

Ronnie Harrison Interviews 17 November 2016 and 10 April 2017

Interview 17 November was in conjunction with Elizabeth Easter, daughter of Shirley Maddock who produced the *Islands of the Gulf* programme in 1964. Elizabeth was refilming the series and wanted Ronnie involved in the Motuihe segment. The second interview was conducted at Ronnie's home in Rotorua.

Summary

Ronnie Harrison and partner Terry Gibbons were on Motuihe from 1984 until 2007.

Ronnie's son Michael lived on the island from 1996 until 2010.

1967 Hauraki Gulf Maritime Park board established and disestablished in 1990.

Department of Conservation took over management of Motuihe in 1987.

Ronnie and Terry were granted the licence to run the kiosk in 1984 and continued until the kiosk burnt down in July 2002

Mainland Power to Motuihe was lost for good when the cable was broken 5 times from 1983 until 1989.

State Insurance refused to insure it again. DoC decided on alternative energy for the future.

1998 Ronnie and Terry took over the farm concession running the farm on Motuihe and on Browns Island until all the stock were removed in 2005.

Ronnie had the idea to restore the forest on Motuihe Island and she also had the energy to get things moving. Without her vision and determination the restoration project would never have happened.

In 1984, at the time of their application for the licence to run the kiosk on Motuihe, Ronnie and her partner Terry Gibbons had been living on a scow called Vesper II. It was a very adventurous way to live with a coal range the only way to cook. By chance she saw in an old newspaper an advertisement for the licensee to run the kiosk on Motuihe. She had previously helped out Joyce Schouten on a casual basis so she knew what was involved. She and Terry applied and were granted the license.

They lived on board the scow, but they had to keep moving it to sheltered bays while they were renovating the kiosk to the required standard. The Hauraki Gulf Maritime Park Board let them use a mooring in Islington Bay and they purchased a small runabout to come over to Motuihe. Eventually the Scow "Vesper 11" was sold as there was no time to use it and it was deteriorating. Unfortunately the people who bought it flew into New Zealand, climbed on board the boat after months of leaving it just sitting on a mooring at Whangarei, and sailed off without doing even basic maintenance. Of course with the first storm off shore there was a Mayday call, and they had to be towed back to land when the motor would not work due to dirty fuel. These people on sold her to a group who were eventually charged and prosecuted for GST fraud. They had sold her ("Vesper 11") within their group for an amazing amount that she wasn't worth and initially successfully claimed the GST.

Following the renovation of the kiosk, equipment was purchased, brought over and installed to supply snow-freeze ice creams, takeaways, and boating supplies. They lived at the back of the kiosk as the Schoutens had done. Also on the island in Sept 1984 were John and Faye Allen who ran the farm and lived in what is now the volunteer house. Their daughters, Sandra and Rachael attended Epsom Girls Grammar in Auckland, boarding with family friends and returning home on the Friday night ferry to spend the weekends on Motuihe. The Ranger at the time was Frank van Derson who, with his wife Carol and their small son Nicholas, lived in the Rangers house. Bruce Nelson (Pest Control Officer) lived in the single man's quarters in the farm complex area.

The public toilets in 1984 were just below the Kiosk on a flat area. They had been there for many years and Ronnie soon objected to the strong smell. The Hauraki Gulf Maritime Park Board agreed and built new toilets over in the corner of the road from the wharf to the headland. About this time a wonderful new woolshed was also built up in the farm complex, making life for John Allen so much easier. This building is now the covered work area for the Trust, the former sheep yards having been dismantled. On her last visit Ronnie observed the wool table still being useful to the Trust.

In 1987 Frank was transferred to Motutapu and John Allen took over the Ranger's responsibilities as well as running the farm. He and Faye moved into the Ranger's house, and Bruce, who helped John, moved into the

farm house. John and Faye were transferred to Motutapu in 1990 following the 1989 decision not to restore power to Motuihe.

