

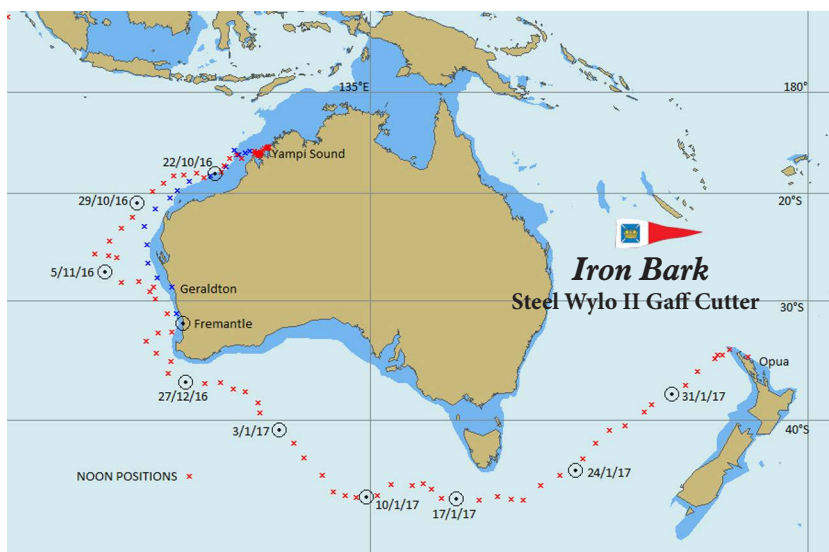
## Kimberley, Crocs, and a Battering in the Bight to...

### ... New Zealand

Trevor Robertson

*Iron Bark* and I arrived in Western Australia from Newfoundland on 31 March 2016 after a slow and not always easy passage of 171 days. I spent three months in Fremantle catching up with family and friends while refitting *Iron Bark* and in late June sailed northward for the Kimberley coast of Western Australia. The Kimberley has an area of 430,000 sq km, which is a bit bigger than Germany, with 40,000 people, 100,000 crocodiles and 40,000 humpbacked whales. I like places with more wildlife than people. Most of it is rugged country with no roads; transport is by sea or helicopter. As it is 1,500 miles to windward of any city, the number of yachts is trivial though there are a few charter boats and small tour ships. The tidal range is up to 12m, the largest in Australia, with tidal streams to match. Large areas of the coast are unsurveyed and the turbid water makes pilotage by eye challenging. Altogether it is a fascinating place.

The passage northward from Fremantle was straightforward with generally fair winds, as one would expect given the latitude and time of year. Unusually, I had a crew for the first 230nm. John Clarke, an old



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friend, came along as far as Geraldton, which took two and a half days. When servicing the Aries wind vane in Fremantle I had reassembled it incorrectly so we had to hand steer most of the way to Geraldton. That was



Anchored in Myridi Creek

no great hardship with two of us and once at anchor it did not take long to fix the Aries.

I continued north from Geraldton with a fair wind that held for 12 days. Then, having got within 150nm of my destination, Yampi Sound, the wind backed and strengthened to E7. This was a dead noser and I spent two and half uncomfortable

days bashing into it, making minimal progress; I should have heaved-to and waited it out. Eventually the wind eased, allowing me to beat into Yampi Sound and come to anchor in Myridi Creek on 16 July, 18 days from Fremantle. It was a pleasant, uneventful passage whose details would soon blur without reference to the logbook.

Yampi Sound is about 18nm by 4nm and separated from the Timor Sea by a fringe of islands. The spring tidal range is 9m. By the standards of the Kimberley coast, Yampi Sound is a busy place. There are abandoned iron mines on two islands, a barge selling fuel is moored in one of its creeks and there is a



permanently occupied camp in another creek. I soon met Scottie, the occupant of this camp in Silver Gull Creek, and we got on well. The camp has a tank fed by an artesian spring that is the most reliable water source

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for many miles and provides a swimming pool/bath heated to 32°C. This brings a trickle of tourists from charter yachts and Scottie sells them mother of pearl trinkets to pay for his provisions.

After a week of pottering around Yampi Sound, I sailed around for King Sound to have a look at an unsurveyed bay irresistibly named, 'The Graveyard'.

