THE AUCKLAND ISLANDS
Vicky and Tom Jackson

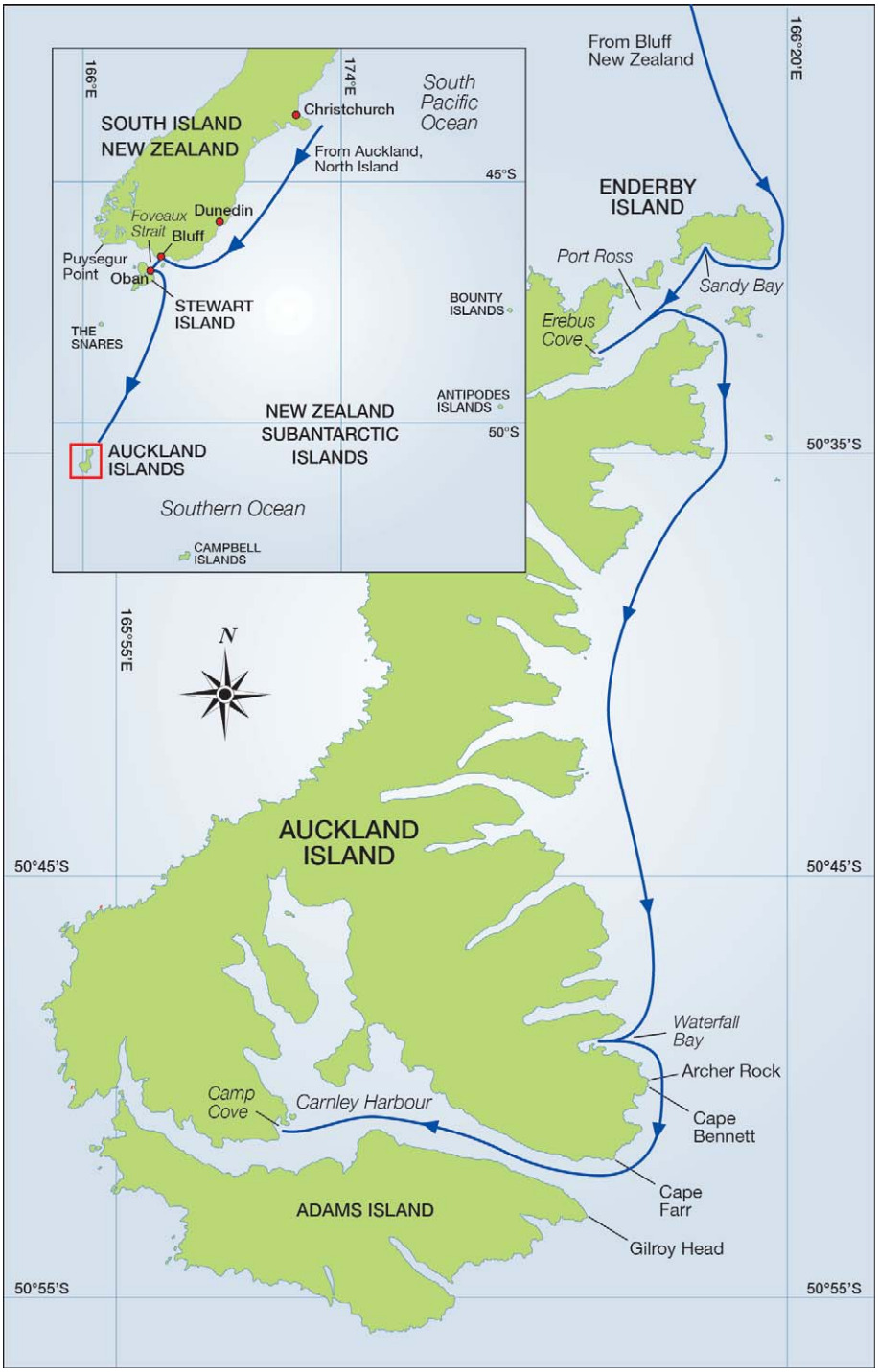
Reaching with the shipwrecked sailors and the albatross,
Beating with the souls of the survivors and the wings of the sea birds.

(*Vicky and Tom Jackson have lived aboard, cruised and raced their 40ft S&S* Sunstone *200,000 miles since 1981. While working full time in the UK they competed successfully on the offshore racing circuit. In 1997 they departed the UK for an extended world cruise and completed a circumnavigation via the southern capes ten years later. Since then they have sailed two circuits of the Pacific Ocean from New Zealand, as well as in the Round New Zealand Two-Handed Race. They are now based in Nelson on the country's South Island.*
All photos are by Vicky Jackson except where credited.)

