

Bill McIndoe

"Harry the Hooker and the Octopus"

Otago Harbour Winter Cruising in *Avanti*

Tuesday 18 July 2017

Watching the ten day weather forecast closely I had planned Tuesday 18/7/17 as a good day to spend cruising in *Avanti*. It is midwinter and it was forecast to be calm, sunny and cool. I put the lunch Margaret had prepared for me in my little haversack and toddled off down to the wharf to get *Avanti* ready for a day on the harbour. I warmed through the diesel engine, turned on the navigation instruments checked all was in order down below

As I was casting off the mooring ropes I sighted a two and a half meter long alpha Hooker sea lion, possibly weighing half a tonne, just beside *Avanti*. He attracting my attention with a the snorty-gasping sound of his breathing as he surfaced for air and a powerful swirl of the water. In his mouth was an octopus with eight arms 800mm long streaming out of his lips. Harry chomped away enthusiastically on the body of the octopus with his large yellow teeth as he thrashed the protruding arms against the surface of the water to kill or shred it to suitable size for swallowing, all the time creating a busy disturbance in the water with lots of splashing. It was probably Otago Harbour's main species of octopus *Macroctopus maorum* which is New Zealand's largest species of inshore octopus, growing to a span of up to 2m. I was intrigued to read that an octopus has nine brains, one in each leg and one in the head. Its method of copulation and rearing of the eggs are fascinating and just must be researched in Wikipedia.

Harry's demonstration of how to enjoy an octopus occurred three meters from *Avanti*'s hull as I stood on deck looking down watching. I thought of Alfred Lord Tennyson when he wrote "Nature, red in tooth and claw" and I was glad that I didn't have eight arms and lived in the harbour. It was our resident Hooker sea lion, that I had long ago christened "Harry the Hooker", and he was no stranger in Careys Bay. We often see him making a living hereabouts grazing on salmon and whatever else is worth eating in the waters of the harbour. Read more in Wikipedia "New Zealand sea lion".

He often hauls out on the Careys Bay launching ramp to the consternation of visiting yachties trying to launch their boats. On sunny spring days during his molting season he also hauls out on our large mown grass area by my slip rails. He lies happily sunning himself growling effectively at dogs and intrusive small boys but generally he and I get on just fine. I am scared of him and he hardly notices me. When he pees on the grass it soon dies and seems to stay dead for ever.

One year when I was working on the yacht up on the slip he placed himself across my approach path back to the boat shed. Being ware and never forgetting that he is a wild animal I became worried that he might camp there until his molting was done. Not knowing how to move him I rang the academic staff at the University of Otago, New Zealand Marine Studies Centre over at Portobello. They patiently explained that he was one of the three Hooker sea lion alpha males in the harbour and that Careys Bay was part of his territory. He would only stay for a few days and then move on. But if I wanted him to move earlier the easiest way was to just hose him. I like wild animals, and enjoyed having him there so I let him be, to get on with his molt in peace. A few dead pee patches in the lawn doesn't matter. The grass will grow again, someday.

As I backed *Avanti* out from wharf Harry swallowed the last of the octopus arms and then followed with evident glee, surfacing, diving, swirling and splashing close on the port side. In the clear water I could see him 2m below the surface swimming alongside the keel. How agile he was for such a large animal. After 100m of treating *Avanti*'s keel as a playmate he was gone, back to serious sea lion business. I turned and headed towards Portobello two miles distance across the harbour.

