

BDC New Zealand Tour 2006

Part 2 - North Island

Paul and Liz Spencer
3 litre Bentley YR2876

Day 14 - 12 February Blenheim to Wanganui 140 miles

An early start today, some earlier than others. We were told to leave at 07:00 to get to the ferry port at 09:00. This is exactly what we did (although we actually arrived about 08:20). Some decided on an early start at 06:00 to allow time for breakfast. They ended up driving the 365 bends in the dark and rain - we had it light and dry. This was rather lucky for me as my lights decided not to work until we had driven ten miles. I imagine this was a result of the damp. I am taking the engineers' approach of ignoring it unless it happens again.

The ferry from Picton in the South Island to Wellington in the North takes three hours, and is a typical ferry trip. The Bentleys were all lined up in one row on the dockside and caused some interest before we all had to reverse into the ferry.



Liz and I were met off the ferry by Colin Wallis, a colleague with whom I have served on several e-Government committees before his return to New Zealand three years ago. He and his daughter provided us with lunch in his garden high up overlooking Wellington harbour. From

there, it was a fairly boring main-road drive to Wanganui, missing a scheduled visit to a car museum as we had no time after our lunch break. We then had an evening meal on a coal-fired paddle steamer.

Day 15 - 13 February Wanganui to Napier 180 miles

Up this morning for a briefing at 08:00, leaving my navigator / water temperature monitor in bed. Some people really like an early start, one moving his car so that it was just at the exit from the car park ready for a quick getaway. The briefing was mainly about the fact that twenty miles of today's drive is over unmetalled roads, and people had been complaining. We got away at about 09:00 to drive to the NZ Army Museum at Waiouru. On the way, we met Kurt and Roger having ignition problems

on one magneto. Although there are fifty or sixty cars on the tour (it varies as the locals come and go), we seem to keep bumping into Kurt and Roger. We failed to fix the magneto, so he kept going on one. We have a rest day tomorrow, so we will have a proper look then. The picture below gives an idea of the roads we have been driving on much of the time. The only difference from most is that, having waited for the 3 Litre in the picture, there is still another car visible ahead. Very unusual.



We looked around the museum, had lunch and then continued on our way. Much of the next hundred miles gave us the best driving so far. Some gave us the worst. We started over the same sort of rolling countryside we had been driving on in the morning, then hit the unmetalled road. This was not as bad as we expected, and keeping at around 30 mph was fine, with quite a few steep hills to slow us down. After 20 miles, we were back to a proper surface until we crossed a bridge, rounded a bend and suddenly returned to an unmetalled surface, this time with bad corrugations where it looked as though a tractor had driven down the road when the surface was wet and soft. The road continued like this for miles, and was most unpleasant, never mind what it was doing to the car. When this ended and we suddenly came out of the hills into a panoramic view of the sea about 30 miles ahead and hills about 50 miles away on each side, I musty admit to getting a bit carried away and indulging in my most spirited driving of the tour so far. The road here was of the sort about which motoring journalists wax lyrical - good surface, long straights, long bends, plenty of undulations, some second and third gear hills and good visibility. And it continued for mile after mile with hardly another car in sight. Truly the sort of road for a vintage Bentley. This finally ended, and we were back on the main road for the last few miles to Napier.

Day 16 - 14 February Napier

Napier is a stunning town. It was destroyed by an earthquake on February 3rd 1931, and rebuilt in Art Deco style in a remarkably short time. What took them two years



would probably need five years of planning arguments these days. The result is a wonderfully preserved town - no large buildings like the Chrysler Building in New York, but streets of smaller Art Deco buildings. We had a pre-arranged walking tour in the morning, which was both informative and enjoyable.

Today was not a good day for the vintage cars.

Generally, these have performed well over the first 2000 miles. However, Kurt's magneto problem turned out to be stripped gears. Roy Partridge stripped down his spare magneto and fettled parts to fit, but could still only manage a weak spark. Of course, we don't know that the spark was ever good. Meanwhile, John Watson, who has the most original and unrestored 3 Litre I have seen, has had no starter motor for a couple of days. He managed to get this fixed by a local auto-electrician, but not until he had spent all day working on it himself.



At five o'clock, we all became part of the Napier Earthquake 75th anniversary event as we displayed our cars on the seafront.



