reviewed forecasts the previous afternoon and both Peter and I thought we could get to Wellington just before a predicted northerly blast due Friday night. The course was set at 214 degrees true and stayed like that until 0600 Friday. By then we were near Flat Point and Honeycomb rocks. Nothing of interest happened during the day and night. The sea was calm and the wind light. The forecast had predicted a short burst of 30 knots from the south around 0300 so Peter had pulled down two reefs in the mainsail before retiring to bed.

Near Cape Turnagain the wind did change to the west and freshened but only to 15 knots and created a jobbly speed robbing head sea. It did not last long and vanished when we neared Castle Point. At 0600 Friday we were six miles from the land and northwest of Flat Point. The wind was again having a holiday but Internet access was available and it seemed we would arrive at Wellington Harbour entrance before 2000 hours just as the northerly wind would arrive. So as to reduce travel distance I set the course to close to within one and half miles of TeKauKau point. A light south southeast wind had arrived and Britta was closed hauled on the port tack but with engine still running. We wanted to get to Wellington before dark.

It was a pleasant day and warm. From 0800 our course was a straight arrow that took us to a point due south of the Cape Palliser light by 1430 hours. Three seals had floated by, several Albatross and near the Cape there were small power boats out fishing.



It is 27 miles from the Cape to the entrance of Wellington Harbour. If the wind held in the southeast it would be an easy ride. If it switched to northwest at over 15 knots it would be tedious and lengthy. The wind changed to the east once we were clear of the Cape and that was perfect as it negated the usual southeast set.

At 1800 hours we were due south of Turakirae Head. There were no tide rips and a slightly favourable current. At that point both chart plotters decided that life was too hard and gave up any display of our course and route. They had been giving strange messages during the day but as eyeball navigation still worked admirably I did not seek alternatives (my computer and USB driven GPS). The wind had died by then and as we neared Bearing Head the north east wind arrived. Ahead I could see a yacht under sail coming out of the harbour. It soon proved to be Suhani with Sue and Stephan aboard. They had come out to welcome Britta home.

The headsails were put away and with motor and mainsail we arrived abeam of Barrets Reef buoy at 1941 hours. The wind then eased as we motored up to Seaview and into Britta's berth at 2100 hours. It had been a successful cruise and delivery.