The tidal streams in King Sound are strong and at times *Barky* was doing 10kts over the ground in winds so light that she barely had steerage way. The Graveyard is so named because an island near its entrance was used by the pearlers to bury their dead, mostly divers



Afloat in Silver Gull Creek. The dark shape on the raft is the resident crocodile, sunning herself

killed by the bends before the need to decompress was understood. Inside The Graveyard I found a good anchorage where I spent four weeks grinding and repainting *Iron Bark's* decks, exploring and charting The Graveyard and scrambling over the islands and mainland hills. The country surrounding The Graveyard is harsh and inhospitable, even by Australian standards, and I saw no evidence of past aboriginal occupation; no rock paintings, no discarded spearheads, no fire blackening of the roof of rock shelters. The monsoon rains had failed for the past three years and The Graveyard, like the rest of the Kimberley, was drought-stricken. The steep hills are composed of blocky siliceous sandstone covered with spinifex and half-dead scrub. Spinifex is a spiky, tussocky grass with sharp, siliceous tips that penetrate the skin then break off and become infected. I have spent a lot of time working in spinifex country and still find it unpleasant. I also found the clouds of voracious sandflies and the unremitting heat discouraging, so my hiking was limited.

I sailed back to Yampi Sound late in August and stopped at Silver Gull Creek to visit Scottie and top up with water. Yarning with Scottie, it emerged that he had not been out of his camp for a year and wanted to visit his family as well as do some shopping for luxuries like a VHF radio and a pair of boots. He needed someone to look after the camp while he was away. Would I do it?

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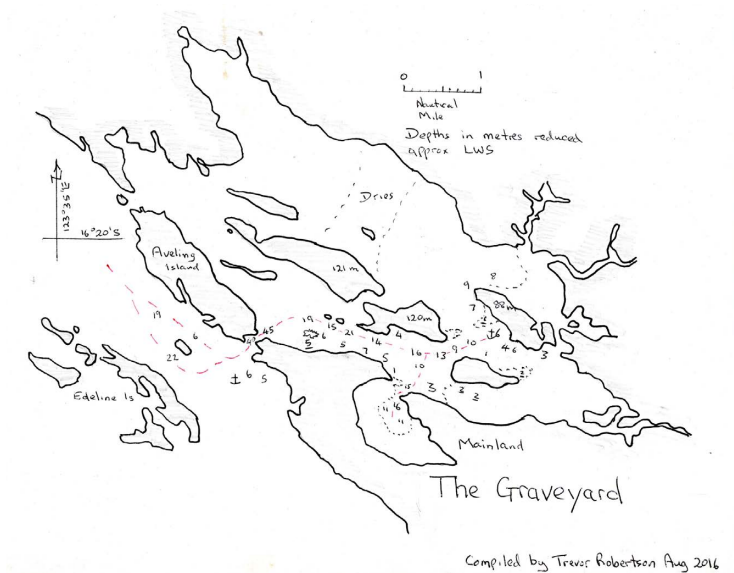
It was too good an opportunity to refuse. Camping at Silver Gull Creek for a month would let me get to know the area in a way that I never could on short trips ashore. For me to appreciate an area I need time to get to know the landscape and its animals. That is why in the past I have chosen to spend a winter in one place in the high Arctic or Antarctica rather



Ruins in Camden Harbour

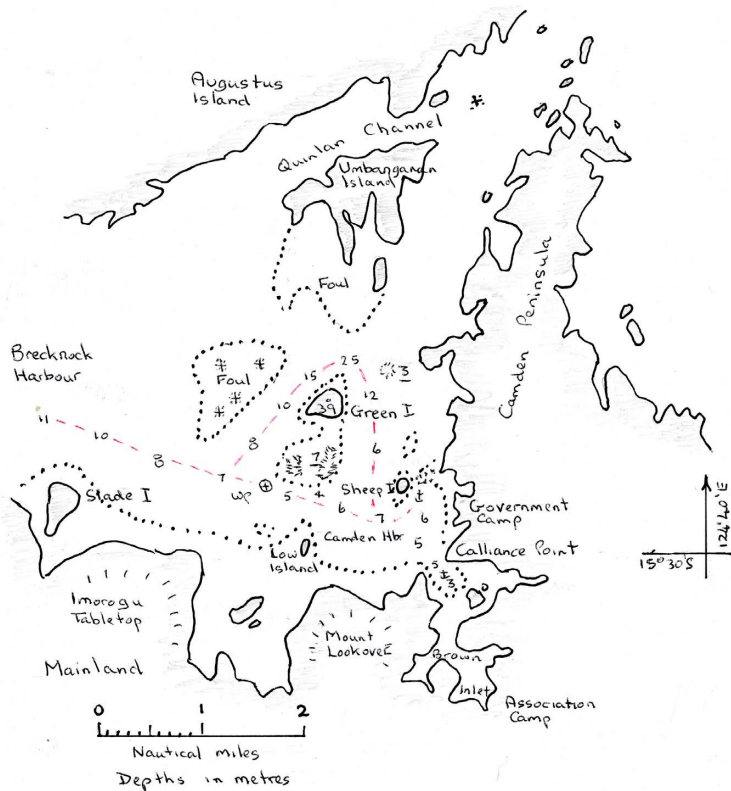
than attempting to cover the maximum amount of territory in the time available. Admittedly, the sea being frozen for seven or eight months during the winter had a lot to do with not moving on in those cases.

