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SOUTH ORKNEY ISLANDS

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PETE and ANNIE HILL



The RCC Pilotage Foundation is grateful to Pete and Annie Hill for allowing us to publish their notes, arising from their cruise to the South Orkney Islands, for the information and benefit of others. Any skipper tempted to cruise these waters should note their advice and cautions and only attempt the voyage in a well found vessel with a strong crew. They must be totally self contained and physically and mentally strong enough to cope with the fast changing conditions and the harsh environment. Attention is drawn to the Caution below.

Readers are also referred to other information about the South Atlantic – and Annie Hill's Blog - which may be found on www.rccpf.org.uk

Caution

These notes have been prepared by the authors on the basis of the information they have been able to obtain in the course of their visit to the areas described. In particular, soundings shown reflect the route taken by the authors and the absence of soundings does not indicate that depths are necessarily safe. The notes are in no way comprehensive and refer only to the conditions encountered at the time of the visit. Any plans are simply sketches and do not represent the results of a survey of the places referred to. They should be used with extreme caution. The RCC Pilotage Foundation and the authors has published these notes in the hope that they may be of some help to mariners but the safety of a vessel depends ultimately on the judgment of the skipper who should assess all information, published or unpublished.

To the extent permitted by law, the RCC Pilotage Foundation and the authors do not accept liability for any loss and/or damage howsoever caused that may arise from reliance on information contained in these pages.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	3
South Orkney Islands	6
Signy Island.....	8
Factory Cove, Borge Bay	8
Paal Harbour.....	10
Coronation Island.....	12
Shingle Cove	12
Robertson Islands	13
Matthews Island.....	14
Powell Island	16
Falkland Harbour.....	16
Ellefsen Harbour.....	16
Laurie Island.....	17
Scotia Bay	17

INTRODUCTION

The following notes were made during a cruise to the islands in the summer of 1994-95 and are therefore in some ways out of date. At the time, we had no GPS, so the differences between chart datum and WGS 84 are not mentioned: judging from what other people have said, they can be considerable. Stick to traditional methods of navigation, once you are navigating to within half a mile.

The Antarctic Pilot, while more appropriate to small vessels than is usually the case with Admiralty Pilots, still has some gaps. I hope that these notes will help fill these and help when planning a cruise in this area.

When planning such a cruise, it is essential to appreciate that conditions in the Southern Ocean can be extreme and that you are very much on your own. Any yachtsmen sailing in these waters must be totally self-sufficient and prepared to extricate themselves from any eventuality. There are no rescue services and help should neither be sought nor expected from any of the few scientific bases. No-one should visit this area unless they are happy to sail without EPIRB or an SSB transmitter. Authorities are anyway unhappy at the thought of yachts sailing around this area without supervision: any request for assistance – however minor – is going to create more problems for those who follow on. It should also be remembered that it is impossible to replenish either stores or fuel.

Before making a decision, you should read *The TOTORORE Voyage* by Gerry Clark: it provides some very sobering accounts of how bad the conditions can be and no-one should venture down to this area without first reading this book. As well as being meticulously prepared for sailing in these latitudes, a yacht's ground tackle must be heavy and reliable. Hurricane force winds in apparently sheltered anchorages are not uncommon, and adequate ground tackle that will cope with these conditions is essential. This will mean that the anchors and chain might seem ridiculously oversized. Your life may well depend on it.

Weather conditions can change with extreme rapidity and a barograph is an enormously useful aid to weather forecasting.

The accuracy of available charts should not be relied upon. A number of rocks and shoals are unmarked and there are also large discrepancies in many areas between the position as indicated and that obtained by GPS.

The sketch charts included in these notes are just that. While every attempt was made to make them as accurate as possible, they should be treated with caution. This is not simply the usual disclaimer made in Cruising Guides – it is very genuine: most places were only 'surveyed' once and kelp, floating ice or poor conditions could all have contributed to errors being made. In anticipation of the metrication of the relevant charts, soundings are given in metres, to an approximate mean low water springs level. Heights are also in metres.

Of necessity, *Badger* features in nearly all the photographs of anchorages. Not only does this show where we anchored, but it also gives a scale to the picture.