When I came to the Port Otago steamer basin there was a clear view of the old green container crane being dismantled. Two larger new blue cranes had superseded the two old green ones? The company had found a buyer for only one of them. No buyer was found for the other so it was being

dismantled for parts and scrap. Two men stood on a platform hoisted by a crane-platform lift (cherry picker) to reach high up to continue unbolting and gas cutting the enormous structure. The arm of the crane-lift was so slender and long, stretched high above the wharf that it made my stomach turn to watch them. The structure that they were dismantling so massive that the brave engineers, industriously working away on it, was so high that they looked like little dolls. In the steamer basin below the crane the Port Otago tug Tairaroa was doing circuits and bumps. A new tug skipper under training was practicing going alongside the wharf instead of going alongside a real ship. He then practiced maneuvers going alongside sideways, forwards and backwards. As I passed it was difficult to apply the correct interpretation of the rule of the road because I didn't know which way he would go next. With a cheery wave, which was returned in kind, we understood each other exactly. "Mr Tugmaster you are bigger than me so I will stay right out of your way while you get on with your exercises." Although not written into the International Regulations for the Prevention of Collision at Sea small boats know very well the unwritten philosophy in confined waterways - "Might is right."

As I approached Quarantine Island the harbour was calm and beautiful. Apart for the swirl of the ebb tide the only ripples were caused by two Stewart Island shags watching my with beady eyes and quickly turning heads, thinking about diving underwater to avoid Avanti. I was only doing 3.5kts so they swam lazily out of my line of approach and I passed by without upsetting their morning. Traversing the 5m deep channel on the north side of Quarantine Island brought me to Aquarium Passage between the western end of Portobello Peninsula and Quarantine Island. The reef on the port side was marked by a post but tide covered rocks on the starboard side could not be seen. I knew where they were and taking my standard heading points and courses slipped safely through the passage. Here the ebb tide was flowing at about 1.25kts and the eddies were throwing Avanti off course. In open water a bit off course didn't matter but in such confined waters it was essential to hold steady the course and not be thrown off. The rocks and the marker pile were too close.

Once clear of the pile, a gentle curved course to port into Cradle Rock Bay to avoid the small area of shallow water. Then close around the Cradle Rock and into the 30m wide channel only 40m from the cliffs (and one known projecting isolated rock) is certainly close but as long as I watched the echo-sounder, the chart plotter and held my nerve, all was well. At the end of the 0.5nm long channel off First Bay I turned hard a-starboard and headed for the splendid Portobello steel pontoon. Taking a nice big sweep I put her alongside and tied up with fore spring, back spring and breasts fore and aft so the boat could not move much but not so tight that it was boused hard against the two big round fenders put out between the boat and the pontoon to protect my new topsides paintwork.

Out of interest I compared the ships head as shown on the magnetic compass (mounted on the binnacle in front of the wheel) with the GPS compass on the iPad chart plotter screen (in the wheelhouse) which is set to show the magnetic course which includes variation. The magnetic compass reads the course from the earth's magnetic field. The GPS compasses receives its information from a satellite. Normally they read about the same. However there was a difference of 20°. I thought about it for a while until I remembered that the 15m long pontoon that we were tied to was made of steel and would in fact be large magnet which caused the extra 20° deviation in the magnetic compass. However it had no effect on the compass in the iPad chart plotter which was operated by GPS information sent wirelessly from a satellite, unaffected by the earth's magnetic field or any other magnet. However such metal items as tools, knives or the magnets in a radio speaker will effect the magnetic compass (and also the fluxgate compass of the self steering gear) and create a course error in the navigation. This includes handheld VHF sets placed within a meter of the magnetic compass.

With the boat safely tied to the pontoon, the boat heater warming the saloon to a comfortable temperature I felt content. The tide was ebbing and it was necessary to leave the pontoon at half tide otherwise I might be grounded and stuck unable to go home until after dark at 21:00. After lunch in my favourite seat, leaning against the warm casing of the heater, I sat quietly with a cup of tea reading my new book the "Coot Club" by Arthur Ransome, loaned by John Chappell. There

was a fuzzy period there when I might have dozed off. However I had to keep an eye on the falling tide. I set an alarm to remind me to leave before the tide had dropped to such depth that I might be grounded and not be able to leave the pontoon. In mid winter there are few places more comfortable than the grand saloon of Avanti, warmed by the heater, reading a classic sea yarn and drinking tea accompanied by a chocolate biscuit. Luxury!

