

BETWEEN *the Tides*

A collection of voices from
Awaroa's wild and wonderful coastline

COMPILED BY ANNA LOCKER-LAMPSON

Published 2026
by Anna Locker-Lampson

ISBN 978-0-473-77685-5

© Copyright Anna Locker-Lampson 2026

All rights reserved.

Except for the purpose of fair reviewing, no part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or any information storage and retrieval system, without prior written permission from the publisher.

COPYPRESS

Printed by CopyPress, Nelson, New Zealand.

{REALNZBOOKS}

Distributed by Real NZ Books, Nelson, New Zealand.

www.copypress.co.nz

This book truly belongs to all the bach owners who have written their stories of building a house within the restrictions of unstoppable tides. Hopefully future generations will value the tales of determination, stoicism, perseverance, lucky escapes and indefatigable spirit.

As Jo Eason commented, 'Awaroa was built with heart and good humour'.

Awaroa is a special place and I feel privileged to be a part of such a wonderful and zany community. Thank you and lets keep making more memories.

Introduction

A LONG THE WALKING tracks that hug the coastline of Tasman Bay at the top of New Zealand's South Island are many pleasant surprises. Threading your way through the beech forests of Abel Tasman National Park, you might spot little blue penguins bobbing in the turquoise sea or fur seals lazily peering out from rocky outcrops along the shoreline. On the forest floor, you could find empty shells of the *powelliphanta*, a huge, nocturnal, carnivorous land snail, or a bright orange leathery bracket fungus protruding from an old beech log.

These things you might expect to see in a New Zealand national park, but you would not count on finding, in the middle of almost nowhere, a cluster of 40 or so dwellings of varied architecture and home-built baches, on one of the most pristine shorelines in New Zealand.

In English, the Māori name Awaroa means 'Long River', and where the Awaroa River connects with the sea, it becomes so deep and wide at full tide that it takes the form of a harbour. For two hours, either side of high tide, this great sweep of water is kept in check by a long white arm of sand which helps turn it into a vast bed of sand and mud, braided by small, clear streams.

To cross the inlet, anyone travelling from Tataranui to Awaroa on foot must time their walk to coincide with low tide. But whether you come splashing through the inlet or approach from the south, marching up over Tonga Saddle, the discovery of a small settlement in a national park is incongruous. Looking out over the honey-coloured stretches of empty beach and the clear turquoise sea rippling into the crannies and sand gullies of the inlet, it is easy to understand why anyone would want to spend time here. But it has never been easy to access. Homeowners and visitors who don't come in on foot can take water taxis from Kaiteriteri and Marahau, and kayakers paddle along the coastline and haul ashore. Some residents arrive in their own small craft, and occasionally, private aircraft land on the bumpy airstrip above the beach.

Until 2016, part of the beach remained in private ownership. Private land in a national park is very unusual. In 2006, a Wellington businessman, Michael Spackman, had purchased seven hectares of beachside land from Joff and Joan Benge, who had acquired it from the Harwood family in the 1960s. The Harwoods had owned land in Awaroa since 1938. Then in 2016 Spackman put the land up

for tender with no guarantee that the buyer would allow access to the beach. Alarm bells also rang when some interested buyers proposed to build upmarket dwellings on this exceptional piece of land. This spurred two men, Adam Gardner and Duane Major, to come up with the groundbreaking idea of altering the course of these possible events, by giving New Zealanders a chance to become title owners of their own bit of beach. The two men launched a crowdfunding scheme, and the response was astonishing. Within a short time, 39,239 New Zealanders had raised \$2,259 923.21, enough to purchase the seven hectares. The area was renamed The People's Beach and gifted to the national park and the people of New Zealand. The story was so remarkable that ten years later, people who have no idea where Awaroa is, recognise the success of that achievement.

Among Awaroa's spectacular coastal environment, the 40 or so baches and homes that have been built there over the years make up an eclectic collection that range from rough-hewn baches to artfully conceived houses that pay homage to the environment. But even more remarkable is the innovation with which these homes were constructed by their owners, some of whom had never built anything

before. Overcoming the immense problems caused by Awaroa's remote position and difficult access has led to a community that is tightly bonded through shared successes, disasters, celebrations and a love of the environment they have chosen to live in or occupy sporadically. This book records the process and progress of constructing these living spaces.

