

Chapter Seven

There aren't many places in Aotearoa I would call a treasure. For example, I wouldn't call Invercargill a treasure, nor Gore or its close neighbour Mataura. Bulls in the North Island isn't a treasure, however one place that most assuredly is a treasure is Arrowtown. Another is St Bathans. I can't quite describe what it is that makes Arrowtown and St Bathans a treasure, however if you ever drive through them, believe me, you'll understand. Don't get me wrong, I'm not saying that places like Invercargill, Gore, Mataura or Bulls are bad places, far from it. I'm sure the people who live there are very happy and like the place very much, it's just that I like Arrowtown and St Bathans so much more.

When it comes to places like Arrowtown and St Bathans, I think it's the fact that they have a homely, timeless, old world character about them that is all together charming. I like the fact that in Arrowtown you can walk down the main street and it doesn't take much imagination to picture what the place would have been like in the 1860's. Gazing up into the hills, I almost expect to see prospectors appearing from beyond the ridgeline with all their worldly possessions slung over their shoulders.

It's William Fox we can thank for Arrowtown. He was the man who first discovered gold in the area and started a rush that brought miners from all around the globe into the tiny village. If we could go back in time to 1862 and put William Fox into a Delorean, get it up to 88 miles an hour and bring him back to the present day, I'm sure he'd be mighty impressed. Not only would he be dazzled to be here at all, he'd also be fairly stunned at what Arrowtown has become. Or still is to be precise. It's a quaint village with a population of around 2000 people that is filled by tree lined streets, cottages, a delightful shopping area and plenty of walking tracks along the river.

It had been a few years since I had been to Arrowtown, in fact it felt like it had been a few years since I'd been anywhere outside of Dunedin. While this wasn't entirely true, I did find myself needing to go exploring, a road trip if you will. It didn't need to be long, just a change in surroundings for a few days would do nicely. Fortunately, there was a long weekend coming up and this seemed the ideal time to reacquaint myself with Arrowtown, or anywhere for that matter.

Geographically, Dunedin is in a rather odd place. Due to the fact that it is surrounded by hills, if you want to go in any direction by vehicle, you have two options. Let me explain! If you want to travel north, you have to head north along the Northern motorway. If you want to head south, you have to travel south along the Southern motorway. If you want to head west, you have to first travel north or south for 55

kilometres (35 miles) before turning west, and if you want to head east then you need to get a boat. As I was driving inland to Arrowtown, in a kind of west by north-west direction (some 270km away), I could either first head north or south before pointing the car inland. So, with the flip of a coin, on a cold and wet Dunedin evening, I headed south.

An hour was spent in Friday evening traffic that travelled at a brisk but uneventful pace. I stopped and ate at a Subway restaurant in Milton, I listened to a podcast and generally tried my best to not become a statistic of the long weekend road toll. I drove through places like the Manuka Gorge, Beaumont, Rae's Junction and Slaughter House Creek, where there was occasional drizzle, some wind and a Lexus driver that didn't seem to know the give way rule, or how to calculate a safe following distance while traveling at speeds in excess of 100km per hour. I stopped and looked at stars at Lake Dunstan, discovered newly formed roundabouts in Cromwell and watched the temperature drop by 10 degrees to -1 at my final destination, Arrowtown. Arriving just in time for a beer and a short walk in the chilly night air.

The next morning I awoke to the sound of birds chirping and a temperature gauge reading -2. So, after sorting myself for the day which included donning the thickest pair of socks I had, I headed out into the crisp morning air. It was early enough that most people were still tucked up somewhere warm, so the streets were all but empty and it wasn't long before the shops came into view. I crossed at the corner of Centennial Ave and Bedford Street when suddenly I found my feet involuntarily giving way beneath me, no longer in control of my own equilibrium. Doing my best to imitate a drunken giraffe on roller skates, I eventually came to rest beside a conveniently placed handrail. Turning to view the sparkling patch of ice that had broken my stride, I found that my balancing act had been witnessed by a small group of early morning walkers. As they generously applauded my efforts, in return I assured them that yes, I do in fact do my own stunts!

A while later and back in the warmth of the cottage, armed with the morning paper, coffee and deliciously fresh croissants I sat down to examine the state of world affairs. One of the main features was a news item outlining that The Queen did not attend the Jubilee service at St Paul's Cathedral because of discomfort and that she didn't feel up to it. If we read between the lines, what this really means is that the night before her majesty got whammed on gin and forgot all about it! My guess is that after waking up some time mid-morning with a stonking hangover and discovering a list of abusive phones calls and text message she'd sent to Prince Andrew the night before, she order McDonalds via Uber and settled into binge watching Sex Education on Netflix in her dressing gown with a cigar for the afternoon. Then, sometime around 5pm after being told by Prince Charles that "Oh mummy you're such an embarrassment," she poured herself a pint of Tetley's and did donuts on a mobile scooter in the throne room for the rest of evening. It was at this point that I noticed the plants outside were defrosting as the sun peeked over the surrounding hills. This, I took as my cue to leave as I had to

stop by Pak n Save Supermarket (something I was not looking forward to) and I was also wanting to see the former Lower Shotover Bridge.