Half tide at 14:15 and the alarm went off. I washed the dishes, put everything away in its proper stowage and checked the depth of water under the keel on the echo sounder. My draft is 1.7m and there was still 1.8m of water alongside the pontoon. Only 100mm under the keel. It was time to cast off and depart. The engine started at first turn of the key. I cast off the mooring ropes and as Avanti drifted away from the pontoon I coiled up all the ropes and stowed them away in the lazaret. Back at the wheel I eased the engine control lever into ahead, increased revs to 1200rpm, engaged the Autohelm self-steering and settled comfortably in the watchkeeper's seat in the wheelhouse to guide our little ship home to Careys Bay. Another satisfying winter's day boating on our beautiful Otago Harbour. Indeed how fortunate we are.

GLOSSARY

An explanation of the seaman's terms that are used in the text.

YACHT CRADLE - wooden structure mounted on wheels to hold a yacht safely while it is pulled out of the water on rails for maintenance and repair

SLIP - set of rails upon which a yacht cradle is moved.

FLOOD TIDE - tide coming in.

EBB TIDE - tide going out

HALF TIDE - half way between high tide and low tide.

GPS - Global Position System. Satellite navigation system with an accuracy of about one meter.

BINNACLE - post in the cockpit near the stern of a boat that supports the steering wheel and has the magnetic compass mounted on top.

FENDER - a soft air inflated or padded ball or cylinder placed between a boat and another boat or wharf to protect the boat's side paintwork from being damaged if in contact.

LAZARET - stowage locker with a lid in the stern of the boat for ropes and fenders.

AUTOHELM - electric self steering gear controlled by a fluxgate compass and a gyro compass.

ECHO SOUNDER - electronic instrument that measures the depth of water under the boat.

VHF - very high frequency two way radio with a range of between 5nm and 25nm depending upon type and height of aerial, geographical position and atmospheric conditions. Radio transmission is line of sight i.e. travels in a straight line and does not follow the curve of the earth.

SSB transmission however bounce back to earth after hitting the heavyside or E-layer and can skip some thousands of miles.

FORE BREAST - rope to secure the bow of one boat to bow of another (or a pontoon or wharf).

AFT BREAST - rope to secure stern of one boat to stern of another (or a pontoon or wharf).

FORWARD SPRING - rope that secures the bow of one boat to the stern of another (or a pontoon or wharf) that prevents the first boat going forward.

BACK SPRING - rope that secures the stern of one boat to the bow of another (or a pontoon or wharf) to prevent the first boat moving back.

BOAT HEATER - device that keeps the interior of a boat warm. Avanti's boat heater is LPG fueled which heats water which is pumped around the boat and through 6m of strip heaters.

MAGNETIC DEVIATION - magnetic compass error caused by the magnetic field of parts of the boat such as the engine or the hull if built of steel, effecting the compass.

MAGNETIC VARIATION - magnetic compass error caused by the compass needle lining up with lines of magnetic force around the earth which are not parallel with the lines of longitude. The geographic poles are not in the same position as the magnetic poles.

NAUTICAL MILE (nm) is based on the circumference of the earth, and is equal to one minute of latitude. It is slightly more than a statute (land measured) mile (1 nautical mile = 1.1508 statute miles = 1.852 kilometers). Nautical miles are used for charting and navigating.

KNOTS - abbreviated as "kts" sometimes "kn" - conversion 1knot = 1.85kph.

A knot is one nautical mile per hour (1 knot = 1.15 miles per hour = 1.852 kilometers per hour). The term knot dates from the 17th century, when sailors measured the speed of their ship by using a device called a "common log." This device was a coil of rope with uniformly spaced knots, attached to a piece of wood shaped like a slice of pie. The piece of wood was lowered from the back of the ship and allowed to float behind it. The line was allowed to pay out freely from the coil as the piece of wood fell behind the ship for a specific amount of time. When the specified time had passed, the line was pulled in and the number of knots on the rope between the ship and the wood were counted. The speed of the ship was said to be the number of knots counted (Bowditch, 1984).

REVS - revolutions per minute of the engine.

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