The first buildings appeared in 1884 when the original European settlers, Harry and William Hadfield, built homesteads for their families. One was named Meadowbank, which was demolished and more recently replaced with a replica building. The other home built across Venture Creek has also long since disappeared. This early history is detailed in *Awaroa Legacy*, a book written by Lynette Wilson, a descendant of William and Adele.

As much as the collection of buildings, Awaroa's character is a reflection of the attitude of the people who built it. In their own voices, owners and past owners have written about their experiences to provide insight into the Kiwi ingenuity, communal support, and good humour that are the foundations of the settlement. Their enthusiasm for this place in a lucky part of the country is boundless.

Jill Malcolm

Foreword

WHY ON EARTH did I embark on this project? Simply put, I wanted to ensure that the next generations will have some historical records of how Awaroa has become such an extraordinary place. Not only was Awaroa voted the ninth most beautiful beach in the world by the Conde Nast Traveler's List in 2024, it is also on private land, which in a New Zealand national park is unusual and not always pleasing to the Department of Conservation (DOC). Using the beaches and buildings as a link to the past and present has allowed the owners to tell their experiences and stories of how they came to build there. It has been no mean feat to erect buildings in Awaroa, given the heart-stopping drive on the Awaroa road, the steep and winding Takaka Hill, and precarious landings on the beach to bring in material.

The diversity of bach owners meets once a year at The Awaroa Residents Association, which is held on the president's lawn. The agenda typically ranges from weighty council topics to recording the trapping of vermin (one year a mouse was recorded). The meeting is also the time to plan New Year's activities, including tourists who may be passing through. The events include a sandcastle competition, a boat

race, a triathlon, a cricket match, and a tug-of-war, and for a while, there was also a dog agility course. It is quite a complex schedule as the tides must be right for holding these events. The boat race and the tug-of-war go back nearly four decades.

The real locals, mostly from Motueka, Mapua, Nelson, Takaka and Riwaka, bought their sections in Awaroa long before the Judds and my whānau arrived. They called us the Wellington Wankers. I think once the locals realised city men wouldn't present a challenge in the boat race and turned out to be a complete pushover or pullover in the tug-of-war, we were accepted. We could not have settled in without the existing residents' help, as they, too, had rescued us on many occasions.

It's fair to say most of us like a drink or two, and this has served us well when we have to sort out any issues that arise. A keg here and there has been a great mediator. But I think the main thing that keeps us together is that when necessary, everyone pitches in, and there's always a welcome at everyone's bach. That's the spirit of Awaroa.

Coming from a wide range of backgrounds and a multitude of different opinions, every person who owns/or has owned a bach has a plethora of special

memories, and I believe recording some of them is important.

If I had known, when I started putting this book together, the time and energy it would require, I think I would have backed down. However, I was recommended an amazing editor, Jill Malcolm, and her expertise and dedication to ensuring everything is historically as correct as can be has been astonishing. When I first approached her, she did warn me it would be tough (I probably should have taken note then), but she also said that by the end of it, I would be enjoying it, and she was right. Thank you, Jill, for all your support and total commitment to the book and for our extraordinary chats in between, where we discovered we had so many things in common.

I would also like to thank Nick Dicks for the many, many hours he spent formatting and perfecting so

many photographs – an onerous task as some of them being quite old were in a bad shape. This book would never have come to fruition without your talents.

And thank you to my amazing daughter Kerry, for always being there when I wailed and threatened to give up the project. She would calmly come and get everything back on track and despite some muffled huffings and puffings, we managed to get there. I am impulsive but Kerry reads the manuals.

This book is for her, Radek and Marty who it gives me great pleasure to see that they, with their friends, all continue to equally treasure Awaroa holidays and are documenting it.

Thank you Kerry for being you.

STORIES FROM THE PEOPLE OF
AMAROA
BETWEEN
the Tides



Early Days



Barron

WRITTEN BY CHRIS BARRON

PROPERTY: Number 03
LAND PURCHASED: 1959
HOUSE BUILT: 1960
BUILDER: Douglas Barron
PAST OWNER: Douglas & Maisie Barron/Chris Barron

I am the previous owner of property number three. My dad, Douglas Barron, was the local Takaka school and farm builder, and we lived next to Morrie Harwood, who sold us land in Motupipi. They were good friends, and I remember that Mrs Harwood was a great baker. Then, in 1959, Dad bought ten-and-a-half acres from the Harwoods, who owned all the land at that time. The property cost 600 pounds and included a stream and the front beach at high tide. The house was designed and built in 1960. It was prefabricated in Motupipi, and Dad put it together at home in Takaka. It was then boated over the inlet, and Morrie Harwood's bullocks pulled it onto the section. According to my brothers, it was the first bach in Awaroa. Morrie Harwood's bach was built after ours.

