GREAT BARRIER GRIEF

Metro Magazine - February 1987

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Cover Photo: Rob Tucker. All other photographs by Richard Gordon

After 20 minutes of ear-crushing roar from two engines just a few metres from our heads, the silence on the ground at the Claris airstrip is just as deafening. A faint breeze rustles the grasses and flax choking the swamp around the green airstrip, but otherwise there is no sound.

We stand in the sunny silence trying to gain our bearings while the pilot opens the rear hatches. There is nothing to be seen except a small building used as an office by the airline and a few empty cars in the gravel car park.

As well as six adults and their packs, suitcases and boxes of supplies, the plane has been carrying a heavy load of goods for the island's shop and hostels, so we are asked to help unload the heavy damp cold boxes of frozen chicken and ice-cream. We stack them in the shade of the office building and then sit on a log to watch the plane load up again with a Barrier family and their possessions heading for the mainland.

Already we can feel ourselves slowing down in the emptiness. We are waiting for a lift to Medlands Beach but feel after being on the ground for only half an hour that we could wait all day. Time doesn't seem to matter any more.

But before too long we are barreling down the unsealed road towards Medlands with a load of frozen chicken and ice-cream that was desperate to see the inside of a freezer. We had gone only about a mile when the driver's daughter in the back seat yelled out that we had dropped something off the roof-rack. We paled, that was where our belongings had been placed, deferring to the frozen goods.

The car screeched to a halt and all heads turned. There was nothing on the road behind. The child hooted with delight at her practical joke.

Not even a flicker of annoyance crossed the driver's face. We continued on with our journey, the children in the back screaming out the side windows to nobody but the dust trail we were leaving in our wake, Between the airstrip and brightly painted letterbox where we were dropped off we passed fewer than a dozen houses.

Climbing to the top of the conical mountain at the end of the Medlands Beach we surveyed the eastern coast of the island, A huge golden beach spread out before us. Halfway along, a tower of rock stood out, splitting the curve in two. Called Memory Park and crested with pohutukawas, it looked as though it had been placed there by a landscape gardener.

High-rise development at Medlands Beach (Photo: Richard Gordon)

Along the single sand dune running the length of the beach were dotted a few baches, most of them built recently, Some years ago the dune was cut into 144 sections but most of the owners have yet to build.

To the south of the beach a sharply jutting headland has been cleared of bush and now grazes sheep. To the west, high mountains covered with dark forest divide the island. Beyond the mountains is a jumble of harbours, bays and inlets, all surrounded by steeply sloping hillsides covered with a thick coating of bush. There the beaches are mainly pebbled, with small scoops of sand.

The difference between east and west is symbolic of the contrasts that mark Great Barrier. The conflict between old and new was illustrated when we walked from Medlands Beach over the headland to the settlement at Claris. Rumbling up the narrow steep road behind us was a massive old truck with no top. It looked like a converted vintage fire-engine. We almost expected to see a row of shiny silver helmets along the side seats, but instead it carried a complement of big smiling men wearing full beards and swandris. When the truck finally

pulled up outside the Claris store, the driver produced a screwdriver, reached into the dashboard and wound down a screw until the engine died.

Back on the Claris/Medlands road we were passed by another truck, this time a bright shiny blue Hino owned by Les Blackwell, a carrier. An elder of the one of the original families on the island, he was on his way to the wharf at Tryphena to meet a navy tug bringing in equipment for the naval station perched on the headland between Awana and Palmers beaches.

The new Hino, brought to the island on a roll-on roll-off barge, was a familiar sight on the roads, constantly delivering supplies and dumping gravel on the dusty roads. Blackwell is one of the few residents whose livelihood is dependent on the island's economy - others must rely on their own resources to maintain a reasonable lifestyle.

Just a five minute walk from the squeaky-clean Medlands beach is the Rangimarie (Peaceful) farmlet owned by Tim and Robyn Roberts. They live on this small hilly block of land with their two young children as well as Tim's father Jack and Robyn's parents.

On their flatland they have developed a large garden and orchard which provides enough food for the family and a small surplus for the guests staying in their four cabins. The income from the cabins is not great - they don't qualify for GST - but is enough to pay for food they can't grow and other essentials.