The power cable had been pulled up 5 times since 1984 and State Insurance had had enough. Divers had discovered 38 anchors on it during one repair. It was lying on the sea floor where boats traditionally went fishing, and although marked on the latest charts, not every boat had a chart. Larger vessels could winch up the cable, removing their anchor before letting it fall back down again onto the sea floor. Smaller boats had to employ divers to recover their anchors and others had to abandon them, having neither winch or finance to recover them

As Ronnie and Terry operated a business dependent on power they had to purchase a generator to power the kiosk and equipment and learn to manage the changing demand on it, depending on what powered equipment was drawing power or turned on in the kiosk. When it was first installed the generator had been serviced and cleared for use. State insurance came out to Motuihe to approve its insurance. John and Faye had a generator too until a solar system was installed by DoC to power the Rangers house. The farm house had a califont installed, gas fridge and oven, with solar panels for lighting.

After the Allens left in 1990 to go to Motutapu there was no permanent DOC presence on Motuihe except for a university student, Michael Tubbs, DoC acting assistant Ranger who came during the summer in 1990 and 1991 to manage DoC responsibilities. Landcorp continued to graze cattle on Motuihe operating from Motutapu, Brian Holly was the Land Corp Farm Manager. Land Corp withdrew from both Motutapu and Motuihe Islands (late 1991?) Motutapu Farms Ltd became established on Motutapu Island.

Once there was no Ranger on Motuihe, Terry decided that collecting drums full of visitors' rubbish was not going to continue. He made a sign telling people that pack in and pack out would apply. The initial response was mixed with some determined it was their right to leave their rubbish, but others understood the policy and co-operated. It did take some time but eventually visitors policed each other, with toilets and bushes eventually becoming rubbish free.

Another responsibility they had was spotters for the Coastguard. When vessels were reported late or missing, or sighted possibly in difficulties, coastguard contacted its spotters in that area for more information, or help in liaising with those in difficulty. Terry and Mike with tractor, three wheeled motorbike and handheld VHF radios were able to assist fairly regularly.

Terry was also designated an Honorary Ranger for DoC, so that illegal fires, dogs roaming freely and uncontrolled behaviour of visitors could be managed better as they were isolated and had to solve problems themselves if they arose. The kiosk was generally the first contact for visitors experiencing problems in earlier years, be it a lost child, a bird that seemed unwell, fish-hook in the finger, injury through falling on the rocks, boat motors that would not go and even drownings. As cell phones became more prolific that responsibility eased and people called for help themselves.

When Terence Darby (farming Concessionaire) left the island in 1994, Ronnie and Terry moved into the Rangers house that he had occupied on the island, retaining the accommodation at the back of the Kiosk for themselves when extra staff were employed for catering on weekends and at busy summer periods

1993 Apart from the kiosk, Ronnie was encouraging camping on the island after getting permission from DoC. They mowed flat areas on the headland away from day visitors, and this developed into a very busy part of their operation. Taking bookings, allocating permits, they met campers with the tractor and trailer off ferries at the wharf, and private boats on the beaches, taking them up to the area allocated for camping by DoC. When campers left they were taken back down to the ferry or private boat with their gear. Campers became regular visitors, loving the island, patronised the kiosk, also taking part in the growing conservation effort. Men fished, their wives relaxed, children played, the holiday a success.

They had also developed a catering business, catering for children's parties, Christmas breakup parties for companies, weddings, team building and fishing competitions. They purchased a large marquee and tables and chairs to seat 130 people. For larger BBQ events, they hired extra staff, accommodating them on the island. There were different mowed areas beside the beaches that people could hire for games etc for their events, supplied by the kiosk. During the season sometimes there would be two or three catered BBQ events going on at the same time. People could still bring everything themselves if they wished to and do their own thing, but many chose the catered option.