Scottie arranged a ride to town on the fuel barge that was anchored a few miles away in Dog Leg Creek when it made its next trip to Derby. That was in two weeks; I promised to be back before then and set off to look at Camden Sound in the interim. It took me a couple of days to sail the 100 or so miles there, anchoring along the way at Deception Bay and Samson Inlet and arrived in Camden Harbour on 3 September. In 1864 this was the site of the first attempt at colonial settlement of the Kimberley district, by farmers from eastern Australia. The country is rugged, rocky, covered



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by spinifex, has no permanent water and little topsoil. The settlement failed with considerable loss of life and the survivors retreated south leaving a few ruined drystone chimneys and graves to mark their efforts. It is a testament to the harshness of the country that the area remains uninhabited.



# CAMDEN HARBOUR

Compiled by Trevor Robertson Sept 2016

I spent ten days there exploring the shores and sounding the harbour for a sketch chart. There are numerous shoals and the water is muddy making it difficult to use *Iron Bark* for much of the survey, so I did it largely from the dinghy using a hand-held echo sounder, rowing about 20nm in the process. The area was charted at a reconnaissance scale in 1970, but since then two islands have disappeared and the harbour has shoaled considerably. My sketch chart should help if visiting the area, but go warily as I undoubtedly missed some shoals. There is a large resident crocodile to watch out for when landing from a dinghy.



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I returned to Silver Gull Creek on 10 September and Scottie departed to sample the joys of civilization for the first time in a year. The nearest float hole for *Iron Bark* was 2nm down the creek and out of sight of the camp, so I brought *Barky* up the creek and moored her opposite the camp and let her dry out on each tide.



One of the Kimberley rock monitors in the kitchen

Scottie's camp is quite sophisticated, with a waterproof tin roof, solar panels to run a fridge and even an intermittent internet connection (satellites, sunspots and cloud cover permitting). The camp has a dirt floor and there are no walls so the local wildlife wanders through, uninhibited. Resident in the kitchen area was a small group of dunnarts (marsupial mice) and three Kimberley rock monitors. These lizards are about 700 or 800mm long, but very thin, a big one might weight 500gm, and are quite shy. Intermittent visitors to the kitchen included golden tailed tree rats (endangered, so tolerated though they make a dreadful noise running back and forth on the roof at night) and greater bowerbirds.

The bowerbirds are bold and thievish, with a particular liking for blue kitchen wipes that they use to decorate their bowers. There were a lot of other birds around the camp including a barking owl living in a tree overhanging the kitchen. The wallabies in the surrounding scrub seldom came into the camp. Various reptiles including large skinks and a variety of snakes were occasional visitors. Most of the snakes were fairly harmless, a python, a whip snake and the like, but I did see a taipan, which is of the world's more venomous snakes. I threw rocks at it from a safe distance. There was inevitably a resident crocodile in the creek below the camp. It was a wee timid thing just over 2m long and I never managed to get within 150m of her. In contrast, her neighbour in the next creek - saltwater crocodiles are territorial - was a big, aggressive bastard who chased dinghies. Apart from the wildlife, there was a steady trickle of



Silver Gull Creek inhabitants, Nigel the barking owl

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visitors, and it was rare to go three days without seeing someone.