There is no reticulated electricity on Great Barrier. Power for lighting the houses and cabins is generated by a large modern windmill on the hill above the farm. Hot water comes from both solar power and a wetback on the wood-range and the fridges are gas-powered: most people use similar methods, although those without diesel or wind generators either go without light or use tilly lamps.

Living on the Barrier is a struggle. Costs are much higher than on the mainland. Freight to Tryphena adds an extra $6 to a sack of flour, and then it has to be transported from the wharf.

We sat down one night with the Roberts family to a huge meal of organically grown vegetables and asked them why they bought the farm.

"The land was cheap and the farm was ideal for what we wanted to do," said Tim. "The cabins have been here since the farm was settled. We wouldn't want to live here if we didn't have people to stay in them - on an island you can get quite insular and alienated. But we meet more people passing through our guest house than we did running a lunch-bar business in Napier a few years ago. People come to the island to relax, unwind and enjoy themselves. They're more inclined to sit down for a long talk."

Our own long talk was cut short by the sudden death of one of the guests. An elderly man had just arrived on the island for a fishing trip with a friend, and his heart gave out after an evening walk.

The island's doctor and sole police man were summoned when the body was discovered in the bathroom and came within half an hour. The Barrier isn't a place where you would want to be requiring immediate first-aid. The nearby tall pines, and the kaka parrots in them, seemed to make more noise than usual that night.

A day or so later we were driving down Masons Road in the County Council ute with Keith Mitchell horticulturist and part-time handyman for County. Earlier that day the ute's suspension had cracked from the strain either of driving over the uncompromising roads or

of collecting tonnes of garbage every day, Japanese vehicles fare the worst on the island - they weren't designed with the Barrier's unsealed roads in mind.

“There’s no such thing as junk on this island. It’s only something you haven’t found a use for yet” (Photo: Richard Gordon)

As we passed another guest house, Mitchell pointed out a number of wrecked cars left on the side of the road. Dumping cars is a common practice. When a car dies, and they all do, they are left to rot on the spot. On the tops of mountain passes, by sand dunes, in backyards. There are more abandoned cars on Great Barrier than in a South Auckland wreckers' yard.

This particular brigade of wrecks had been left to disintegrate at the property's front gate. It was an extraordinary collection of rotting Prefects and ancient trucks. One car was so far gone that there were just a few slabs of rusty steel poking out of a clump of grass.

This seems to be a quirky way of "keeping up with the Joneses" on the island, even though a local wag told us because there's no one called Jones on the island you don't have to keep up with anyone. Another resident explained the wrecked cars and other rubbish lying about this way: "There's no such thing as junk on this island. It's only something you haven't found a use for yet."

Instead of swimming pools, spas and private tennis courts, the route to recognition is the number of abandoned wrecks you have on or near your property. Keith Mitchell is not of this school however. He hates seeing dumped cars lying about and when one was left in front of his property he pushed it over a bank with a bulldozer.

We stopped at a tree-shaded orchard owned by a pair of Auckland doctors and their families. Mitchell takes care of the still-maturing peach trees for the absent owners. Then, when

harvest time approaches at the height of summer, the owners and family come across to the island to combine a holiday with fruit picking.

Between some of the rows of young trees it appeared as if someone had taken a hoe to the short grass cover. Wild pigs had been rooting about in the orchard. Professional pig hunters, brought in by Mitchell to flush them out, have so far shot a large sow.

We were on rich flat land at the head of the valley behind Medlands Beach, good-looking land but prone to flooding. Mitchell pointed at his waist to indicate how high the flood waters sometimes ran through the orchard.

About 10 years ago most of this valley was one large farm block. Then teams of surveyors with their maps and theodolites tracked across the paddocks and low hills drawing out new 10-acre farmlets.

Leaving the quiet sanctuary of the peach orchard we drove past several of the now well-settled 10-acre blocks and across a river that had to be forded in true rural style - gunning the engine, Mitchell tore across it hell-for-leather. This was still a public road and the only way home for Mitchell and another couple of upper-valley dwellers.

When Mitchell and his wife moved here several years ago there was nothing but an undulating paddock and a steep slope overgrown with manuka scrub. The hillside is now dense with a thousand fast-growing pines and some Tasmanian Blackwoods. Above the trees the Mitchells have built a house that enjoys a grand view down the valley towards the Pacific.