I had hoped to take a panorama of this, but there were too many people for the entire time the cars were there. Instead, I climbed on a wall for the shot here.

This just left time for a most enjoyable dinner at East Pier with Kurt, Roger and Toon and Mieke Boogers from Belgium. And so, as they say, to bed.

Day 17 - 15 February Napier to Taupo 90 miles

Just a short drive today, so we left quite late, starting on the Pacific Highway before turning inland to drive past vineyards and stop for breakfast at a lavender farm. From there, the road was mainly open and up long hills, with one or two scenic stops.



This was the first time on the trip that I have really wished I had another 1.5 litres under the bonnet. We could generally make the hills in third, but this was at about 30 mph and the hills were each a mile or two long. All the long hills had an overtaking lane, so this is not a real problem. The only embarrassment was when we were overtaking a double-length truck on one hill early in the day. We had just drawn level with the cab when the engine started stuttering. Presumably, the autovac had not kept up with the demand. We had to fall back, then could not quite make it back to the side of the road. A minute or so of fast idle and we were on our way again.

Taupo is a volcanic region, with New Zealand's biggest lake. This was formed in, I think, the second century by volcanic activity. On the way from Taupo up to our hotel a few miles away, we stopped at a couple of places. The first was a waterfall that is neither high nor wide, but spectacular for its sheer volume of water as the river narrows from 100m to 10m. The second was "Craters of the Moon", which is an area of fumeroles and bubbling mud pools that appeared in the 1950s as underground hot water was extracted for energy. The drop in pressure created more underground steam, and this is where it found its way to the surface.

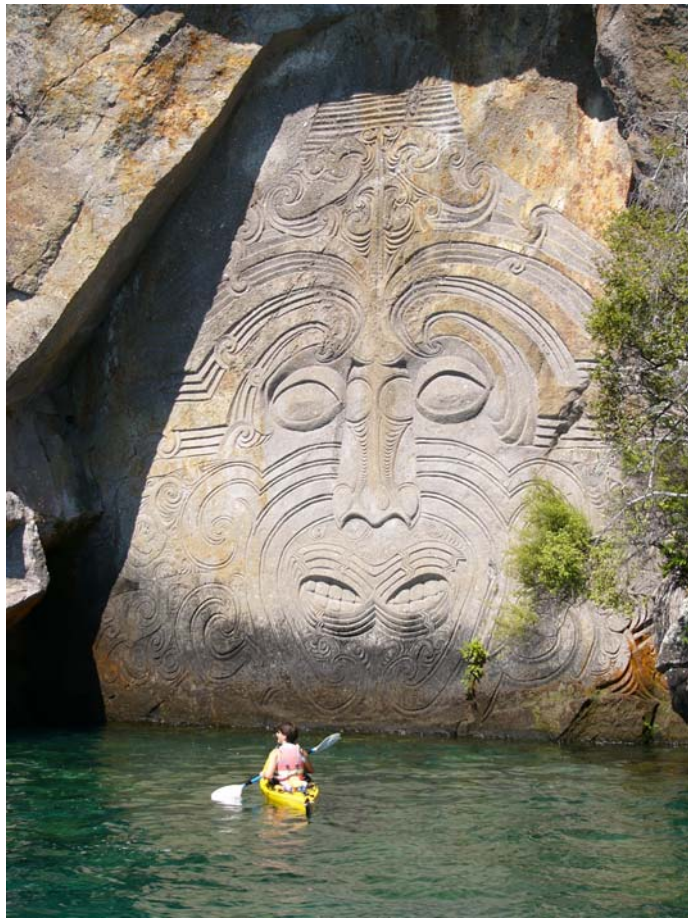


The hotel is a resort hotel in a thermally active area, so both the pools are kept very warm but mixing in water from hot springs with cold water. So we spent the late afternoon by the pool before dinner with what is rapidly the regular group of Kurt, Roger, Toon and Mieke. One discussion over dinner was how high we are. Unlike Europe, where every pass has a height marker at the top and most alpine villages give their height, we never see signs indicating height here. None of the staff knew either, so we will rely on the Internet next time we get access.

