

22<sup>nd</sup> November 2012

Extracts from an interview with Peter Oldham skipper of Waitangi on 1949 journey to Sydney

I met Peter together with his cousin Christopher Deane on board Waitangi alongside the Voyager New Zealand Maritime Museum on 22<sup>nd</sup> November 2012. We had been communicating for a few days prior to this after Christopher followed up a brief discussion held with Tony Blake, some two years earlier.

Peter is aged a young 86. His eyes were flashing with excitement as he sat (for the first time in 63 years) in the saloon of Waitangi and recounted tales of his journey sailing Waitangi to Sydney Australia in 1949. Peter was then an enthusiastic young 23 year old, who like many of the sailors from that time has a truly amazing story to tell of an incredibly challenging journey.

The following is extracts from the discussion with Peter:

“I spent many years sailing small yachts on the Auckland Harbour and in my adolescent years had the pleasure of sailing on several occasions on the British registered ship Waitangi. In those days a Mr Wilkie Wilkinson who used to broker yachts had control of Waitangi and used to charter her out. For three summers in a row the M class boys hired her and took her up to Mansion House Bay, where she was the centre of social attention with her large flush decks for dancing etc. I met up with the owners of Waitangi Mr and Mrs Chapman and their 6 year old son Phillip through Terry Hammond, who was NZ’s first America’s Cup sailor, who had been approached to sail Waitangi to Australia. He was unavailable to do this and suggested I meet with them to see what I could do for them. I did this and caught up with them some two days before they were due to depart on a journey to fulfil their dreams of sailing around the world. Mr Chapman was an Englishman who had retired as shipping manager for a shipping company based in Ceylon. Mrs Chapman was a much younger Australian woman. The Chapman’s had purchased the Waitangi a year earlier and lived on her in Matauwhi Bay in Russell for a year prior to moving her to Auckland for a refit, new engine and conversion to a ketch before their world trip. The work was completed at Shipbuilders yard at St Mary’s Bay and was completed in time for a test sail only days before departure to Australia. The state of Waitangi was very poor prior to the refit and many local people complained through the local newspaper of her state of disrepair. After a short discussion I agreed to help them with the first leg of their journey by getting them to Sydney, Australia. I went home dropped my car off, gathered my wet weather gear and navigation equipment and we were off. Surprisingly I was the only one on board with proper wet weather gear.

Two crew members had been taken on to assist with the passage; David Stewart, from the Gisborne area and Jim Ewers a Welshman who had worked his way to NZ as ships carpenter. We were frankly very thankful that Jim brought his tools along on the journey, as they turned out to be very useful. While I received no pay nor paid for the journey the two crew members paid the Chapman’s for their trip. I had to find my own way home however.

The next two days were spent readying the boat for the journey. The Chapman’s nor the crew had much experience with provisioning a boat for such a journey and the first task was to get them to remove all of the paper labels on the cans and label with more permanent identification. Later on

when we were pumping desperately for our lives they understood what those labels would have done. Provisions included kerosene for the lamps, a drum of petrol lashed to the mast for the newly installed engine, waxed paper plates, tinned corned beef, tins of peas, baked beans, porridge, bread, 4 gallon tins of egg pulp (for making scrambled eggs) and tinned butter, which was rationed in those post war days and only available in bulk to a ship leaving NZ waters.