I have a history with supermarket's which means that I am rarely allowed to go in them without supervision. The sum total of my shopping experiences up to this point in my life have led me to form the opinion that life can be tough, being a modern male. It all starts by being expected not to yell at morons who have forgotten how to drive in car parks and insist on holding up traffic for ten hours while they wait for a car to leave a parking space, just because it's three spaces closer to the shop's main entrance! Then, we have to remember face masks, reusable shopping bags, shopping lists, manoeuvre shopping trolleys without pretending they're race cars, workout where the hell they've moved the alcohol section too and then be expected to speak politely to checkout operator who will be either overly enthusiastic or won't say a word. Yes, it's fair to say that as my age increases each year, my tolerance for Supermarkets diminish. Still, on this occasion, apart from making a few wheeie noises as I was going around the corner of the biscuit aisle and remembering that I had forgotten a list, I survived the Frankton Pak n Save somewhat unharmed. It must have been something to do with the mountain view, if there is a more picturesque location for a Supermarket, I would like to see it. Every time I turned down a new aisle and felt my frustration levels rising, I would happily gaze out the windows to the mountains. Eventually I successfully escaped the Supermarket, and the carpark for that matter with my carefully selected items safely tucked away and headed off to find the Old Lower Shotover Bridge. Tracing my steps back towards Arrowtown for a distance, I turned off the main road until 300 meters down a side road I came across a car park with a sign that read "Carpark for Old Lower Shotover Bridge." I guessed this must be the place.

I'm not usually that curious about bridges, however I had driven past this one many times and so I was very intrigued to see it up close. The original Shotover River bridge was built in 1871 so farmers, miners and merchants could access the Wakatipu area however it survived a mere 7 years before it was washed away by flooding in 1878. A new bridge was then erected before the building of the current structure was completed in 1915. This bridge then lasted until 1975 when it was decided that it no longer met requirements and so a new bridge (a forth) was built further downstream. It was the 1915 structure that I was now standing on as following years of neglect it was restored to its former glory in 2003.

Nowadays, the very fine bridge is enjoyed by walkers, runners and cyclists who take in the sweeping views of The Remarkables to the South, Coronet Peak to the North and the river below. I spent some time looking both up the river and down the river. For a few moments, hypnotised, I watched the river pass below me before walking back to my car.

The rest of the day I spent wandering beside streams, walking in leaves, strolling through the local museum (which is quite lovely may I added although a tad expensive at \$10) and looking at old buildings, I dined at the New Orleans Hotel where I fought

with the visiting ‘Vocal Collective’ (whoever they are) for a table and I watched the Highlanders loose to the Blues at Eden Park before walking back to my cottage guided by street lights, in a not altogether straight line. There ending my day as a tourist in Arrowtown.

When The City Bank of Glasgow in the United Kingdom collapsed in 1878 through a combination of fraud and speculative investments in Australian and New Zealand the effects were catastrophic. One of which was a period of depression that lasted from the 1870’s till the early 1890’s which was called the ‘Long Depression’ for obvious reasons. During this time in New Zealand there was widespread hardship as working conditions in factories were exploitative, farmers went bankrupt and there was a severe lack of jobs in the rural sectors. Eventually, as overseas conditions improved and partly due to New Zealand’s move into exporting meat overseas through refrigeration, the country started to move out of the depression. One of the moves out of the depression was to replace the slow mixed trains that carried both passengers and freight on the Kingston Branch and Waimea Plains Railway lines between Kingston, Gore, Dunedin and Invercargill with a faster and more frequent service through to Kingston at the southern end of Lake Wakatipu. As the locomotive used was considered the fastest timetable train in New Zealand at the time, the service became known as ‘The Kingston Flyer’ and Kingston was where I was heading today.

Once known as St Johns until the early 1860’s, the town of Kingston lies at the southernmost end of Lake Wakatipu, 47 kilometres south of Queenstown and according to the 2018 census, it has a population of 348. I arrived early in the afternoon as the darkening clouds started to spit with rain and a bracing wind rocketed off the lake. Large clouds of steam bellowed from a railway yard close to the train station as workmen were busy polishing every part of the famous train. For a moment I thought I might be in luck to see ‘The Flyer’ in action, however after inquiring a workman informed me that it was;

“simple maintenance checks as she’ll be heading out tomorrow. Just takes a while to build up all the steam needed ya see. We’ll be moving some carriages around later on tho.”

“When would that be?”