Day 18 - 16 February Taupo

The weather in the North Island has been wonderful so far. I was awake early, so got up, went for a swim and got the diary up to date. I also had some work emails to catch up on. At 6:30, there was already a certain amount of car cleaning and maintenance going on. We are now a little over 2000 miles into the tour, so I did a quick round of chassis oiling before going over to see how Kurt was getting on with his magnetos. After watching the experts at work for a while, I shall claim full credit for spotting that one magneto had been rebuilt 90 degrees out so the spark was always going one cylinder too early.

Liz and I went into Taupo for lunch and for a trip on a yacht that had once belonged to Errol Flynn. Unfortunately there was little wind, so we spent much of the trip under power, but we got to see some ancient (about 1980, which counts as virtually pre-historic in this country) Maori rock carvings and to swim in the lake. A photographer was taking pictures for a German magazine and had organised a helicopter to take some aerial shots and some canoeists to add scale to pictures of the carvings.



Day 19 - 17 February Taupo to Rotorua 85 miles

A dam that drains Lake Taupo is opened several times at fixed times each day, so we started by heading for this for the 10:00 opening. This could well be the only tourist sight we have been to where there was not another Bentley. In fact, in the South Island, someone was asked by an American whether everyone in New Zealand drove a Bentley!

Today's "official" stop was at Orakei-Korako, which is another geothermal area. This one is privately owned, and a visit starts with a short boat trip across the lake. This is followed by quite a long walk around the area of fumaroles, mud pools and geysers.



We had a simple lunch in the café, then continued the easy drive to Rotorua. The overwhelming impression of Rotorua is the smell of sulphur, which is everywhere. Like most people, we covered our "german silver" radiator overnight, as apparently this goes black in the slightest rain here.

Day 20 - 18 February Rotorua

Rotorua is mainly a centre for Maori culture and geothermal activity. Even the hotel has a small geyser at the front. We combined the two with a visit to Whakarewarewa, which is a Maori village in a geothermal area. This combines a tour of the village, a Maori cultural performance and a Hangi - a meal cooked in a naturally heated oven and water pool.



This was our third visit to a geothermal area, but they are all quite different, this being the first that included geysers that condensed to perform for us.



The performance naturally included a Haka. The performers also tried teaching us some Maori words by making us do a hokey-cokey in Maori - perhaps rather less authentic.



After the hangi, we went for a walk around on our own and saw our first mud volcano. This is just a pile of mud about 18" high that lets out an occasional gloop and spurt of mud. It sounds simple enough, mud the combination of sight and sound makes it something you could watch for hours.



This was a very worthwhile trip, although the only benefit of the meal was that we would have been left wondering what it was like if we had not had it.

Day 21 - 19 February Rotorua to Auckland 170 miles

Today's drive was really just a way of getting from one place to (half way to) another. Not only fairly dull roads, but a traffic jam on the motorway into Auckland to remind us of home. Just like a Sunday on the M25. Earlier, we had had the second attempt by a Kiwi to wipe us out. The first was on a bendy road in the South Island when a double length articulated truck came haring round a bend towards us taking one and a half lanes. We just got round the outside of him. Today we were going uphill at about 55 mph when a bike went past in the passing lane. That was fine until his hard plastic top box fell off and bounced across the road in front of us. One emergency braking later, and the box had just missed our radiator and was in the ditch. We noted the mileage where this happened, but the biker didn't stop and we could not catch him.

Day 22 - 20 February Auckland to Paihia 150 miles

Back onto the motorway this morning to take us to a planned stop at a small airfield belonging to Richard Izard.





This was a pleasant break with sandwiches, cakes and tea. From there, the official route continued along route 1, but we decided to break ranks and take the slightly longer coast road. We were glad we did - this was a good and sparsely populated road through hills and along the coast. We stopped at an almost empty beach for a lovely swim in the Pacific surf.



From there we were back onto route 1 for the rest of the journey to Paihia. On the way, we stopped at the famous Hundertwasser toilets at Kawakawa. If these had been in the England, I can't help feeling that they would charge 50p to go in, and the glass bottles embedded in the design would have been smashed.



The group has been split into three hotels, and ours is a couple of miles out from the town. Since Bridget Partridge hurt her leg badly some days back and finds travelling hard, several of us ordered a Chinese takeaway to eat in the hotel garden.