Waitangi was ketch rigged at the time. Her mizzen mast was located in the forward part of the cockpit and had to be manoeuvred around to head through the companion way. The Main mast was located as far as I can recall in a very similar position as it is on the boat today. She was Bermudan rigged with sail tracks on the back of the masts, this replaced the original gaff rigging. The main mast was stayed back to the mizzen mast which was in turn stayed to the deck with very light deck eyes with no backing plates. It was early in the journey after a particularly heavy swell that I realised that the rigging was flexing considerably in the deck and this needed to be substantially strengthened. I attached ropes to the mizzen mast back stays and with no solid deck fittings to attach to I decided to attach these to the boat by splicing them to an anchor warp, an art I learned from a bullock team driver who worked for my father who was a civil engineer in road construction, and feeding the rope right under the stern of the boat. This was then tightened by means of a Spanish windlass, made from a spare sheet and a dinghy oar. This made the mizzen mast unusable but gave me comfort that we now had the main mast firmly stayed. We had stanchions made of 1inch galvanised pipe??? and lifelines all round, surprisingly these were later bent over to deck level under pressure of the seas. Decks were flush as they are now with the skylights over the saloon table in same position. Down below Waitangi had a galley to port with gimbaled primus stove and an oven box that sat on top. A bunk was forward of the galley and the head further ahead in a similar position to port as it is now. A chart table was forward of a bunk on the starboard side and sails were stored in the pilot berths above the bunks. The foc'sle was the owners cabin which had been used while the Chapman's lived on the boat prior to the refit and was also the space that Mrs Chapman and her son occupied largely for the entire journey. This must have been an extremely difficult journey for her. The space forward of the owners cabin was accessible from the forward hatch and used for storage. The engine was a 6 cylinder grey marine side valve located below the floorboards mid-ships. The entire interior of the boat was fitted out with french polished kauri timber. The cockpit was also the storage place for a deckchair that Mrs Chapman had intended to use to sit on deck from which to enjoy reading during the long balmy days of sailing. This mysteriously went overboard very early on in the journey. There was no marine radio and the valve radio receiver was only briefly useful within range of shore. Weather forecasting was only possible by monitoring the sky and the barometer.

We set off on the first leg of the journey to the Bay of Islands on 25<sup>th</sup> March 1949. Sailing up the coast was by compass and was a good opportunity to get the crew familiar with dead reckoning navigation and settle into the two hour watches adopted for the journey. We then headed up the coast and turned left north of the Three Kings to tackle the Tasman. Jim became extremely sea sick, vomiting green bile for three days and was ready for us to roll him overboard before he finally and rather suddenly came right again. Mrs Chapman suffered sea sickness for much of the passage.

Neither the Chapman's nor crew were familiar with celestial navigation, leaving the journey entirely dependent on my navigation capabilities. Sextant sights involved 3 of us at once. I would brace myself against the shrouds to take the sighting then thump the deck with my foot while a crew

member read the chronometer below decks and a third recorded the readings. Meanwhile the 4<sup>th</sup> crew member would helm the boat.

The owners were very keen to visit Norfolk Island which I quickly discouraged because of the lack of safe anchorage however they remained keen to at least visit Lord Howe Island. I bore their wishes in mind and took a slightly more northern course but maintained my main focus on Sydney.

Three days into the journey I went to fire up the engine to charge the batteries and nothing happened. On removing the spark plugs to check what might be causing the problem salt water flowed from the block. When fitting the engine no elbow had been fitted to stop seawater from returning through the exhaust and hence the motor was flooded and unusable for the rest of the journey. This also meant we were totally reliant on our kerosene lanterns for light and could not show any navigation lights.

The early part of the journey saw some glorious sailing with wonderful experiences such as being surrounded by pilot whales as far as the eye could see and an albatross that glided along behind the boat for several days. On one day we covered 125nm on a broad reach with strong winds and huge swells from the Southern Ocean. On the tenth day at sea I recorded that we had made good progress and expected to be in Sydney in another 5 days. The weather was totally calm and we were able to slip over the side and swim while the boat rested motionless on the sea. That evening the sky was an amazing yellow colour, the barometer started to drop dramatically and the wind started to pick up. By evening the wind was howling and we had hove to in huge seas with a small trysail set on the main mast only. When peering above decks it was easy to check on the boat as visibility at night was very good due to the high level of phosphorescence in the water. We spent a very rough night being tossed around with water leaking through multiple cracks in the decking. I sheltered in my bunk under a sail to keep dry. At 3 a.m. everything went calm, the wind had dropped and the break on the tops of the swell abated leaving the boat in silence in a huge swell. On peering through the companionway I could see that all was well on deck and for a moment I could see a small moon through the cloud.

Within minutes of heading below we could hear a mighty roar and a huge wave picked the boat up and turned her upside down. Water was washing everywhere and I could see a small pool of kerosene from the lamp burning on the deck head below me, sparking the fear of a fire. This quickly burned away without damage and the boat slowly started to right itself. I'm not sure whether we actually rolled right over or returned the same way we had rolled, but it doesn't really matter. I untangled myself from the sail and realised I was knee deep in water and more was fast coming in through many cracks in the deck and from somewhere further aft.