Scottie got back to Silver Gull on 13 October by flying across Australia to Derby then hitching a ride for the final 150nm with a fisherman. I took *Iron Bark* down the creek on the next tide and two days later sailed for Fremantle. The North West Monsoon had set in so the first part of the passage, from Yampi Sound to North West Cape, was to windward. That took two weeks with long tacks to seaward, during which I sailed 1,200nm to make good 650nm before rounding North West Cape. By this time the prevailing summer southerly winds had set in along the west coast so the remaining 1,000nm to Fremantle was also to windward. That took another two weeks. By the time I arrived in Fremantle on 12 November, having taken 28 days and sailed 2,579nm to make good 1,600nm, I was getting tired of life on a heel with the hatches dogged, but otherwise it was an easy enough passage.

After sorting out a backlog of personal matters and reprovisioning, I set out from Fremantle on 20 December 2016, hoping to get around Cape Horn to the Falklands before winter set in, with the option of diverting to Tasmania or New Zealand if delayed. The voyage would be largely in the Westerlies of the Southern Ocean and likely to be rough. I expected to have to beat south from Fremantle to reach the Westerlies. I thought it might take five or six days, but it took 18 days. For that time there was nothing but strong headwinds frustratingly interspersed with calms and I was 900nm south-east of Albany, in 45°24'S, 131°11'E, before I found fair, west winds.

As expected, the westerlies were boisterous and almost immediately rose to gale force. That first gale briefly reached SW9 then eased to W7 and I ran off under bare poles with the Jordan series-drogue astern. I streamed the drogue as much for comfort as for safety. The gale only lasted 12 hours but the next depression was on us within 24 hours. The wind quickly built to NNWF11, so I streamed the drogue again. *Iron Bark* ran steadily before it, with no sign of broaching and shipping very little water, while I cowered below. The seas were huge, majestic, terrifying and worthy of all that has been written about the greybeards of the Roaring Forties. I have done quite a few miles in the Southern Ocean and the seas there never cease to overawe me. They are far bigger than anything I have ever seen in the North Atlantic. Some were so big that *Iron Bark* almost becalmed in the troughs. When that happened the tension came off the drogue, and on three occasions there was enough slack for one leg of the drogue's bridle to take a turn around the Aries servo paddle. Twice I managed to free it; the third time I was not quick enough and the whole lower leg of the Aries was torn off. The shear coupling in the Aries paddle proved to be stronger than the shaft it was meant to protect.

I have a fairly full set of spares for the Aries gear, but not enough to fix

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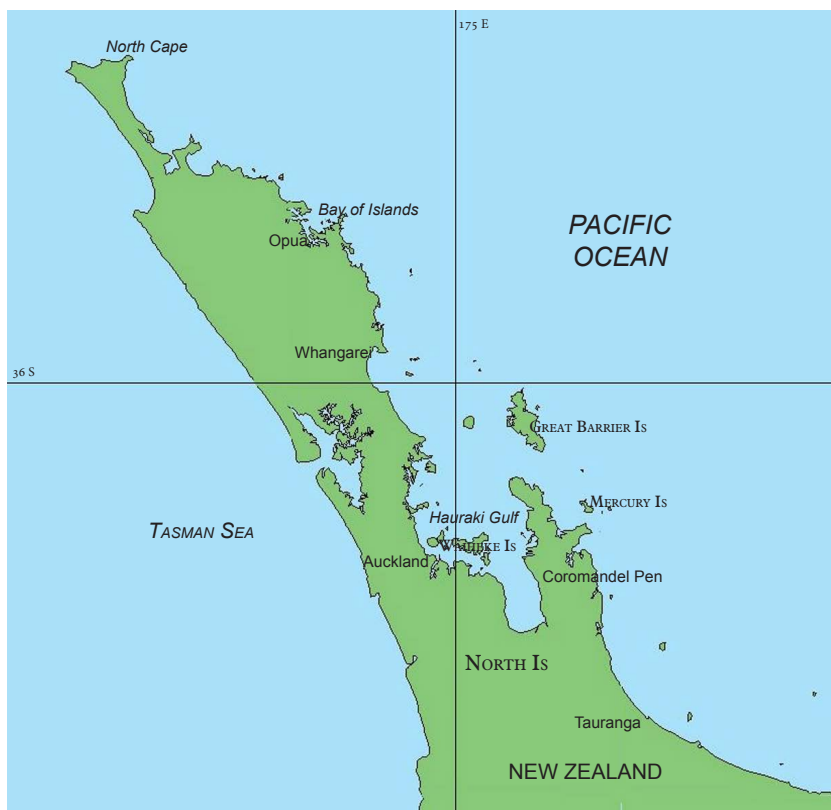
this, so was henceforth without any self-steering. In the short term this was not a problem as while running with the drogue astern the tiller is lashed and self-steering disengaged. In a vessel of *Iron Bark*'s size there is little option to running off once the wind reaches F10, at least in the sort of seas found in the Southern Ocean. To remain hove-to in those conditions is just too dangerous; the strain on the rig and sails is enormous and a great weight of water breaks aboard. In the Atlantic, where the seas do not have the same weight and size, the upper limit for *Iron Bark* to remain hove-to is probably slightly higher, perhaps near the top of F10. Lying ahull in F10 or above seems to me an invitation to a rig-destroying knock down and I now regard a drogue as essential equipment for Southern Ocean voyages. From my limited experience a Jordan series-drogue is by far the best option, despite some problems with damage to the cones after prolonged deployment.

