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BOLDRE STILL AND BOLDRE (October 2019)



Tristan da Cunha: Calshot Harbour

*The Reverend Canon Andrew Neaum became the “House for Duty” Anglican priest of the lovely Boldre Benefice in August 2013. The Vicarage in which he and Diana live is on the edge of the New Forest, a couple of miles north of Lymington in Hampshire. He is old fashioned enough a priest to visit his flock in their homes, but “house for duty” clergy are supposed to work only two days a week and Sundays, which means visiting everyone in the parish takes a long time. The following are the **October 2019** weekly ruminations, aired prejudices and footling observations that in the weekly pew sheet augment his visits and help keep folk in touch week in and week out. Earlier articles are available from the Article Page on this Website:*

<http://www.andrewneaum.com/articles.htm>

(319) “This and That” - 27 October 2019

Returning to Tristan da Cunha 2012 (19)

Friday 21 September, 2012 continued

On our way back from the walk to Pigbite we had made a detour to view a house being built in the traditional way and style. It is to be a museum as well as a tribute to the old way of doing things.

Island housing

We brought with us to the island lots of black and white photographs depicting such houses being built during my time on the island in the nineteen fifties. We have left digitalised copies of these at the Tourist and Heritage Centre where they aroused a lot of interest.

The gable ends of houses in the old days, as with the one we viewed being built, were constructed of huge, irregular sized blocks of soft volcanic rock, shaped with an axe and pulled by oxen to the building site. The front walls were built of similar stone, though with door and window spaces. The back wall was usually set into the slope and so often had no windows at all and was made from dry-stone-walled, hard, unshaped blue stones. On the house being built as a museum there was a great concrete plinth on top of the back wall. This, in days gone by, would probably have been a wooden beam. The inside walls of these old houses were lined with timber, much of it gathered from the beaches, washed ashore, or made from crates. The roofs were thatched with New Zealand flax and turf was used to seal the ridge.

Five fingers

When we got back home Kobus brought us a “Five Finger” (*Acantholatris monodactylus*), gutted and cleaned. Abundant around the island these were my father’s favourite fish. Silvery grey in colour, five, black, vertical bars give the fish its Tristan name. They grow to two feet in length and the one given to us was not far from that. So before venturing out to a celebration at Carlene’s, I sharpened a knife and filleted it. We haven’t made up our minds what to do with the two large fillets. We are out to dinner tonight and tomorrow and so will have one of the them for lunch, possibly simply as it is, fried with bread and butter.

We then walked to Carlene’s to celebrate her son’s twenty first birthday. To begin with this was less crowded than such celebrations on the island usually are, because folk were still working at the factory. Later on the house filled up tight.

The Administrator and his wife were already present when we arrived and a handful of others. A large table in the kitchen groaned with the weight of food: horns filled with a tuna mix, crayfish tartlets, nogs of cray fish to be dipped in mayonnaise, Vienna sausage rolls, pasties, little quiches, homemade potato crisps, (all cut by hand not machine, Carlene tells me) and then cakes, pavlovas and much more. I managed not to over indulge this time, but such bounty is hard to resist.

A character-imparting nose

I had a good chat once more with Jeremy, the Island’s shepherd, and then Marina, the Administrator’s wife. She raised my hopes by suggesting that there could well be suitable conditions on Monday for a trip to Nightingale Island. After a while Jeremy’s father came in, a tall, thin fellow with one of those amazing faces you would love to paint, dominated by a great character-imparting nose. With an air of quiet wisdom and integrity, he is an astonishingly fine looking man. We left shortly after the Administrator and wife had departed, though before we went I ventured into the bedroom where there were a lot of men gathered, quietly sipping beer and keeping Carlene’s husband company. He was in bed with gout.

Conversation got on to the traditional house being built. The Administrator was interested in the photos I have on the computer (mentioned earlier) and was pleased that we had taken copies of them to Dawn in the Heritage Centre so that she can archive them (Some months after I had returned to Australia I received an email asking my permission to publish some of them in connection with the opening of the traditional house newly completed).

(318) “This and That” - 20 October 2019

Returning to Tristan da Cunha 2012 (18)

Friday 21 September, 2012 continued

Tristan is far closer to economic self-sufficiency than St Helena, 1,500 miles away. This is thanks to the abundance in its waters of crayfish: *Jasus tristani*. Locally called crawfish they are marketed as Tristan Rock Lobsters.

Destroyed by volcano and fire

They've been commercially exploited since 1954 when a canning factory was built. Canned crayfish tail meat was exported mostly to the United States. The factory was in operation when I was on the island as a boy, but was obliterated by lava in the 1961 volcanic eruption. In 1963, after the islanders returned, a new factory to freeze crayfish was built. This was destroyed by fire in 2008. A state of the art replacement provides the island's economic heart.