A quick inspection on deck, still with lots of phosphorescent light, showed the boom flailing across the cockpit with no topping lifts, and the trysail having been washed away. The fuel drum remained lashed to the front of the mast and both masts were still standing, no doubt through the forethought to strengthen the rigging early in the trip. The chocks had loosened from around the mast at the deck level, but eventually we managed to get them knocked back in. Deck timbers were loose in various places. The stanchions had been flattened and we were soon to learn that the rudder had broken. We quickly manned the pumps and pumped the worst of the water out and at daylight started to assess the situation. It was far too rough to attempt anything more major than securing anything which was working loose. The main topping lift and halyard were wrapped around the

mast head and only one headsail halyard was useable. As soon as it was calm enough I went up the mast and cleared the tangle so all hoists were useable again. I also attempted repairs to the sail track but found this was impossible. I could not stay up the mast very long because of the violent motion. These repairs were spread over two days to effect repairs to get under way again. The sail track had been damaged beyond repair in the upper third leaving us restricted to running a small mainsail with three reefs in it on the lower two thirds. The mizzen mast remained out of commission so we had substantially reduced sail area and no engine.

Once under way again I found that I couldn't steer the boat and she kept rounding into the wind then falling back and heading on the same tack. An inspection below decks revealed that the rudder shaft had rotted out and was no longer connected to the rudder which was flailing around at whim. Lying at the mercy of the sea with no ability to steer in the middle of the Tasman was not a pleasant feeling however we got on with the task at hand and with the tools on board we cut the rudder trunk off to water level using a handsaw. This allowed more water to gurgle in every time the stern went down. The owner had a souvenir whaling harpoon with large flukes on board and we drove this into the sodden rudder stock timbers. A 2ft by 1ft slot cut in the deck allowed this to protrude above deck, to this we lashed the windlass handle creating a right angle and to this we lashed a fishing rod. While the whole set up appeared frail, with the jury sail plan we were able to set, the boat was extremely well balanced and I could easily helm the boat without too much pressure on the fishing rod. This jury rig took four days to complete and had to last us all the way to Sydney.

The rest of the journey thankfully had some rather pleasant weather and enjoyable sailing. Food was however limited. We managed to get the stove going again and got used to the taste of kerosene flavoured porridge as the whole boat had been awash with oil and kerosene. We still had some 15 day old bread. We could slice down to the core to get rid of the mould and get a small good piece from the middle of each loaf but we lived largely on pancakes and canned foods.

After 26 days at sea I was delighted to see the whole horizon light up with the lights of Sydney. By the early hours of the morning we were sailing through Sydney heads without, and proudly I must admit, having to alter course from the heading I had established earlier that evening.

As we entered the heads we met other boats racing out and there was lots of abuse hailed across the water as we loomed up out of the dark with no navigation lights. One of the yachts hailed us and asked what yacht are you? I shouted back that we were the yacht Waitangi from Auckland and a voice called back "is that you Peter?" It was one of the Helverson's whom I had met when they came to NZ on their yacht. I had actually sailed on their yacht once but we also raced against them on our own 1893 42ft logan, Aorere. It is a small world.

In sailing up the harbour in the night we were nearly run over by a collier boat due to our having no lights. Jim had the presence of mind to rush below decks to soak his shirt in kerosene and light it to light up the sails to get them to alter course.

When we reached the inner harbour we dropped sail and picked up a vacant buoy and rested for the night. At daylight we discovered we were on HMS Australia's mooring Buoy and we were in big trouble. The navy signalled us by flags to leave and we ran up our flags to let them know we were an overseas boat and unable to move. They wanted us off but refused to tow us. Eventually the customs launch was called in to tow us out where we dropped anchor.

We all went ashore for a good clean up. On return to the boat the Chapman's immediately discharged us from duties and I flew home to Auckland.

Waitangi was sold a few days after her arrival in Sydney and I never heard from the Chapman's again."

Larry Paul