Every item needed for the house's construction had to be carried uphill from the river by hand. The gravel road now serving the valley has hewn out of farmland by Mitchell himself using a borrowed bulldozer.

Part of his horticultural operation is a nursery growing many island natives from seeds and cuttings. The Department of Lands and Survey is an important customer, but because it has its own nurseries on the mainland, cut him down to a "knife-edge price.

He would like to sell seedlings as well as imported fertilisers and other garden paraphernalia from the nursery but says the County's district scheme prohibits him from operating a retail business there. "The district scheme plan is hopeless. It doesn't allow for any industry, innovation or for entrepreneurs who want to do something with their land," he says bitterly.

As well as peaches and hoped-for export-quality rock melons, he grows peppers, tomatoes, chillies, spring onions, lettuces and citrus fruit for the local market. When he came to the Barrier he knew nothing of growing warm climate produce. Originally from a Yorkshire moors farm, he was more at home growing turnips and cabbages.

To irrigate the gardens and orchards he had to carry a mile of pipeline up a hill to reach a water source in the bush. The irrigation is needed for the sort of intensive growing he is committed to: every square metre of arable land has something growing on it. He even plants pumpkin among the karamu (coprosma) wind-breaks.

Developing his small patch of the Great Barrier took not only plenty of hard graft but plenty of money which he didn't have left after buying the block. He sought and received a Rural Bank loan, but the interest rate has risen from 9% to 15 %, a crippling rise for a struggling farmer already facing the Barrier's extra freight costs.

Mitchell is known on the island as a tireless worker, He runs his own farm, manages others, works for the county two or three days a week, during the summer collects and disposes the island's rubbish every day, and does contracting work. If he could work in his sleep he'd find a way.

"My wife and I haven't been off the island together for seven years or even had a holiday together in that time. It's all britches-arse power here. Everything has to be done by hand and if you don't do it yourself it'll never get done."

We walked to Claris to view Zealand's finest collection of pre-oil shock Holdens and Ford Falcons. The big Aussie cars, designed for endless trips across the Nullabor were said to be perfect for driving conditions on the Barrier. We hired a Holden Special station wagon for a few days to test the theory. Despite its width, it held up well on the narrow roads. Our main fear was that we would get bogged somewhere isolated, but the rain which had hit for a few days finally abated and the roads returned to their original dustbowl condition.

The two post offices, at Claris and Mulberry Grove in Tryphena, are favourite meeting places for locals. "Come in and have a natter," shouted the Claris postmistress from her wooden verandah to a couple of women who pulled their gurgling Landrover to halt. Children and dogs poured out and disappeared into the shelter of the post office.

The wind was blowing hard, turning the desolate road in front of the Claris store into a classic dusty western scene. With the dust permeating everything - cameras, clothes, hair, door-locks - and its grey unpainted Fibrolite buildings, Claris was not a pretty sight, so we headed across the island to Tryphena.

At the top of Tryphena hill we met face-to-face with a black Ford Zephyr with Auckland-style orange and red flames licking down its sides. Everyone else we had passed had given us a welcoming rural wave, but not the driver of this hostile-looking car. It only grudgingly, and at the last moment, moved across a couple of feet to let us slide by. A taste of the small but irksome loon element on the island.

We went looking for Sally Combes and her friend Bob Harrison, long-time residents, to talk about Barrier people and their concerns.

Combes, a freshly-elected councillor for the Tryphena riding, sat on a footstall by a slowly burning wood-stove which she fed with manuka logs. From big mugs we drank tea topped with milk that came from one of the bleating goats tethered outside the kitchen door.

The kitchen was like other rural kitchens - chockful of oddments, big old Milo and baking-powder tins, spare chairs for guests, and vegetables sitting in jars of water to keep them fresh. But there was no fridge, nor any other electrical appliances. The only modern-day object was a recently-installed gas cooker.

"You have to take personal responsibility for the necessities of life here," said Sally. "There's nobody to feed power to your house or to take away your rubbish. You have to set aside time every day to chop wood for the stove or to feed the livestock.

"It may sound to the city-dweller like too much hard work, but it's not just work. It's a form of relaxation also. And you can take a great deal of satisfaction eating homegrown vegetables or reflecting on a productive morning fixing a leaky roof."