Fishing is scientifically monitored to be sustainable. There are nine open, powered fishing boats. Each has two crews of two. The crews fish on alternate fishing days. The season begins in July and a catch limit quota is usually reached by Christmas. A South African Company runs the factory and provides larger fishing vessels, based in South Africa, to exploit the waters around the other islands.

On Tristan relatively rare calm days are greeted by the very early beating of a loud gong in the middle of the village. It heralds a busy day for most able-bodied islanders.

£40,000 worth of fish

The boats roar out to favoured positions around the island. Traps are lowered to a depth of about a hundred feet, baited with fish heads stuffed into small, finely meshed canisters. Nearly all the fish heads are imported frozen from South Africa. To fish merely for bait is forbidden around the island for sustainability reasons. The traps are winched up and any crayfish stored in open plastic boxes in the boat. Two boats do the rounds to collect the catch and take it for processing in the factory while fishing continues.

On a tour of the factory we were guided by Eric, its amiable South African manager. We donned gumboots, white coats and disposable hygiene hats and were shown first the biggest and strongest crayfish being selected and dropped into a series of large bins of filtered sea water to be purged. After this they are cooked to a bright scarlet, frozen and packed whole for sale in Australia and Japan. With no waste these are the most profitable. Because quotas in Australia have been severely reduced, Tristan crayfish are marketed there as Tasmanian to make up quota numbers.

Luxury products are sensitive to economic downturns. Eric told us that the demise of Lehman Brothers curtailed sales because such costly fish are mostly eaten on expense accounts. It's only the tails of smaller crayfish that are processed. They descend a watered chute to have their 'threads' expertly pulled by a line of island women. This day's catch, three and a half tonnes, is worth about £40,000.

Saved by a whisker

There's no fishing from June to August and September is not the best. A good catch can be as high as ten tonnes. I can't remember the worth of the fishing company's exclusive rights to the fishing grounds. The Administrator told me last night, but it's based on a percentage and so could be £70,000 or even £100,000 per annum. Tails are packed in boxes raw, flash frozen and go mostly to the United States. Acceptance into the European market is being negotiated. Vulnerability to economic conditions means the more outlets available the better.

There's a possible market developing for the discarded heads. Some merely as decorative additions to sea food dishes in restaurants, but more interestingly there's a substance in the shell which, when treated, reduced and ground, can be made into a pill that absorbs or prevents the digestion of oil in humans, with beneficial health results. Spare whiskers are sent with whole lobsters to encourage the assumption that specimens without one lost it in transit.

When viewing the lobsters in the tanks, I inadvertently stepped back against the outflow pipe of the constantly running water and half filled one of my gumboots, to everyone's amusement.

(317) “This and That” - 13 October 2019

Returning to Tristan da Cunha 2012 (17)

Friday 21 September, 2012 continued

The cloud is low on a dark and brooding mountain, the horizon blurred not sharply defined. Although the wind is almost still in the village, offshore the waves are choppy. Further out there are white horses on a pewter coloured sea. The village is today in the mountain's lee.

Diddle dees and doggerel

Yesterday we took a trip to Pigbite. This is the area between what used to be Big Beach (now covered with black lava) and Big Point, the eastern end of the settlement plateau. Though not as desolate and barren as the lava flow itself it is stony and infertile, offering only scant sheep grazing. When we lived on the island in the 1950s we picked red crowberries there, known on the Falkland Islands as diddle dees. They are *empetrum rubrum* of the heather family and extremely hardy. Their fruit, like many sour berries, makes excellent jam. They feature in the near doggerel that is the Falkland Islands' unofficial national anthem.

To get there we walked across kikuyu grass turf and over the Big Watron, which follows its traditional course, as I remember it, diverted by the lava flow only at the end. Once past the jagged black clinker of the volcanic cone, the looming mass of the base mountain is striking for the different colours on the various precipices where there have been fairly recent slips and falls. Thin pipes of different coloured rock wend upwards, obviously fissures through which lava pushed many, many years ago. The precipices too reveal different layers and colours of rock, indicating presumably successive eruptions and layers of lava and ash.

Harvesting sand

We walked across a flat area covered for the most part with the ubiquitous kikuyu grass and then clambered up and over a stony, crow-berried hill. On the other side was a great front-end loader with its engine going and a big fellow sitting inside. We had passed two tippers full of black volcanic sand along the way. The front-end loader fills them with sand that is a long way back from a shoreline lined with large boulders, as is pretty well every beach on the island these days. There appears to be lots of sand available for building works this little way inland. The driver hopped down and told us to beware of a seal that had been on the beach earlier, saying that they can all too easily be mistaken for a boulder and very nasty if you get too close. He also showed us the route taken to get up to the base mountain from this end of the island. A perilous looking track.