In the early 1990s Peter de Lange and Gillian Cowcroft stayed on Motuihe off and on carrying out a survey of botanical flora on the island. This was an immense help to establish which plant species Ronnie should concentrate on. Peter spent time with Ronnie identifying trees for her to propagate. Plants were grown to provide shelter for more fragile species and also those that had nearly disappeared from the island or had gone completely were targeted. Ronnie had to discard some she had been growing with enthusiasm, kermadec pohutukawa, Tasmanian ngaio, olives etc.

Graeme Platt took an interest too, coming out to help with advice on plants, trees and their propagation. In fact Graeme was instrumental in helping Ronnie and Mike earn money one winter by finding a market for them when they picked up hundreds of kilos of viable Norfolk pine seed on the Island. A shortage of Norfolk pines existed in both Norfolk Island and Australia though the viability rate would drop quickly in transit.

Mike Lee would help with seed sourced from Waiheke Island where tree species were proven to be low on Motuihe or gone completely. Sandra and John Wotherspoon, the good people from Motutapu, also sent over seed and seedlings when they could spare them.

After some years of catering, a liquor licence to sell alcohol was applied for, and Ronnie sat her managers certificate. The licence was granted for the small fenced area at the back of the kiosk. While this little restaurant suited campers and smaller groups, larger gatherings of sometimes 200 – 300 + people would require help with beverages needed for their group so Ronnie would get a special licence to cover the area beside the beach being used by large groups.

One of the environmental groups working with Ronnie on Motuihe was "Island Care", an organization set up and managed by Gael Arnold to organize the collection of beach rubbish and categorisation. It was suspected that much of it was flowing over from Auckland's stormwater system which over the years proved to be the case. Gael would send Ronnie over collection bags and lists of items found to be counted and marked, (plastic, foil, tin, glass etc.) for her groups of volunteers to use. One whole weekend would be devoted to Island Care all over the inner Hauraki Gulf with the filled out lists providing valuable data. The rubbish was taken away by DoC, working with the Regional Council, a co-operative venture all round. The Devonport Yacht Club was a group that came regularly, combining a race to the island, a volunteer exercise planting native trees and weeding, then a BBQ catered by Ronnie. The Spirit of New Zealand also called in with very fit and enthusiastic volunteers who planted trees. They supplied Ronnie with morning tea they had made on board and it was always delicious.

Another regular group were the Conservation Corps, managed by Stephen Jackson and Jeff Cooke. These young people were introduced to boating and to the island, staying usually in and around the Sea Cadet Hut, (formerly Naval accommodation) camping during the week, while they volunteered for conservation work. They primarily weeded and did physical work that Ronnie was finding difficult to organise, as well as planting trees.

Rob, the DoC Pest Control contractor living on Motukorea (Browns Island) had a solitary life. He used his dogs, poison, gas and other methods, eventually eradicating the rabbits. He rowed across to visit neighbouring islands from time to time, including Motuihe, for human contact and socialising.

In 1998 Ronnie and Terry were successful in their application for the farm concession for Motuihe which this time included Motukorea (Browns Island). This meant extra expense for barging stock onto Motukorea while also operating from Motuihe. Tide and weather dominated every barge action, which could be called off at the last minute with truckloads of cattle needing grazing on the mainland, or letting go again on the island, until the weather changed or the next suitable tide allowed the barge to access the ramp near the farm complex.

Also it soon became evident that with no one living on Motukorea, friendly quiet stock became a target for thieves. They didn't steal them, but shot them, butchering off their hind quarters to carry away, leaving the rest to rot. The solution was to purchase wild cattle from down south that were not used to people. Soon, mad Black Angus cattle from Gisborne raced away from everyone including their new owners. Motuihe also had its share of cattle chased over the cliffs by potential thieves, and sheep stolen or killed by dogs. Not unusual events for those farming on islands.

