



NEW ZEALAND  
ARCHAEOLOGICAL  
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**NEW ZEALAND ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION NEWSLETTER**



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SOLANDER ISLANDS SITE SURVEY

Karl Gillies  
Southland Museum & Art Gallery  
Invercargill

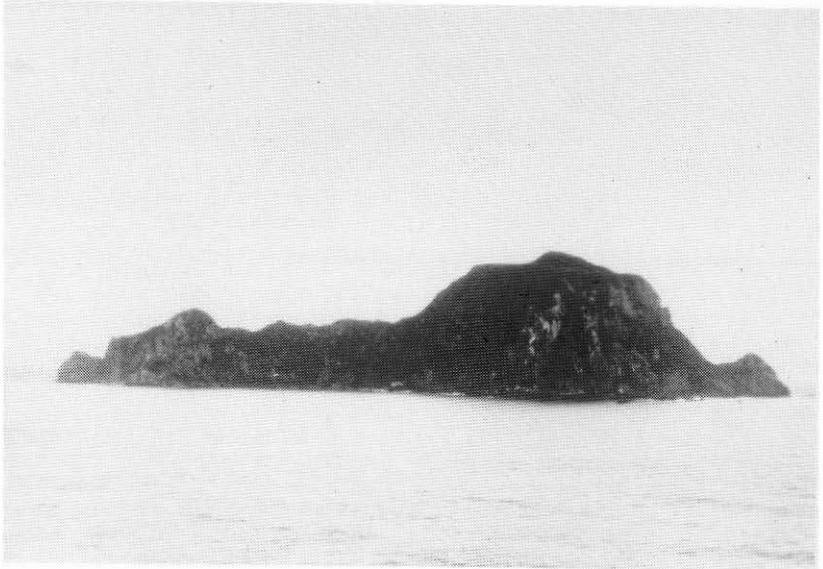
In 1770 Captain Cook sighted two bleak islands some 90 km off the southern Fiordland coast and named them Solander Islands after his Swedish shipboard botanist. I was recently given the opportunity of participating in the third scientific expedition to these islands, in July this year; this time organised by Fiordland National Park.

The party was made up of five - Winston Cooper (Lands and Survey) and Colin Miskelly (Zoology Department, University of Canterbury) would be dropped on the tiny islet "Little Solander" to study the flora and fauna. Kim Morrison and Ron Peacock (Fiordland National Park) would study the ecology of the main island and assist me with the archaeological survey if time permitted. My role was to collect geological specimens for the Southland Museum's comparative collection and to try and locate the campsite of a sealing gang marooned there for five years until 1813. This is well documented in McNab's (1907) Murihiku, which also mentions sealskin caches left on the islands after the rescue.

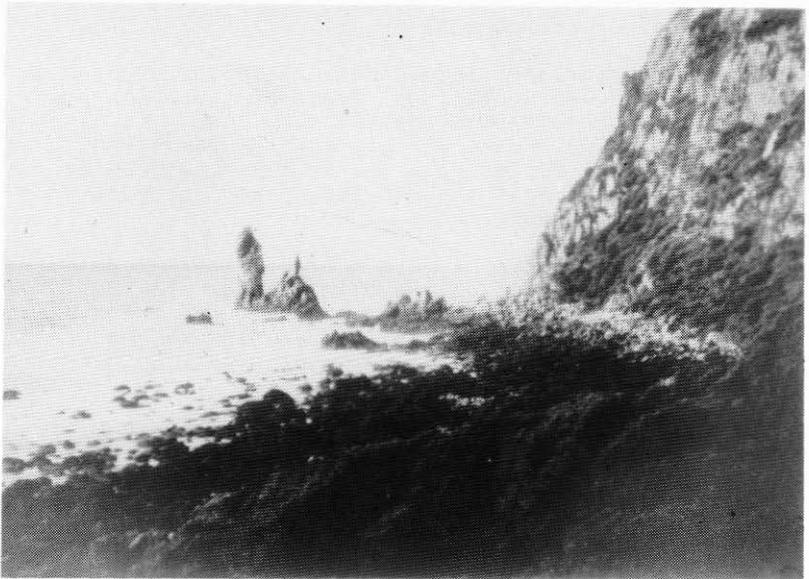
Armed with the appropriate collection and excavation permits we rendezvoused at Clifton (near the Longwood forest) with a helicopter piloted by Bill Black. Two nets of provisions were then hooked up and we set off for the remote volcanic Solander Islands. For me this was my first helicopter flight, but there was comfort in the knowledge that our pilot had some 18,000 hours flying experience.

In about 20 minutes we were there - first dropping Kim, Ron and our supplies off on the main island, and then flying over the bleak Little Solander to drop off Colin and Winston. This went without a hitch and Bill then flew me back to the main island. As the beach was somewhat rocky, he had to hover while I scrambled to safety.

We had excellent weather for the two days stay. I surveyed East Bay and put two test trenches in a couple of rock shelters which would have been likely fair-weather campsites. The results were somewhat inconclusive - some cultural material, but no definite indications of the 19th century sealers. Kim and Ron also surveyed north of East Bay but with no conclusive results. Halfway along East Bay (where a safe anchorage is possible) we explored a large cavern with a multitude of back adits and tunnels (each occupied by a family of fur seals).



*Big Solander Island from the east.*



*Eastern Bay, Big Solander*

This would have given shelter for the bad weather that so often plagues these islands. Also, there were no smoke stains, artefacts on ledges, or obvious signs of sealskin caches. The cave's pungent atmosphere created by moisture and seal 'effluvia' I think would not have made this a desirable long-term shelter.

Departure came soon enough. Pick up from the two islands went without a hitch thanks to good weather and Bill's excellent airmanship. From East Bay he flew us around the island's coast. We saw several beach caves, some of which may have been cache or shelter spots; I made a photographic record of each. These are high priority areas for a return visit, although for my money East Bay offers the best shelter against the prevailing winds. A full scale excavation of the two rockshelters in the future may provide the evidence we are looking for. Meanwhile, besides McNab's account of the sealers' rescue by Captain Murray of the "Perseverance" in 1813, another piece of tantalising evidence remains: a small sealskin purse with a brass button, on display in the Southland Museum's History Gallery. This was recovered from the Solanders at some period in the past but unfortunately there is no further provenance information.

#### Reference

McNab, R. 1907 Murihiku. William Smith, Invercargill.