There has never been a permanent settlement on the Auckland Islands. There have been Maori and Moriori groups eking out a life at some periods. Shipwrecked sailors survived, some for twenty months. British colonists established the settlement of Hardwicke, lasting for less than three years. Whalers and sealers took their bounty, and a few optimistic farmers gave up. Castaway rescue missions, World War Two coast-watchers and the conservationists came and went. But none lasted more than a few years, none was permanent, even given the expansive desires of the 18th and 19th century explorers. It is too wet and windy, the soil is too poor, and perhaps it is just too isolated. This was the destination for our not-so-summery sailing holiday in 2019.

Although the cruise had begun in Auckland on New Zealand's North Island, our stepping-off point was Stewart Island, across the windy Foveaux Strait from South Island and considered by many Kiwis the country's last outpost. We were to sail to New Zealand territory some 220 miles south of Stewart Island at 50°30'S. Even then we were not going to the farthest outpost – Campbell Island, 320 miles from Stewart Island at 52°30'S, is the last speck of New Zealand

Vicky and Tom walking on Enderby Island. Photo Kevin Beaumont



Overfall waves approaching Enderby Island

territory in the Southern Ocean. Before our sail across that boisterous stretch of ocean, Oban, capital of Stewart Island (population around 400), provided us with a few comforts. First, the Four Square supermarket, to buy some fresher fruit and veggies and add another packet of ginger nuts, a few more bars of dark chocolate and packets of Cup-a-Soup, and second, the South Sea Hotel, the local pub, to drink tap beer, watch some rugby and have our fill of blue cod, chips and salad.

Our Auckland friend Charles Bradfield had been keen to visit the Auckland Islands in his yacht *Vingilot*, a Cavalier 45. We had also hoped to visit these remote islands, but the stringent requirements of the Department of Conservation (DoC) meant that teaming up on a larger yacht, with room for five or six crew, would work much better. So we were aboard *Vingilot*, not *Sunstone*. There was no denying that we were also attracted, in our older age and increasingly sybaritic ways, to comforts such as ducted heating, a very protected cockpit, hot water, a shower, a freezer and a 'fridge. The adventure had been in planning for two years. Prior to the intended visit, Charles had to work with the DoC to seek permission, with two yacht inspections and many forms to complete. There was also a requirement that at least one, and preferably two, crew would remain on the yacht at all times. Shore visits would have to be in rotation.

The Auckland Islands are part of the New Zealand Subantarctic Islands. The other four groups are The Snares, Bounty, Antipodes and Campbell Islands. They have been called a 'seabird capital' hosting over 40 breeding seabird species, comprising around 11% of the world's seabird population. The flora is unique and diverse, with more than 35 plants endemic to the region, several found on only one island group. This could hardly be a better draw for us – rarely visited, thousands of seabirds, unique flora, remote. Long ago we had learnt that to take in all those qualities you may have to suffer some cold, wet, windy and harsh sea conditions. We were not put off. Neither were our companions on board – Charles Bradfield (skipper), Kevin Beaumont (crew), and Simon Mitchell (a previous visitor to the Auckland Islands as DoC volunteer and wreck diver).

After a final inspection by a DoC employee at Bluff on the southern tip of the South Island, we set sail at 1510 on 24th February 2019 – destination Enderby Island, the northern of the Auckland Islands group at 50°30'S 166°20'E. The start was benign, a close reach with a westerly 12–18 knots, but at 1750 Vicky heard something on the VHF that was perfectly normal but thought-provoking ... "sea area Puysegur; storm warning, NW 50–55 knots, high seas ...". Puysegur, South Island's southwest headland, records a gale or storm warning 100 days each year. We rechecked the weather models and pressed on – further south we should not have more than 40 knots.

In the end we had no more than 35 knots and a wet, bouncy 60° reach, with the wind then abating before heading. It was not the weather which was most testing through the night, however, but seeing the targets on the AIS. We had to weave our way through a line of twelve large Russian trawlers, each 80–100m long. These are productive fishing grounds.

The welcome at the eastern tip of Enderby Island, after 270 miles and 42 hours, was a taste of the days ahead. As the waters shallowed, the waves rose. The breaking crests of the overfalls were photogenic and exhilarating to watch, but not so comfortable to experience. Albatross became our constant neighbours, flying alongside *Vingilot*, swooping, soaring and gliding.