We sat on the beach to eat an apple. In the distance two of the fishing boats were at work. Big Point, the bluff that marks the end of the settlement plateau, with the beach below it looked inviting to me. I would have loved to scramble over the beach boulders to look around it, but we went only a little way because it was heavy walking and the cliffs above looked so unstable there seemed a good chance of being knocked on the head by a rock fall.

Penguin eggs

While sitting we noticed what we thought was a vessel a bit taller than a mere fishing boat, though very close to what we assumed to be one. We realised after a while that in fact it was the superstructure of a ship right on the horizon. What we had thought to be the boat close to it was its bow. We climbed the stony hill to where a brave pine tree struggles to survive and got a good view of a passing bulk carrier full of soya beans on its way from Brazil to China. This southern route is cheaper than the high-priced Panama Canal. All passing ships are tracked and monitored by the island in the hope of making a case for an exclusion zone since a disaster a few years ago on Nightingale Island. Human error wrecked a ship resulting in no loss of life, but the oil-ruination of many penguins.

An interesting footnote to all of this is that the rights of the islanders to gather a quota of penguin eggs are being foregone at present. Not for the sake of penguin numbers, but for insurance claim purposes. If egg numbers are sufficient to be harvested for eating then claims of financial or even ecological loss of eggs would be harder to sustain.

(316) “This and That” - 6 October 2019

Returning to Tristan da Cunha 2012 (16)

Thursday 21 September, 2012 continued

Tristan da Cunha is a British Overseas Territory, one of the few colonies that has not asked for independence, wishing to retain its links to the crown. The Governor, representing the Queen, resides on St Helena of which he is also Governor. He appoints an Administrator for Tristan.

Through these officers Britain has responsibility for external relations, internal security, defence and the Tristan public service. Otherwise the island governs itself through an Island Council of twelve, three of whom are appointed.

The Chief Islander is elected and at present is off island aboard the *Agulhas* which is supplying and supporting the boffins at Gough Island. His position is not salaried. It seems that the islanders these days do feel they run the show. The Administrator's role is largely advisory. He's a member of the Island Council, and I think chairs it. The Chief's popularity, unsurprisingly, depends largely on the decisions he makes with the Council. The recent introduction of an income tax is less than popular!

A visit from Ronnie Biggs

Our next home visit was to Agnes, the Chief's mother. She is on the Parish Church Council and left a delicious crayfish dish in the rectory to greet us on our arrival. Over a cup of tea in a Dickensian kitchen, desultory conversation became more animated as Agnes warmed to her theme and visitors. She told us a story of their time exiled in England during the volcanic eruption.

Her husband Gilbert is a gardener. As a youngster he assisted my father in our fine vegetable garden in the fifties. As such he was able to acquire a gardening job in England near to the great train robbery which occurred at that time. According to Agnes, Ronnie Biggs, the most notorious of the robbers, came to her door one evening looking for accommodation, clutching a suitcase. When she asked how he would pay for his lodgings he opened the case and it was full of wads of notes. Although not knowing at that point who he was, she suspected it to be a shady offer and refused him hospitality. He went elsewhere.

She was too nervous to go out and find a public phone to contact the police, though they interviewed her later. I might well have got some of these details wrong, but it is essentially the story she told us. Possibly the most interesting event in her life.

The island shepherd

In the evening we went to a reception at the Administrator's residence. Apparently such “Welcome and Farewell” receptions are the norm when the *Agulhas* arrives. It began to rain a little as we walked up the long path to the Administrator's residence, so it was good to get into a warm and pleasing home full of people. There was a great table of booze in the foyer with a bevy of folk pressing it upon guests. I asked for a red wine and was given a large glass of Pinotage full to the very brim. Whenever my glass was anywhere near empty it was again brim-filled, without asking.

It was an enjoyable evening with a good mix of islanders, visitors and expatriates. I met Jeremy, the island shepherd, an articulate man with an important job and obviously something of a leader. The island sheep are cross Dorset and Suffolk and roam the mountain right up to the top of the Base and beyond. We have spotted them in what appear to be the most inaccessible of places. Each islander is allowed only two sheep.

Raising eyebrows

Many of the island women seemed happy to sit and quietly watch all that went on, without obvious participation, though of course a raised eyebrow can be as eloquent as a tirade. At one stage I settled myself down next to one of them, but even my charm elicited little response.

The Administrator gave an informal talk, welcoming us all individually. He and his wife seem ideal for the job, not at all stand-offish or reserved.

I managed to resist too much wine, but only just. In future I'll stick to light beer. The food was excellent and I enjoyed a lavish plate of cray fish. Will I ever get tired of it?

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