And now the bad news. Although the car has been running reliably for over 2500 miles, the pounding it has taken, particularly on route 1, which is quite bad in places, has taken its toll on the VdP tourer bodywork, and this has split just behind the passenger door. The damage is hidden when the door is closed, but we have been debating the best course of action. The first plan was to glue the

split part to the wood behind, but on reflection, I have rejected this. Apart from ending up with glue residues when I get to a proper repair (whatever that might be), the metal obviously wants to move, and a hard glue could cause a second split. So for now I have covered it with tape to keep out moisture and stop metal to metal rubbing on the door.

Day 23 - 21 February Paihia

Today is another free day. I am conscious that I have not mentioned the weather recently, and that is because it has been sunny every day in the North Island. Many people took various of the dolphin watching boats. Since we are sailors, we went in a 50 foot catamaran. We started under power to a likely area for dolphins, and there was a group of four there swimming around. The trip offers the possibility of swimming with the dolphins, but that relies on the dolphins wanting to play, and they didn't today - they just swam around, keeping their distance.



From there it was off to a beach for swimming, snorkelling and lunch, then a sail back to Paihia. Altogether a pleasant way to spend a Tuesday in February.

Day 24 - 22 February Paihia to Kaitaia 70 miles

After a visit to the Internet café, it just a short drive to Kaitaia. Unfortunately, this provided the first terminal case of the tour, when Cedric found a wheel of his 4.5 was only held on by the rear wing. Although this might have been fixable, he made the decision that it was so close to the end of the tour that he would have the car shipped to Auckland and finish in a hire car. At Kaitaia we just went for a walk around the town, then had a good dinner with Terry and Wendy Unwin (Derby), John and Agnes Watson (3 litre) and Rolf and Edda Aschmann (Derby).

Day 25 - 23 February Kaitaia

The main reason to go to Kaitaia is not the town itself, but its proximity to 90 mile beach and the northern tip of New Zealand. As part of the tour, we had a coach trip to the beach, which is "only" 60 miles long. Perhaps it was named by a fisherman (or, at least, a man). The coaches are specially built with extra galvanising of the chassis, more aluminium than is usual and the engine mounted internally. This allows them to drive happily through the sea as well as along the sand.





Timing is everything on the beach as there are very few exits and a high tide covers the beach completely. It is also known for large waves (known as sweepers) that appear without warning. These can easily overturn a car, as the owners of the Mercedes below discovered last December.

On the beach, we also saw a Blue Penguin. The males come up the beach to make nests before trying to attract a female. Since the penguins are small and prone to being attacked and killed by gulls, I am not sure why they don't just wait until high tide. The penguin below did not look capable of the journey up the beach.



90 mile beach is also famous for its sand dunes. Although most have been stabilised by planting grasses, some have been kept as part of a national park. These are not your average Great Yarmouth dunes - these can reach 200 metres in height, and are fun to go down on a body board.



The top of the beach is also the top of New Zealand, where the Tasman Sea meets the Pacific Ocean. Since the Pacific high tide is an hour earlier than the Tasman high tide, it is obvious where the seas meet.



A feature of this part of New Zealand is the Kauri (gum) tree. These are now protected, so there is no new Kauri wood. However, this area used to be marshland

and farmers often dig up well-preserved trees that are tens of thousands of years old. A business has developed making furniture and other objects from these trees, which cost over £1000 per cubic metre in their raw state. We visited a workshop that had some beautiful (and expensive) furniture and a central spiral staircase made out of a hollowed out Kauri trunk.

In the evening, the Far North Vintage Car Club put on a lamb roast for us at a local museum. A welcome by the local school children was followed by an excellent meal, time to look around the museum and a sing-along accompanied by the pianola in the museum. We even found a pianola roll for the Bentley song. Those of us with WOs then gave the club members rides round the local lanes.



Day 26 - 24 February Kaitaia to Auckland 203 miles

This morning, I looked at my HT leads and found that the plastic insulation had melted close to the plugs on the exhaust side above the manifold. Unless anyone tells me differently, I shall ascribe this to a combination of inferior leads and long high-speed motoring in hot weather. I tried to buy some cotton-coated leads during today's journey, but failed, so this will wait until the car gets home.