Morrie and Dad used to go hunting and fishing together, catching lots of cod and crayfish. With my two older brothers in tow, Dad used to drive his tractor to the farm to help with shearing. Dick Daly lived in a small tin hut near the big Mulberry tree. Mr Hadfield used to shoot at my brothers when they were on his land. They still laugh about that!



Our front bach 1964

An old coal stove was used to cook on and warm the bach. Clothes were washed in the outside copper, and the toilet was a long drop. I recall that soon after, the Benge's bach was built and after that, the Crawford's.

I enjoyed Awaroa from the time I was a child until the present day. I have many memories of the times we had there as a family, which is why I love it so much and still visit there. There are many memories, but two incidents stand out. One was before the Crawfords arrived when we went pig shooting with



Maisie Barron (mum), Christopher Barron (me) and Douglas Barron (dad) at the Awaroa car park 1964

Dad at the back of the property. It was 1964, and I was only five years- old. My sister Catherine pushed me towards a huge pig with big tusks and then took off screaming in the other direction. Luckily, Dad shot the pig in time, and it fell right in front of me.

I have never forgotten this and often remind her of it. However, I forgave her because sometime later, she pulled me out of an eddy in the Totaranui inlet.

A boat propeller just missed me, and she dragged me sideways as it whizzed past.

I also remember Dad building the road bridge on the way to the Awaroa car park. It still exists today. Both my parents and my sister's ashes are in Awaroa, as well as Baxter and Beatrice, my two beagle dogs, so it will always be my sanctuary.

McNeil

WRITTEN BY BARRY MCNEIL

PROPERTY:	Number 03
PRESENT OWNER:	Ivo Distelbrink
PURCHASED:	2014
PAST OWNERS:	Douglas & May Barron, 1962-1972 Barry McNeil/Robert Clifford, 1972-1996 Barry McNeil, 1996-2014
HOUSE BUILT:	Around 1960
BUILDER:	Unknown. Modified by Barry McNeil
MODIFICATIONS:	Terry Knight, 1990-2000 The Geary Family, 2014-2015

In the late 1960s, I'd spent family holidays in Nelson, Golden Bay and Marlborough. Since then, I'd yearned for a safe, sandy beachfront getaway in that region. Then, in 1972, I discovered that number three in Awaroa Bay, owned by Douglas and May Barron, was for sale. The property comprised a rectangular, 10-acre, 32-perch block of beachfront land, including rare riparian rights over a sandy beach. Such rights were equivalent to ownership of the beach to the median high-water mark. The bach was perfectly positioned with a northerly aspect and elevated above a row of dunes. It was basic, containing several bunks, a potbelly stove for cooking and heating, and a kerosene refrigerator. Out the back was a long-drop 'dunny'.

The panoramic view of the bay, framed by bush-covered hills on all sides, was breathtaking. A sandy pathway through the dunes provided access to the beach, and a freshwater creek separated the property from the national park. In contrast to the surrounding hills, the land was treeless, patched with gorse and grazed by sheep. The Abel Tasman Track was a short walk away. I was captivated. The

property offered everything I was seeking. With my friend Bob Clifford, we paid the asking price of \$9250, and for the next decade, my wife Gill and our four children, Penny, Belinda, Miranda, and Ben, spent many enjoyable holidays at the property. There were few other baches, and we had solitude and privacy.

As well as boating, rock climbing, bush walking, fishing and swimming our children enjoyed exploring the ruins of the original Hadfield Meadowbank Homestead. A crude airstrip stretched from the wetlands to what became known as the 'Trains Community'. I believe the airstrip was constructed by Frank Cantwell, a Christchurch clothing manufacturer, who accessed his property in a small aeroplane and, his bach was naturally, 'The Hangar'. Frank was an infrequent visitor.