“A person that elects to come here is an individual," said Bob. "You enjoy life because in the morning you never know what sort of challenges are going to be presented before you. But by the evening you're satisfied because you've faced and overcome them.

"People that succeed on the island are those that came here and accepted the Barrier for what it is. There's no point hoping all the time that the situation here will improve or that next year things will get better. Here you've got to live off your own resources.

I admire the success of some people here who year after year progress against the odds. Some people from the city may be appalled by how much of a razor's edge some have lived on to survive. They have managed through sheer guts and total self-reliance."

The Great Barrier community is small - only 854 permanent residents - but is rich and broad-based in its skills and abilities. If there is an accident or crisis (when cars go over banks or when a pod of whales grounds, as one did in Tryphena in 1984), the turnout of people to help is always enormous.

"It's not the sort of place where you step around somebody on the pavement who's having a fit. There's a great community spirit - but here's also plenty of shallow petty malice," said Sally

So what are some of the problems of the island? It's such a peaceful, tranquil and unspoilt land, far removed - 80km - from the problems of the modern world.

Many islanders say trail bikes are a nuisance on the roads and beaches. They are a means of social aggression and rebellion although what there is to rebel against on this amiable island is anybody's guess.

Bikers get away with things that wouldn't happen on the mainland. Few wear helmets and few bikes have decent mufflers. They seem to roar around at breakneck speed constantly.

Perhaps the only challenge left on the island is playing Russian Roulette on the corners of the Tryphena hill road. Often as we swept into a hopelessly blind corner we would hear the blatt of a motorcycle engine and pull across to the left, unfamiliar with the size of the Holden and unsure exactly where the left-hand wheel was. A bike would hurtle up around the bend in the middle of the road spraying stones and dust. As it ripped past we would see the crazed grin of the rider - he made it this time.

They tend to play up in front of the school at Mulberry Grove where they have a captive audience. Just a few hundred metres past the school is the general store and post office - a popular meeting point, especially on mail day.

Then a short distance from the store is a flat wooden bridge with a raised lip. A biker was putting on a spontaneous demonstration there not long ago. He roared down the dirt road, built up speed and took off at the lip at the bridge. When he landed the bike its condition typical of the island's two wheelers, it broke in two, much to his horror and embarrassment.

Although there is enough traffic to make the roads dangerous, there has yet to be a fatal accident. This summer an extra 250 cars were expected to be on the roads due to the new barge service. Many residents were concerned about the impact of increased traffic - visitors from the mainland are used to wide roads and speeds of 50 to 100km/h, but the average speed on the island is about 30km/h. More accidents were expected.

Other problems are those that affect all communities: availability of liquor from the two social clubs: unemployment and boredom among the teenagers who have left school. But the

difference on Great Barrier is the lack of social resources to cope with such concerns. Some of the more liberal-minded residents are suggesting the County hires a Community Worker to help but others wonder where the money will come from.

In any small but growing community - up 15.5% - in the past five years with a need for certain facilities that have to be paid for by the ratepayers, the basic question comes down to conservation versus development. It's an argument that will never be resolved.

There are two ways to improve Community services - increase the rates paid by the existing residents and thereby threaten to drive some long-term residents from the island, or increase the rating base by encouraging more settlement through subdivision and thereby bring more problems of sewage disposal, rubbish and noise.

The people who live on the island are basically selfish although in the nicest possible way. They have their beautiful unspoiled island and want to keep it that way. That's the viewpoint of people like Tim Roberts and Sally Combes, but not all agree.

Strolling down the CIaris Road one afternoon we were accosted by Keith Mitchell who dragged us of the road to meet someone who "can tell you what's happening on the island".

The man he wanted us to meet was welding the County vehicle back together. He quickly finished, slid out from under the truck, dusted himself down and introduced himself as Peter Benson, quarry owner and resident on the island for nine years.

"What's going on here? I'll tell you what's happening on the island - nothing. Everybody is trying to stop things happening," said Benson, a thin, bearded man who looked not unlike his archenemy Tim Roberts at Rangimarie guest house.