The anchor rumbled out on a calm, sunny morning in Sandy Bay, which lived up to its name. Ashore three small buildings stood out – man-made features in an otherwise pristine environment. Through binoculars we spied three figures making their way down to the beach. We had been told that there might be DoC staff living in these huts over the summer months. The calm conditions encouraged Charles to take a quick shore visit with Simon and Kevin. Two hours later, over tea and scones, we were told stories of the programme of sealion population assessment by Andrew, Aditi and Helena. The Sandy Bay anchorage is well protected from the northern sector; but a strong southwesterly was predicted so we stayed only three hours. The first night's anchorage was spent in Erebus Cove, on the western side of Port Ross.

Simon and Charles in the dinghy, Sandy Bay

Vingilot with a background of rata trees, Erebus Cove

The World Heritage Area nomination for 1997 states: 'There are days when these islands are enveloped in an unsurpassed bleakness, and days of bright blue clarity when they are the most invigorating and wild places on earth'. The descriptions of the weather from sailors, settlers and conservationists provide a dismal picture of these specks in the southern ocean – 'strong gales ... strong gales ... gales with hail ... strong gales and rain, hail and snow'. At least the winters are relatively mild, but autumn and spring is filled with rain and gusty, cold winds. Hail in the summer is common place. Rare fine days – or even a few hours – were well appreciated.

That evening we celebrated our arrival, taking in a view that all those before us had described so vividly – sheets of rain, grey scudding clouds, white water just visible across the bay in the full force of the southwesterly gale, and it was cold. But with the heating on, a glass in hand and food in the oven, we felt far more privileged than those early shipwrecked sailors, the failing settlers, the castaways and more recently the DoC staff.

The second day of our stay was cool, showery and windy, with more rain later in the day. Vicky, Tom and Simon donned layers of Merino and Gore-Tex rainwear, plus hats and gloves, to provide some protection, at least for the first couple of hours. Joined by DoC researcher Andrew we tackled the 5½ mile circuit of Enderby Island. Aditi had suggested that we allow six or seven hours as in some sections the tramping is through thigh-high, spiky tussock grass or low unyielding hebe bushes. Returning in five hours, we were wet, cold, challenged but rewarded.

The shoreline provided interest throughout – dramatic cliffs and caves, tiered platforms with columnar boulders and stones, rock pools, sandy coves and beaches, golden and black. Surf and swells pounded the northern cliffs with a near-gale northwesterly, and

Megaherbs and the northern cliffs, Enderby Island

the huge beds of kelp were mesmerising as the forest strands danced – curling, twirling, twisting, jumping – in an ever-changing pattern of movement, colour and texture as surge disturbed the leathery brown tentacles. Blue, turquoise and white water washed over the dancing forest as breakers sped in and the undercurrents pulled out.

Much of the vegetation is endemic to these subantarctic islands. The leaves, stems, flowers and names were new to us. We had never heard the term 'megaherbs' – a group of herbaceous perennial wildflowers that flourish on all the island groups. Mega meaning large, they have evolved to adapt to the harsh weather conditions and reduced sunlight. We were past high summer and into early autumn so the colours on all the plants had faded, but with low light the last of the colours became more obvious, on both blooms and leaves. This was also true of the rata forests* which line much of the coast of the islands with an entangled maze of low-growth trees.

* Rata forest is characterised by lower trunks as well as branches being inclined or even prostrate as a result of wind action.

Dancing kelp

A yellow-eyed penguin hides from us

Currency is not an obvious place to research flora and fauna of far-off destinations. The New Zealand $5 note, however, features a scene from Campbell Island similar to what we also saw on Enderby – *Bulbinella rossii* the yellow Ross lily and purple daisies (both megaherbs) with a curious yellow-eyed penguin (*Megadyptes antipodes* or *hoiho*).

The yellow-eyed are shy penguins. We spied some hiding or sheltering under heavy undergrowth or poking their beaks out from behind rocks. More obvious are the sometimes boisterous and inquisitive New Zealand sealions. They featured on just about all the beaches, coves, rocky foreshores and in grassy swards all over Enderby Island. In one encounter a more determined female sealion followed us for more than half a mile. Followed is perhaps an understatement – it felt more like a chase. Andrew had suggested that a tramping stick was useful not just for the knees and balance, but to fend off any inquisitive sealions. A gentle tap on the nose or whiskers is supposed to see them away.