Ronnie's son, Michael Harrison, lived on the island from 1996 until 2010, originally living in a sleep out near the Ranger's house where Ronnie and Terry were living. Mike voluntarily helped where and when it was required, for his Mum and Terry catering, meeting the ferry for stock, taking campers up to the campground. He helped with rounding up stock for the yards so they could be loaded into the cattle trucks and barged off to Tuakau cattle sales. They managed stock without dogs, having taught them to come to the call. This was very handy when people walking over the island left gates open and curious cattle sometimes following the track to the wharf. The "Cooome On" call certainly saved them and Ronnie's energy. Mike also helped volunteers and their gear on planting days, meeting their boat at the wharf and assisted DoC staff and contractors and groups arriving on the island.

Later as the Trust gained momentum he moved up into a caravan near the nursery where he watered the young seedlings, met the DoC boat Hauturu, loaded the tractor with bags of potting mix taking it up to the nursery. This caravan had been originally placed on the island for Brian the electrician, who worked on weekends with the kiosk generator and wiring problems. It also allowed Derek Tremewan to stay over with his family when he came over to help Terry work the cattle at busy times for the kiosk.

Mike also did work for DoC and the Trust including perimeter track mowing, watering, weeding and transportation of gear. This was volunteer work and unpaid. Unfortunately after he left Motuihe his wind generator was stolen from inside the locked woolshed and has never been recovered.

Of great significance was the fire in July 2002 which burned and totally destroyed the kiosk/catering centre and everything in it. The wiring had been corroding over the years in the salt laden environment. Ronnie had been doing annual maintenance, painting the inside of the building, so there were tins of paint, turps, accelerants and stored gas bottles for the occasional catered BBQ and volunteer sausage sizzle.

The State Insurance Assessor found it had just chosen that July evening to catch in the power box outside, travelling through the ceiling until it caught the old wooden framework. The gas bottles exploded and the fire burned the kiosk to the ground with all the equipment in it a twisted and charred wreck. Even Ronnie's old German iron-frame piano, a gift from her parents when she turned 10 years old, was consumed by the heat and unrecognisable. Terry had extended the hatch on Vesper 11 to accommodate this piano when Ronnie joined him on board. It had caused much interest and amusement being lifted out of the hold, manoeuvred onto the tractor and up the hill when they first moved onto Motuihe.

The tide was out when the coastguard arrived with the fire brigade that night. Water required from Wharf Bay needed extra hoses. It already had a fierce hold when they first noticed it and Ronnie couldn't save the precious memorabilia gathered over the years. This included treasures given by families for the museum, planned as part of the new complex. Generations of visitors had taken a keen interest in what had been collected by Ronnie so far, which could be perused at the back of the kiosk in the little licensed restaurant. Plans had been drawn up by an architect hired by Motuihe Island Ltd for a new large catering and education

centre on the flat area above the toilet block.

Ronnie and Terry were still running the farms on Motukorea (Browns) as well as Motuihe, with the kiosk, camping and catering business well established prior to the fire. Following the complete devastation of the kiosk it became obvious that cash flow from the shop and larger group catering needed replacing somehow, so Terry went over to the mainland to work, returning home to Motuihe on some weekends when he could. Now Michael and Ronnie were the only permanent residents, Ronnie continuing to have responsibility for the farm and recreation concessions, volunteer groups and the regular boating and yachting visitors.

BBQ catering for small groups continued but with the loss of both cool stores in the fire, a refrigerated container for storage and refrigerated van for transport were purchased together with a generator to power them and kitchen equipment, plastic bowls, platters etc. Ronnie, on a rare visit back to Motuihe recently, discovered the large charred stainless steel former catering bowls, the only survivors of the fire, still being used in the Trust potting area.

Larger groups still hired the marquee, tables and chairs, so help with erecting this heavy marquee was a constant request to unsuspecting visitors and workers on the island. People are very kind and many a man left his vessel to “give a hand” in those days. Stock continued to be shifted around, sheep following cattle. There were no sheep on Motukorea, but those on Motuihe continued to need regular care. Being sheep they would get into all sorts of trouble by getting through fences. One orphan lamb, on gaining maturity, would still recognise Ronnie, his stand-in mother, many months later, making its way through every barrier until it was in position to bowl her over with charging love and delight.