Benson told us the story of the Great Barrier crayfish:

Sitting on the wharf at Tryphena is a Barrier fisherman just in from a successful trip into the Hauraki Gulf. Close by a tourist stands transfixed, watching a bucket full of crayfish. The live crays are writhing about, crawling over each other. "That top Crayfish is going to climb out," the tourist warns the fisherman. "Nah, don't you worry, mate," says the fisherman. "The minute that cray reaches the top of the bucket the others will pull him back down."

"That's the story of the Barrier," said Benson, "We've been held back for years, too many people on the island are nonproductive- they do everything on the cheap because they haven't got much cash. And that attitude has affected the planning of the island. The scheme plan was written by environmentalists and doesn't allow for any sort of development. We might as well chop some more land into sections and get some rates from it but instead we get the attitude from some people of wanting to turn everything into reserves and parks."

A motorcycle engine crashed through the silence and roared past. "Look at these guys tearing up and down the road on new motorcycles. I know some of them have never worked in the entire time I've been here. Where do they get their cash from to buy those bikes or to fill the petrol tank? There ought to be an investigation into the activities of those guys. They're not working and they can't get the dole over here so they have got to be doing something dodgy."

Asked how he knew they weren't working he and Mitchell counted off names of those they knew were. They reeled off all the fishermen, tour operators, builders, shop owners, drivers, county staff, forestry workers, farmers, the one policeman and one navy employee who mans the secret navy base.

"Out of 800-odd you'd be lucky to find 50 productive people on the island." said Benson.

(The base is far from a Subic Bay-style warship haven: a single building houses the recording end of an underwater listening post. Apparently a number of sonar sensors are implanted in a huge grid system in the Pacific sea-bed a few miles off the Barrier. The system is supposed to track the movements of ships and 'unidentified submersibles' in the Hauraki Gulf region. However, according to island sources the Navy didn't count on the seabed's vagabond kina. The rolling - and, to a highly sensitive sonar, noisy - kina have reduced the information gathered to an uninformative rumble.)

Peter Benson came to the island nine years ago. He first ran a small quarry near Tryphena and then moved across to the Medlands beach quarry which had been opened briefly for aggregate just before World War II.

Working only with a small crusher forced him to break bigger rocks by hand for those first five years. Using a 14lb sledgehammer, he hammered 60% of everything that went through the crusher. It was back-breaking and wrist-jarring work.

Benson breaking rocks the hard way. (Photo: Richard Gordon)

A year ago he bought a bigger crusher that will take rocks the size of a decent office desk, but even with the bigger crusher and other innovations like bringing a drilling rig to the island for a few days to drill dynamite holes in the quarry wall, running the operation is almost too much for him.

"Establishing and developing a hardrock quarry is not a job for a one-man-band," he says. "It's been a bloody hard battle: to get where we have got today and we're still not secure here. It's the old story - 16 tons and what do you get, another day older and deeper in debt."

Benson tells us about Richard Greaves the part-time building inspector, honeymaker, Pa Beach store-owner and lodge owner. Greaves also runs the Barrier Youth hostel.

"The hippies call him Greedy Greaves because he's making a living. He's going ahead on the island but he works like buggery to do it all. The hippies' attitude is that the bastard is making too much money.

"One of Greaves' customers who had already run up an extensive debt asked for further credit. When Greaves turned him down the guy got angry and said Greaves could afford it - after all he had just had an overseas trip. That's their attitude - they're riding on our backs."

Benson is obviously bitter about the so-called hippies, no doubt because of the eight court battles he has had with Tim Roberts over his right to run a quarry. The court has limited the hours he can run his big crusher and also instructed him to sound-proof it - a measure he has yet to undertake.

Both Benson and Roberts ran for the County Council last October. Benson in the southern riding lost by four votes to Sally Combes while Roberts also dipped out in the central riding.

Being a quarrying man, Benson is not adverse to a spot of mining on the island. But he and Mitchell, who also has a mining background, would be in a tiny minority. Nevertheless they argue that mining would benefit the whole island and that the scale would be nothing like the open-cast style in Australia.

Gold and silver was discovered in the Okupu and White Cliffs area west of Claris in the 1890s. A number of mines operated there on a small underground scale until just before World War I. An Auckland company, Sigma Resources, (owned by Australia's Delta Gold), has applied for a prospecting licence to go back to the old mines and see if there is anything left in the three vein systems.