The Wellington New Zealand Settlement Company's property, between the airstrip and the inlet, was our nearest neighbour. The members of this community inspired by prominent architect Ian Athfield were constantly busy creating a modular masterpiece for the group. In sunny conditions, they

were often skimpily dressed, hippy style. My ex-wife Gill banned our daughters from exploring the work site after our pre-schooler giggled that she'd seen Mr Athfield's penis while he was working on a roof. Later, I engaged Ian to design a large implement shed with a mezzanine floor as the first step in building our new and enlarged bach. Due to our move to Australia, it was never finished. Ian was later engaged to renovate and upgrade the Lodge.

Water taxis did not exist in the early days, and crossing the inlet was challenging because of the distance and the elements. Enormous five-metre high tides and the Awaroa and Awarua rivers added depth and volume to the inlet. We made the journey two hours on either side of low tide employing 'Rat Patrol', a powerful crank-handle tractor pulling a large tray sufficient to carry the family's provisions and luggage. When not in use, the tractor remained at the road end undercover.

Each trip across the inlet required great care due to quicksand, mud spots and huge tides. Yet, only once did we have a crisis. Fully loaded with family, 'Rat Patrol' bogged. With the tide on the make and the water level rising, our predicament was scary, especially for the children. The grim reality was that to save the tractor, possessions, food and our pride, we needed assistance. The water level was at the height of the front wheel hubs and rising, and in a state of anxiety, I left the family marooned atop Rat Patrol and waded off, hoping to find someone in residence. We were in luck.

The Freeth family were at home in their hillside bach and were able to pull the Rat Patrol out of the hole with their tractor. It was a close call. Such adventures added to Awaroa's excitement.

In the winter of 1976, Bob Clifford, my brother-in-law Derek Harrison and I planned a week-long, working bee to prepare the bach for the upcoming summer. Instead of using Rat Patrol, we decided to access the bach from Awaroa Beach, by cruising



My Mother Mamie McNeil with her sister my Aunt Betty Tate (in the bow) receiving help from 3 strangers while disembarking from the family dinghy 'Donna Marie' in front of the bach 1972

out of the inlet at high tide. We hired an alloy dinghy with an outboard motor, which was launched from the road end with all our gear and provisions. The inward voyage through the inlet into the sea and along Awaroa Beach was a joy. We moored the boat above the high tide mark in front of the bach and began planting trees. A few days later, a severe storm lashed the area, requiring us to move the dinghy to higher ground.

When conditions improved, we decided to make the return voyage by motoring out through the shore break to calmer water. In a light rain and a modest wind, we loaded the dinghy with our gear and launched it in front of the bach. Once through the broken waves, we made good headway towards the mouth of the inlet.

However, opposite the spit the swells increased, and water spilled over the gunwales, but the entrance to the calm inlet looked navigable. We were tense, and without warning, Derek stripped down to his undies in the bitterly cold conditions. The situation became perilous. We were a kilometre out to sea without life jackets. Luckily, there was an incoming tide, and after an hour or so, the boat with the three of us still attached, our possessions, and oars all washed up onto Awaroa beach near the

spit. Back on solid ground, we were ecstatic with relief and hugged, danced and shouted with joy. Miraculously, we had avoided a tragedy.

In the darkness, we dragged the boat across the spit to the inlet. The outboard motor was lifeless, and so we took turns rowing to the Awaroa road end, where Derek's motor vehicle was parked. I remember the pleasure of rowing and generating body heat in the bitterly cold conditions.

More drama awaited us. The road-end car park was dry, but the road out was blocked by floodwater. We were trapped. The tide had turned, the rain had stopped, but it was dark, and we were bitterly cold. Derek had sprained his ankle and needed help. Our first thoughts were to get warm. We turned on the car's heater. The warmth was blissful. However, after a couple of hours, we realised, despite the outgoing tide, that the flood water level remained unchanged and running the engine was depleting our fuel supply. We decided to walk to the Totaranui Department of Conservation hut, hoping to find a ranger. Alas, there was no sign of life, and we set off on the long walk to Wainui, hoping to find a telephone. Walking along the muddy road in the dark and crossing the swollen water in the fords was a challenge, especially for Derek with his sprained ankle. We also encountered a herd of wild cattle, which we avoided by going off-road and through the bush.

Some hours later, we arrived at Cowshed Corner, and the first sign of human habitation.