Towards the end of the 1990s Ronnie discussed with DOC the possibility of restoring the forest on the island. DOC were sceptical as they felt it was too far gone with pests and weeds. However, DOC suggested to Ronnie that the way forward was to form a charitable trust as this was the only way to apply for grants. She approached Michael Wood, a lawyer who is still working for the trust today, for help with the legal document and he agreed. Michael knew Ronnie from visits his company had made to the island. Michael had a background in environmental restoration work in England. Helen Lindsay also helped Ronnie with setting up the Trust. She was doing a diploma based on Motuihe.

The original trustees were (chair) Peter Whitmore (business man), Ronnie Harrison, Terry Gibbons, Hariata Gordon (Ngati Paoa), Mike Lee (Auckland councillor with an interest in the Hauraki Gulf), Steven Jackson (NZ School of Outdoor Education), Anne Fenn (Auckland Conservation Board) and Tony Slark, the last naval surgeon, was the patron of the Trust.

The trust was registered in 2000. There were then many meetings with DOC over the next two years particularly with Warrick Murray. DOC was very sceptical about anything being achieved. There were attempts at plantings during this time but the rabbits always won. It became obvious that there must be an eradication programme carried out before any reforestation could take place.

In 2002 Ronnie sent out a notice to all the boating clubs in Auckland asking if they would like to become involved in the restoration programme. The Outboard Boating Club replied. Ronnie and Peter Whitmore, plus some others, made a presentation to the members of the OBC. Although some other clubs also replied, the OBC were the only club that were keen to get stuck in and do the work immediately. John Laurence, the Secretary/Treasurer of the OBC was appointed the new Chairman of the Motuihe Restoration Trust. He was successful in applying for grants. Money from Sky City and the World Wildlife Fund was used to build the nursery. The labour was provided by OBC members. Mobile Oil and OBC funded the tractor.

In 2003 a pest eradication programme was actioned. In 1993 and 1995 programmes had been carried out that removed the rats and mice from Motuihe. However, the rabbits and cats remained. Ronnie applied to DOC for resource consent to have a pest eradication programme undertaken which was a huge effort on her part. The application was many, many pages long. The Auckland conservator at the time, Mr McCullum, felt ashamed that DOC had an island in such a degraded state and he spoke to the Minister directly saying that

the eradication programme must happen. It cost DOC hundreds of thousands of dollars but they found the money. Magtoxin and 1080 carrots were used. The island was closed for 3 months. There were a few rabbits left. Don Thompson, a trapper, was employed with his dog and he shot the last rabbits. It was Don's determination to get that last rabbit that made the eradication programme successful. Also 32 cats were shot. The whole eradication programme took 18 months. The restoration project would not have worked if the rabbits had still been there. Pest free status was achieved in late 2003, 2004.

Ronnie wanted to keep the stock for a while, with fences used to plant parts of the island and stock on other parts. However, it made the planting very difficult. The stock broke through fences, pugged the ground and it was making more work having the stock there. In 2005 the last of the cattle were removed. Ronnie and Terry left the island in 2007 when DOC did not renew their licence.

In 2009 John Mills came as a permanent ranger at the time of the first kiwi release.

John Hawley, a landscape architect, produced a restoration plan with an overall vision for the island. At the time there was a daily ferry service and two ferries on a Wednesday. The Blue Boats also came to the island, run by the Julian brothers. It was relatively easy to get volunteers out to the island.

From about 2004 onwards the restoration programme was fully under way and in some years over 50,000 trees were planted. Ronnie's vision is becoming a reality. This record has been written in 2017 and the forest on Motuihe is rising, in most places it is over head height. Endangered birds have been released, including kiwis. Tuataras have been released. Every year hundreds of volunteers make the trip to Motuihe and plant, weed or propagate plants in the nursery. The success of the restoration of Motuihe will be a wonderful legacy to Ronnie, her vision, energy and determination.