Each has the potential, according to Sigma's managing director Bruce Bell for gold and silver at a greater depth. "The target up there is for a small to medium-scale conventional underground mine.

"Generally people on the island have been helpful to us although the County Council's attitude has been against all mining on the island. But because the land concerned is Crown land, they can't stop mining outright and will have to object in the planning hearings.

"There is definitely an aversion within government to large-scale open-pit type mining in New Zealand but there is no question that small underground mines that we are proposing are favoured."

Gold and silver occur in conjunction with toxic heavy metals like zinc mercury, arsenic and cadmium. Many of those heavy metals are already found naturally in streams in the White Cliffs area, and residents are careful about which streams they take water from. Wouldn't a mine add to this problem?

"I can only point out that we are strictly controlled by regulations," says Bell. "If we set up anything that would cause environmental problems we would be up for the high jump. Then we would have done in our chips for the rest of the country. The burden is on us to perform."

Combes rests her hopes with the new Ministry of the Environment. She says they arc keeping a close watch on the Barrier and will help the islanders. "We need to look after the precious resources and channel all development because we have a serious responsibility in managing something that is relatively untouched. We need to manage it so that it doesn't become something that in 20 years time we don't like anymore," she says of both mining and new subdivisions.

"When it gets to the point that the legal channels are no longer effective, people will be forced to take matters into their own hands. What has happened on the Coromandel will, I'm sure, happen here. A friend of mine said just the other day, “if they start mining here I'm quite prepared to lay my husband down in front of the bulldozers'."

When we flew from Tryphena to Port Fitzroy in the shake, rattle and roll Sea Bee float-plane we noticed many houses dotted in the bush around isolated harbours. Many of those retreats belong to people who have stressful lives on the mainland and who flee to their hideaways on the Barrier to totally unwind far away from telephone and neighbours.

"The barrier is a place for the city to come and restore itself" says Combes. "It is essential to keep the feeling of remoteness because so many people from the mainland need it."

Tourism is gradually becoming the backbone of the island's economy. Late last century, when logging of the rapidly dwindling kauri (an estimated 100 million feet has been taken from the island), mining and whaling were strong industries on the island, tourism was seen as a logical use of the area. Government surveyor Sidney Weetman wrote in 1989: "I believe that in some time in the future it will become the Isle of Wight of New Zealand, owing to the salubrity of its climate, its very picturesque and excellent harbours, and its hot springs."

But while rugged bush walks, surfing beaches, and secluded harbours are what New Zealand tourists look for they aren't really suited to hordes of overseas visitors. The best form of tourism may be the low-key guest houses and lodges already there. It is an unsophisticated approach but it is a natural extension of the island's hospitality.

But Peter Benson argues for a more organised approach. He says organised tours would respect the environment, lead to better facilities for tourists and bring much needed funds.

"The type of tourist we get at the moment is of no use to the island either environmentally or economically. So many come here with very little money and hike through the forests, taking the wrong routes, disturbing the wildlife and leaving their waste behind.

They act as if they are a law unto themselves and have no respect for the land, it's a place for them to goof off and be left alone."

Since the Maori spotted the island from their canoes a few hundred years ago and called the place Aotea, a land like a white cloud, eccentric behaviour there has been common - like the European settlers who stripped the island of kauri and introduced pigs, goats and gorse.

In 1886 two men were convicted after they' had ‘feloniously, willfully and of malice afore thought, killed and murdered one Robert Taylor, The Herald reported that a young woman, Sarah Elizabeth Cleary, alias Lizzie Graham, was charged with harbouring and "maintaining" the two murderers. The charge was withdrawn to the prosecutor's regret: he knew that "as soon as she was discharged she would return to her evil courses".

Perhaps it's the isolated and languid nature of the place that drives people to do strange things - like the man who recently buzzed Port Fitzroy harbour several times in his light plane. Or the quarryman who tried to repossess a truckload of granite and was confronted with a shotgun.

After a week on the Barrier we too were compelled to act slightly out of character from time to time - like climbing a mountain or trudging for an hour through a swamp. Like everything else on the Barrier it was different, unique and a contrast to the concrete shelled city we had escaped from.