Having lost the self-steering, I had to decide what to do next. Although she does not have an electronic autopilot, *Iron Bark* can of course be sailed without a self-steering gear, either by hand-steering or with the sails trimmed for balance so she will steer herself. The first option was unattractive; I had no desire to be tied to the tiller for 16 or 18 hours per day for a month or more. Trimming the sails to achieve self-steering rather than for maximum speed is not difficult but slows *Iron Bark* down by about a knot when running before a fair wind. My timetable to get around Cape Horn was tight when the self-steering was functioning. With the potential loss of 25 miles per day it would be early winter before I was past that draughty corner. I decided to give up on Cape Horn and head north to refit.

The nearest land was Tasmania, about 650nm off, but I did not want to close that lee shore in the conditions prevailing; besides, New Zealand seemed a more interesting option. For the next two weeks I continued east, keeping south of 45°S to give Tasmania a wide berth. Running off with drogues in heavy weather is an excellent tactic, but it requires sea room. Almost immediately after deciding to head for New Zealand another F10 storm hit, which I rode out by running off under bare poles towing the Jordan drogue. There were two more gales of F8-9 before I had made enough easting to start edging north up the Tasman Sea toward better weather and warmer water. Again I ran before both these gales under bare poles with the drogue deployed. By this time the drogue was looking pretty battered, with many of its cones frayed and some burst, testimony to a very rough passage.

On 23 January, in a fair weather interval between gales, I found the bobstay detached from the bowsprit and trailing from the cutwater. The inboard end of *Iron Bark*'s bowsprit sits in a fitting on the stem head and the bowsprit is merely a strut in compression without the long section on





the foredeck between the bitts and gammoning that stiffens a traditional bowsprit. To my considerable surprise, despite the loss of the bobstay, the bowsprit was barely quivering. I lost no time rolling the jib up to get the strain off the bowsprit then crawled very carefully down that now dubiously supported spar to re-attach the bobstay to the crane iron by rigging a tackle in place of the missing rigging screw. The loss of the bobstay did not endanger the mast, as *Iron Bark* is a cutter so the inner forestay gives the mast its forward support. However, losing the bowsprit and thus ability to set sail from its end would have made it difficult to get her to steer herself, at least until I could rig a jury bowsprit. I believe the bobstay detached when the shackle attaching its rigging screw to the crane iron lost its mousing and worked loose.

On 29 January 2017, 39 days out from Fremantle, we crossed 40°S and left the Southern Ocean behind. The rest of the passage to New Zealand was straightforward, but slow. In the Variables, the wind was seldom steady in direction or strength. Daily runs were 20-120nm, ending with an extended calm near the North Cape of New Zealand. After three days

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A quiet dawn off the North Cape of NZ

of creeping along on little more than the flap of the sails, I finally got within motoring range of the Bay of Islands. Having no electronic autopilot, motoring in a calm required steering by hand; I spent 38 tedious hours in the next two days, motoring the final 150nm to Opuā. Prior

to this I spent less than an hour at the helm in the 27 days since losing the *Aries*; my preference for sailing over motoring is practical as well as aesthetic. I secured alongside the quarantine dock at Opuā at dusk on 7 February, 49 days out from Fremantle.