“Probably in a few hours”

Now Kingston is a nice spot however apart from drinking lots of tea, reading a book or going for a walk, I didn’t know how on earth I’d fill two or three hours in the tiny town in the rain! Deciding that I wasn’t that interested in trains, I thanked them and spent some time wandering on the lakefront before returning to my car. On the way, I discovered the second thing Kingston is famous for (the first being the train). It was the launching place for the grand lady of the lake herself, the TSS Earnslaw.

After being built in Dunedin, The Earnslaw was transported in sections to Kingston via train where it was rebuilt before completing her maiden voyage on October 18th 1912 when she sailed from Kingston to Queenstown - still gliding Lake Wakatipu to this day.

Happy that I had seen the famous Kingston Flyer as well as the launching place for the TSS Earnslaw and having spoken to 5 of the town's 348 residents (that's 1.5% I'll have you know), I pointed the car towards the Devil's Staircase and Queenstown.

I arrived in Queenstown and immediately began the battle to find a parking space. It wasn't long before I realised this was a futile exercise I was never going to win. Reluctantly, I opted for a parking building. This in itself was a curious adventure as mathematically it wasn't possible for the people at Wilsons to fit so many parking spaces into such a small area, but somehow they managed it. To make the problem more complex, all the spaces seemed to be occupied by large 4 wheel drives, making it almost impossible to manoeuvre between them, an achievement I was quietly proud of.

I spent some time wandering the various streets that make up the town's centre, I walked along the lakefront and took in the splendid scenery that surrounds the town. When I was younger, I remember Queenstown being a place with spectacular scenery, full of wonder and excitement. As you approached there was always an air of eagerness in the backseat of the vehicle my Dad was driving. Firstly, you'd drive through Frankton, then the housing developments would become less frequent and almost non-existent until we passed the bottle house which was a marvel in itself. The famed Bottle House was always a clear sign that the magical place of Queenstown wasn't too far away. Then, we'd round a bend and catch sight of the gondolas making their way up through the trees to the Skyline Restaurant. This was always the cue to look in amazement out the car window at the most mysterious of towns. Although it always did seem to be packed with people, rather expensive (so my parents told me) and full of construction everywhere we went.

Nowadays, while the scenery remains undoubtedly spectacular and completely breath-taking, the town has long since reached capacity. The Bottle House (which was actually a lodge) was demolished in 2005 and every conceivable space is now filled with shops, bars, restaurants, souvenir shops and places to book activities like skydiving and bungee jumping.

So, here's the thing about Queenstown: it has long been looked at as the goose that laid the golden egg in the tourism industry. However thanks to Covid-19 and the country's international borders being shut, the goose stopped laying. It's a perfect example of what happens to a tourist destination when you take away all the tourists, it just feels a little bit ho hum, like something is missing. The streets felt a wee bit unkempt and a general malaise hung in the air. It's almost as if without a heaving mass of tourists to keep the party going, everyone suddenly noticed that the balloon had burst, and when that happens the only thing left to say is 'oh shoot!'.

I can't say I wasn't pleased to leave Queenstown because I was, but I knew I'd be back. I'm just not sure why.

The morning air was once again cool with a light layer of frost covering the ground, although not as thick as when I had first arrived. After several injections of caffeine, I began the 280km trek back to Dunedin but first I wanted to call in to see St Paul's Church in Arrowtown. A building dating back to 1871, making it the oldest church of any denomination in the Arrowtown area.

Like most things in Arrowtown, the church sits on a lovely tree lined street, set back into the property to allow a grassy area out front where presumably the congregation would gather both before and after the services. As I looked around the church gardens, which were small yet lovely, I became aware that the morning was already pushing on and the traffic on the road behind me was steadily building. Yet despite the occasional passer-by on foot, I seemed to have the place to myself.

Afterwards, fancying a bite to eat, I found a few tasty treats to eat in the car at a nearby shop and followed the Arrow River into the Gibbston Valley, through the Kawarau Gorge and beyond to Cromwell, Clyde and Alexandra. I passed familiar places like Fruitland's, Roxburgh and Millers Flat while pondering that one day I should leave enough time to stop and wander around these towns rather than simply driving through them. Several hours later I found myself happily in the familiar surrounds of Dunedin as the city came into view from over Lookout Point. The light was beginning to fade and I still had a number of jobs at home that needed attending to before the day was done. At some point while driving along the southern motorway I glanced over towards the coastline that was becoming a sea of lights. For a moment I considered taking a detour out to the beach (not that I would see much), it would only be 10 minutes out of my way I reasoned. I thought about the beach and then the jobs that still required my attention at home, 'well, why not!' I thought.

So it was that I ended the day on the Esplanade at St Clair in Dunedin. It seemed a long way from the imposing mountain range of 'The Remarkables' where I had started the day and the surroundings couldn't be more contrasting. The familiar smell of salt air coming off the sea spray as the ocean waves hit the Esplanade wall filled the air. It was good to be home.