Despite the ungodly hour, we knocked on the door of the first house. Immediately, a light came on, and an anxious middle-aged couple greeted us in their dressing gowns. They could not have been more understanding and gave us coffee and toast before phoning to wake a Takaka taxi driver. It was then around three o'clock in the morning, and as an inducement, I offered him a substantial bonus. He came and collected us and obligingly dropped us at the Telegraph Hotel in Takaka. At that hour, there was no reception. The front door was ajar, and with enormous relief, we selected a bedroom each, soaked in hot baths and slept. We checked in later in the morning.

Back at the bach, we had ten acres to manage, and we planted quick-growing pines and blue gums to stifle the gorse and define a manageable area around the building. Numerous native trees were also planted inside this exotic enclosure. Before planting, clearing and crushing were required, and Mo Harwood, who had suitable equipment, kindly obliged. The pines and gums grew rapidly, and the cleared part remained free from the gorse. Within ten years, the untouched rear portion of our land had transformed into a beautiful native wilderness. In later years, one of my favourite exercises was the 300-metre stroll to the lodge along our meandering creek boundary. The canopy of bush, delightful whitey wood perfume, cheeky fantails and variety of birdsong melodies never failed to lift my spirits, not to discount the barista coffee at the lodge.

In 1978, my family and I moved to Queensland, Australia, and for the next decade, we visited the property less frequently. My co-owner also moved to Australia and did not thereafter visit the property. In 1996, he was required to quit his half-share. Then, my wife Gill and I divorced, and she also wanted to sell her matrimonial quarter share and in 1996, I bought both shares.

In 1990, while I was in Australia, Terry Knight and partners created the Awaroa Lodge on my southern boundary on land that Jo Eason (nee Crawford) had acquired from her family. Terry rented my bach and made some useful improvements, including bedrooms, a wet back hot water supply, a shower, an upgraded coal range, laundry tubs and a very large deck. He vacated during my visits, accompanied by Loz Neate and her children, James, Jack and Gracie. During the 1990s, the population of bach owners substantially increased, and Loz quickly made friends. We shared and enjoyed many parties and family gatherings. New Year's Eve celebrations were memorable, with the whole community moving between baches spreading good cheer. In the late 1990s, the lodge management changed, and Dan Fraser was appointed manager. He and some of his staff became my good friends.

Left to right:
Nancy Kennedy,
Callum Kennedy
and my father
Ivan McNeil
outside original
bach 1972



In 2010, the lodge property changed hands, and one sunny morning, the new manager, visited me while exercising his three hunting dogs. He was dressed in work attire: a neat white shirt, tie, grey slacks and very classy brogue leather shoes. While we were chatting on the deck, his dogs became agitated. They'd sensed wild pigs on the national park hillside across the creek. The excited manager asked to borrow a knife. I am not a hunter, and all I could offer him was a bone-handled carving knife. He released the dogs and ran off through the knee-deep creek and up the hill dressed in his finery. Sometime later, I heard distant barking and squealing.

The manager returned, grinning from ear to ear and soaked in blood with a dead, middle-sized pig draped around his shoulders. He returned the knife and walked back to the Lodge with his trophy.

Before the turn of the century, fishing in the bay was a dream. Even without a boat, it was possible to catch fish at high tide from the rocky shore of the hills just a few hundred metres from the bach. A short boat trip to the rocky reef in front of the bach offered snapper, tarakihi, moki and butterfish. There were several beds of delicious Pacific oysters in the inlet, and a scallop dredge could be filled in one beachside dredge.

As the Abel Tasman Walk became popular, the oyster beds slowly disappeared. Scallops were victims of commercial dredging, which destroyed their seabed habitat. Seals regularly frequented the shallows, and occasionally, a predatory orca. Schools of yellow-eyed mullet were common, and seasonal whitebait was abundant in the creek. The birdlife was also prolific. The spit end of the beach was home to many oystercatchers. Around the bach, birds had returned, and bellbirds, tui and fantails delighted with their songs. Paradise ducks were common, and gannets and terns occasionally entertained with spectacular aerial diving as they hunted prey. On one occasion, I spotted a deer walking along the water's edge.

In 2005, after installing a solar panel, electric lights, a television aerial, and a wood burner, the bach became my permanent home for nine glorious years. Living a simple life was the fulfilment of a dream. I was free to read, meditate, exercise and dine at will in that magnificent environment. Of course, it was not all relaxation. Gathering and cutting wood or felling dead trees for fuel was an ongoing task.

Being a vegetarian, I established a garden that required maintenance. I also beautified the property.