Along with the sea creatures, visitors are attracted to these remote islands for bird watching. Land birds abound, and we saw banded dotterel, tomtits and pipits and the brightly marked red-crowned parakeets. Seabirds are even more numerous – shag, terns, prions, petrels and, for us, the most majestic of them all, the albatross. We have been fortunate to see these giants in many places while sailing, more often on the wing or floating*. The Auckland Islands were the pinnacle of our sightings, with varied species flying and nesting. On Enderby we could hardly miss the southern royal albatross, sitting on a 'nest' of a few, loose branches – they were dotted over the flat, moor-like plateau, sitting head and shoulders above the low vegetation. We also saw white-capped mollymawks and the Gibson's wandering albatross.

* The cover of *Flying Fish* 2015/1 featured two royal albatross photographed by Vicky at Stewart Island. Admire it on the website at https://oceancruisingclub.org/Flying-Fish-Archive.

A light-mantled sooty albatross in flight

One species that we watched for hours was the elegant, light-mantled sooty albatross. On the northern cliffs we spied an adult sooty. We watched with interest. And as we watched, three grey rocks morphed into three fluffy, grey chicks. It was delightful to watch the caring parent and now larger youngsters, perched dramatically on a tiny ledge, 30m above the foaming southern ocean. If a chick fell that could be the end. They were probably born in December and from two families, and would not be fully fledged until May, another couple of months. With one or two eggs every second year, the parents could have a long wait for another.

Tom, Andrew and Simon eyeing a sealion on our wet walk around Enderby Island

Two sooty albatross chicks on a rocky ledge

Watching the mothering behaviour of the southern royal albatross was special. Albatross are monogamous, with both parents taking turns at incubation and feeding. We saw royals at the incubation stage, nestling the one large, white egg neatly under their body among the warm, soft feathers but avoiding it with their large feet. Feeding is by regurgitation. In turns, one parent flies over the ocean, eating fish. On return this parent will sit near to, or almost over, the tiny, squeaking, white and grey downy bundle. Chick and parent beaks come together in a gentle, nurturing touch. The chick pushes its small beak deep into the throat of its parent and fishy 'baby food' will satisfy the eager youngster. It is easy to be anthropomorphic in these wildlife moments, but the caring, gentle nurturing was obvious. We felt hugely privileged watching these interactions amid the wild splendour of Enderby Island.

A southern royal albatross mother and chick

Hardwicke cemetery

Another day of exploration took us back to Erebus Cove in settled weather. From the anchorage we spied some structures – clearly a place for further investigation. Landing the inflatable on the stony beach we found a boatshed and the collapsed remains of a castaway depot. An obvious track led inland, through the twisted trunks of the southern rata and daisy bush (*olearia*), with tomtits perched on branches. A track must lead somewhere, or so we surmised. Anyway the birds, trees and plants were interesting. After only fifteen minutes the track came to an abrupt end and there was a destination – the Hardwicke Cemetery, which was well-tended by the DoC and free from infiltration by the forest and undergrowth.

The Hardwicke settlement was named after the Earl of Hardwicke, governor of the settlers' whaling company, Samuel Enderby & Sons. It has now returned to nature, with no trace of the thirty houses constructed in 1860 to house the English colonists who had travelled halfway around the globe to make a 'new' life on Auckland Island. For many reasons these settlers lasted only two years and nine months. The hardships were immense, the soil infertile, the reported whales in very small numbers, and the rain, low cloud, wind and dampness incessant. The population peaked at 300. There were five weddings and 16 births – there were also deaths. One of the headstones provides a poignant reminder of all their struggles: 'Isabel Younger, died aged three months, in 1850'. In respect to these hardy souls we read all the inscriptions on the six headstones. Some, of later deaths, were for shipwrecked mariners.

Of the three main islands in the Auckland group, the southern Adams Island is separated from Auckland Island at both the eastern and western ends – though the latter gap is only 100m wide with strong currents. In the middle sections Carnley Harbour is expansive. For the early sailors – explorers, whalers and sealers – it was a place of shelter from ocean swells, and was probably seen too as a more sheltered anchorage. For those sailing in the 19th and 20th century, and for us in the 21st century, this proved more myth than reality.

'Champagne sailing'. Vingilot reaching down the east coast of Auckland Island

"Champagne sailing in the southern ocean!" Charles's voice rang out as we close-reached down the east coast of Auckland Island in sunshine and 15 knots of westerly wind towards Carnley Harbour. *Vingilot* was kicking her heels and the crew were in high spirits. We dipped into Waterfall Bay to check it as a potential anchorage. It seemed protected, although with some kelp, and was a pretty spot, although we would not be able to go ashore as it is not on the DoC approved list. We came out and sailed on past Archer Rock, around Cape Bennett and on towards Gilroy Head, the easternmost tip of Adams Island. At 1630 we approached the eastern entrance to Carnley Harbour. The genoa was furled and we motor-sailed around Cape Farr. Then the wind hit.