I spent a couple of weeks in the Bay of Islands, enjoying fresh food and the company of some interesting voyaging sailors and doing a few odd jobs on *Iron Bark*, then sailed 45nm down to Whangarei to haul out and build a new self-steering gear. The upper section of the *Aries* was undamaged so I used its vane and bevel gears to drive a trim tab gear on the rudder. Unfortunately a tiller attached to the stub of the *Aries* shaft turned the trim tab in the opposite direction to that required. The method I used to reverse the action is not elegant. After testing the new self-steering I returned to Parua Bay at the entrance to Whangarei Harbour for some final modifications and to visit my cousin Russell Smith and his wife, Rosalie. I took the bits to be modified to their house and converted their garage to a welding shop, while using their laundry and being wined and dined most hospitably.



Day's end – round up and let go

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Parua Bay is open to the SE and the next night it blew hard from that direction. Some squalls were well over 50kts and during one the anchor dragged about 100m. By pure luck we did not hit anything, but we were uncomfortably close to a reef when the anchor finally held. I started the motor and retrieved the anchor with difficulty. Then, with full throttle giving me bare steerage way, we crept 400m offshore where I laid a 75lb fisherman anchor in addition to the 60lb Manson Supreme that had dragged; we then never budged. It goes without saying that all this was in horizontal rain and complete darkness without a single shore lights to



Great Barrier Island's old logging tramways make fine walking tracks

give me a reference point.

With the urgent work on *Iron Bark* done, I declared a holiday and spent the four months wandering the coast from the Bay of Island to the Bay of Plenty, catching up with old friends and making new, and visiting favourite anchorages. The Bay of Islands is a celebrated sailing ground, but there are scores of other pleasant bays and harbours in Northland and the Hauraki Gulf. Good anchorages are close together and the only place I used a marina was Tauranga. Except in the immediate vicinity of Auckland, the anchorages are seldom crowded and most of the time *Iron Bark* had them to herself.

It was a pleasant, unhurried time. While anchored in Oneroa Bay on Waiheke Island, I met Helena, owner of a handsome wooden launch called *Margaret Ann* that Helena was restoring. We got on well so went for a sail together, spending a month pottering between the Hauraki Gulf and the Bay of Islands. With the approach of winter most of the anchorages were empty, but the weather was generally fine. The area is well charted and safe anchorages are not far apart, which makes for pleasant, undemanding sailing. The weather forecasts are good so there was no reason to be caught out by bad weather; we rode out a gale anchored snugly in Kiwiriki Bay on Great Barrier Island and another at Te Kouma on the Coromandel Peninsula. The evenings were cool but *Iron Bark's* home-built stove burns almost anything and keeps the boat warm and dry. In this part of New Zealand there are plenty of pinecones and that was our normal fuel, augmented by coal when in built-up areas where foraging is difficult.

I particularly like Great Barrier Island, which has a good harbour, few

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people or roads and some fine walks. It is about 55nm from Auckland, which is too far for most yachts to go for a weekend and so generally uncrowded. The island was extensively logged early in the twentieth century, but is



Dried out for a scrub and laundry at Smokehouse Bay

now largely re-forested. The beds of the tramways used to get the timber out make excellent walking tracks. The fishing is good, and there is a very useful facility at Smokehouse Bay in Port Fitzroy. The Smokehouse Bay amenities can only be accessed by sea: there is a bathhouse with a view of the anchorage (hot water from a wood-fired boiler, find your own wood, axe provided); a fish-smoking house; laundry troughs and an excellent set of piles to dry out against, all with running water from a spring-fed tank on the hillside. It is on privately owned land covenanted for public use, has no caretaker and is maintained by voluntary work by the landowners, the crews of passing yachts and occasional financial help from the Auckland yacht clubs.

On 7 June we returned to Waiheke Island for Helena to start a new job. Waiheke Island is rather busier than I generally choose, but I spent a pleasant couple of months there doing some work on *Margaret Ann* before retreating to Great Barrier Island. Once on Great Barrier, I dried *Iron Bark* on the piles in Smokehouse Bay for a bottom scrub before moving on to Kiwiriki Bay. There I spent several weeks in bush-surrounded seclusion, tramping the hills, catching up on maintenance, writing this account and contemplating *Iron Bark's* next voyage.