This is the last day of significant driving, which has certainly made us feel a bit nervous about whether we would make it (although there was no reason why we shouldn't). The first part of the journey was off the main highway, taking us past fields and woodland until we reached a café where several people had stopped for breakfast.



We had already push-started Frank Renwick's 3 litre in the morning, and had to do so again here. It looks as though his battery is not charging. From there, it was a short drive to a ferry to take us across the lake.



Shortly after leaving the ferry, we were back on the main road to Auckland, which gave us a fast, if unexciting, run. In the evening, we were accosted by various scantily-clad girls on a treasure hunt, but nobody here would be interested in that.

Apart from a couple of excursions, the driving is now over. Over dinner, we made a list of breakdowns with Kurt and Roger. I don't have the list, but it was roughly as follows.

The total number of cars varied, but averaged about 50 over the 3000 miles, making a total of 150,000 miles travelled. Probably a little over half of this was in WOs. Only one car - Cedric's - didn't make it. Apart from this, several WOs had magneto problems, one had a starter fail, one had charging problems and mine suffered a crack in the body. There were also some oil and water leaks. In the later cars, we had a wheel bearing failure, an exhaust manifold failure and several other faults about which I don't know the details. I have generally been impressed by how well local mechanics have coped with repairs we could not manage ourselves, meaning very few cars missed any days of the tour.

Day 27 - 25 February Auckland

Today we all travelled out to the local Bentley dealer for brunch and to display our cars. As with the dealer near Christchurch, Independent Prestige put on a tremendous offering. Personally, I am not too interested in the modern Bentleys, but they had other cars as well.



One car that has been with us for a few days is a Petersen Special. This caused a certain amount of comment, but at least makes a good photo.



Not only was the food good at this reception, but there was far too much of it. Since several of us were planning to go to an open air concert in the evening, the caterers were doing a good line in doggy bags at the end of the morning.

The Sky City Starlight Symphony is an annual event, and very big in the Auckland calendar. Liz and I went along with our Bentley picnic, and enjoyed an evening with the Auckland Philharmonic, a choir of five hundred and hardly any rain at all. Even the Prime Minister of New Zealand was there to make a speech.

Day 28 - 26 February Auckland

Today is the last official day of the tour, although we are staying another couple of days. Some people have commented about the organisation of the tour, comparing it unfavourably with that for last year's Australia trip. I have nothing to compare to, but this morning's briefing was certainly a low point. We were told the route to a place we are displaying our cars, then told that was wrong and we had to go a different way, then the maps were handed out after we had forgotten the instructions. As a result, we had a line of twenty or so Bentleys queuing at the bottom of a road trying to turn right where the road had been closed for a women's triathlon event. Chris Godwin persuaded those manning the road block that it was better to let us through than turn us round, so we all found our way to the display point. A restaurant had arranged a

brunch for us, which was extraordinarily bad value, but there was a good turnout for the cars.



Included in the crowd was a "BOB" or Bentley Old Boy. As well as having worked at the Cricklewood factory, he had written to the Review asking about a 4.5 Litre that he had driven when it was a police training car. This turned out to be Chris Godwin's car,

and so he was taken for a ride in it, as well as attending the dinner in the evening. I am sure there will be more about this in the Review.

From here, we travelled in convoy to the shipping company, where we all got lost again (some more than once), before preparing our cars for their journey home and returning to the hotel.

In the evening, we had the final dinner dance, with an excellent meal and an even better band.

So what was our overall impression of our first BDC tour? We absolutely loved it, and have some wonderful memories. Not only is New Zealand a great place to drive and to see (especially the South Island), but we also met some old friends and made several new ones that I am sure we will be seeing again. Our personal preference would be for travelling in a smaller group, but if we had not been on a big tour, we would not have met the people to invite for small tours in the future. We were lucky in that we had fantastic weather. Driving a WO is no fun in the rain, and we only had to do that on rare occasions. In fact, our only full day of rain was on a non-driving day. There were one or two sour notes, which I guess is inevitable over a month-long tour. Most were to do with hotels and restaurants trying to rip us off, for example charging extra for decaffeinated coffee at breakfast. I think they see "Bentley" and think we will pay anything. There was one rumour of a hotel bar increasing its prices especially for us. But I am sure our lasting memories will be of the good times and good company. All we have to do now is sort through several hundred photos and plan the rest of the year's Bentleying.

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