The narrow funnel into Carnley Harbour was a mass of white water with short, steep waves, the only expected element being that the wind was from the west. But not the 15 knots outside – we were struggling, beating with the main, assisted by engine, into 45–55 knots. Progress was slow, closing the grey, volcanic cliffs on each shore before tacking as we crawled into the more open section of the harbour. The lay of the land creates katabatic (downslope) winds with *rachas* (gusts) accelerating off the higher hills even when conditions on the open ocean are benign.

The crew were quiet. We were all deep in our own thoughts about the next few hours, wondering whether we would find shelter at Camp Cove, our intended anchorage, or whether we might have to abort and head back to Waterfall Bay or even further north. Spray showered the decks, the wind howled, williwaws hit with more force, blue and white mixed on the water and in the air, the rig shook. Tom and I thought about the next few hours but we also thought about how this would have been on board *Sunstone*. Here we were sheltered within the 'igloo' around the cockpit, we were not getting

Grey cliffs and grey clouds at Carnley Harbour

soaked with every wave, although in habitual anticipation Vicky was turning her head away from big gusts and ducked when a wave hit. Reactions die hard after 38 years!

The *Grafton* experienced even worse in January 1864. Anchored in Carnley Harbour they were slammed by hurricane-force winds, the anchors dragged and the schooner was washed ashore onto the rocks. The five crew struggled ashore. Many books have been written about and by shipwrecked survivors and the stories of the *Grafton* and the *Invercauld*, also wrecked in 1864 on Auckland Island, should be required survival reading. Two shipwrecks, two sets of survivors, one in Carnley Harbour, one in Port Ross, but each unaware of the other. For one group their decisions, actions and co-operation were of the highest standard; for the second the decision-making was poor, there was enmity, contempt and questions of hierarchy. The accounts of these two groups highlight the importance of working together, leadership, ingenuity, perseverance, mental strength, foresight and hope*.

Camp Cove provided the shelter we hoped for. As we pressed on into the more open stretches of Carnley Harbour the wind slowly decreased to 15 knots. Setting the anchor in a small circular bay, the water was flat with just 5–10 knots of westerly and the occasional gust down the valley. The crew started communicating again – the strong winds and thoughts for the next day were discussed. We enjoyed the solitary, if grey, dampness of our harbour on Auckland Island but also the warmth around the saloon table.

The sail out of Carnley was a repeat of the horrendous conditions, except that this time the wind was from behind and it lasted some way up the east coast. The low clouds, the steep cliffs, the spray and spume, gave a picture in black and white, though later the sun peeped through the clouds. There were some struggles in the

* Visit https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grafton_(ship) for information about both vessels.

Sailing out of Carnley Harbour in 50 knots

45–50 knots of wind with waves over *Vingilot*. The less experienced aboard saw the white spume, the water smoking with *rachas* on a sun-drenched cobalt ocean and a bright rainbow growing out of the steep volcanic cliffs, as beautiful and photogenic. The sailors were more contemplative about the rig, the steering, the next sheltered anchorage and the impending northwesterly gale, due later in the afternoon. It seemed almost familiar as we anchored in Sandy Bay again, with limited visibility. The wind was up, the grey was down, but the anchor was well-set in the sand. We were below for the next 24 hours.

We were sailing on a different yacht and with crew, fundamental changes for the *Sunstoners*. *Vingilot* is a far more complex yacht than *Sunstone*, with autopilot, genset, satellite phone and computer navigation in addition to the creature comforts mentioned previously. These additions certainly provide more comfort, but there is also more to go wrong, more time must be spent in maintenance, checking and cleaning, and more spares must be carried. Sailing with more than two people gives more time for conversation, less for personal contemplation. One distinct upside is getting more sleep. Meal preparation takes longer but sitting together over a meal, reliving challenging experiences is another positive feature.

'How long were you there?' was a frequent question on our return to Auckland city, after sailing 3066 miles circumnavigating New Zealand over 41 days. 'In the Auckland Islands, seven days with three shore trips'. 'That was a long way to go for a short time. Was it worth it?' It was a long, cold, windy way to go but 'Yes', it was worth it, it was really worth it. It was amazing to see such wild, remote beauty and feel so close to nature. The best memories are made from hardship and some risk.