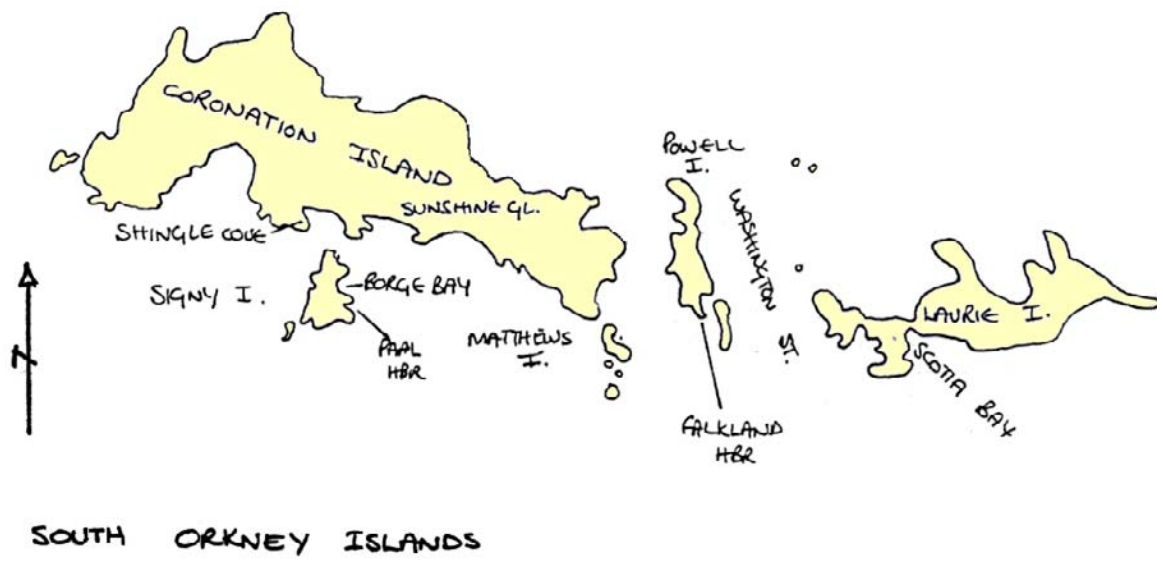
Acknowledgements

The following people gave us help and information: Tim and Pauline Carr, Pat and Sarah Lurcock, Rick, skipper of the *Abel-J*, Russ Manning, Sally and Jérôme Poncet.

Suggested Reading

<i>The TOTORORE Voyage</i>	Gerry Clark	ISBN 0-7126-2438-4
<i>The Antarctic Pilot, NP9 Southern Ocean Cruising</i>	H M Admiralty Sally & Jérôme Poncet	
<i>The Island of South Georgia</i>	R Headland	ISBN 0-521-42474-7
<i>Log Book for Grace Seabirds</i>	Robert Murphy Peter Harrison	ISBN 0-395-33253-2
<i>Wildlife of the Falkland Islands and South Georgia</i>	Ian J Strange	ISBN 0-00-219839-8
<i>The Great Antarctic Rescue Ice Bird</i>	Frank A Worsley David Lewis	ISBN 0-00-211737-1
<i>MISCHIEF Goes South</i>	H W Tilman	ISBN 0-906371-22-8
<i>Shackleton</i>	Roland Huntford	ISBN 0-349-10744 0

Various articles on South Georgia by Tim and Pauline Carr, featured in *Yachting Monthly*, *Yachting World* and *Cruising World*, 1994-95.



Sailing off the South Coast of Coronation Island

SOUTH ORKNEY ISLANDS

These islands are 420 miles SW of South Georgia and 240 miles E of the South Shetland Islands. They lie along the latitude of 60°40'S and thus come under the limits of the Antarctic Treaty. This being the case, yachtsmen wishing to visit the area should first get permission from the appropriate department of their Government, if they are signatories to the Antarctic Treaty. The islands are very mountainous, with glaciers and snow covering much of them, right down to sea level. The scenery is grand and austere.

The islands were discovered on 6th December 1821, by George Powell, in the sealer, *Dove*, and Nathaniel Palmer on the *James Monroe*. A few sealers visited the islands, but nowhere near the numbers that went to the South Shetlands.

In 1903-04, Dr W S Bruce and other members of the Scottish National Antarctic Expedition wintered in Scotia Bay, Laurie Island. Among other scientific work, they set up a meteorological station. The Argentine Meteorological Department took over the station in 1904 and have maintained it ever since: the oldest continuously occupied base in the Antarctic.

A floating whaling factory started operations in the islands in 1907-8 and a shore-whaling factory was established in Factory Cove on Signy Island, in the early 1920's, but was only in operation for about four years.

In 1947, a base was built at Factory Cove by Falkland Islands Dependencies Survey (the forerunner of British Antarctic Survey) and has been continuously manned since then.

Awahnee, with Bob and Nancy Griffiths and a New Zealand crew aboard, visited the islands in February 1971, and was the first yacht to do so.

The yachts known to have visited the South Orkneys, up to *Badger's* visit in 1995 are as follows:

1970-71	<i>Awahnee</i>	Bob and Nancy Griffiths and crew
1973-74	<i>Ice Bird</i>	David Lewis
1973-74	<i>San Giuseppe Due</i>	Giovanni Aimonegat and crew
1979-80	<i>Momo</i>	Charles and Jean-Marie Ferchand
1983-84	<i>Damien II</i>	Jérôme and Sally Poncet and family
1985-86	<i>Damien II</i>	Jérôme and Sally Poncet and family
1989-90	<i>UAP Antarctica</i>	Jean Collet and crew
1991-92	<i>Diva</i>	?
1993-94	<i>Popeye</i>	?
1994-95	<i>Badger</i>	Pete and Annie Hill

Charts and Pilot

The Admiralty chart, 1775, covers the whole of the South Orkney group. Included on it are large-scale charts of several anchorages. The latest edition was printed in 1988. It is believed that a new, metric chart is in preparation, but it is not known when this will be issued.

The Islands are covered by the *Admiralty Antarctic Pilot, NP9*, Chapter 4, page 150.

Note the caution on Chart 1775, that aerial photography in 1990-92 indicates that much of the coastline of the South Orkney Islands has a different shape from that charted and that off lying islands are in different positions. Additional inshore rocks and islands can also be identified on the photographs.

Ice

The islands are usually clear of pack ice in January, February and March. Obviously, conditions vary from year to year, but the months of December and April are also often clear of ice. However, on 23rd December 1991, the yacht *Diva* had to clear out of Factory Cove and was nearly trapped by ice drifting in. There are usually many icebergs stranded inside the 100-fathom line, around the islands and this may well give a good indication of their proximity if approaching in thick weather.

Bases

There are two bases in the islands, the Argentine base on Laurie Island, 'Orcaades' and the British Antarctic Survey base on Signy Island.

Because few yachts visit this island, they are still something of a novelty to the base personnel and consequently, the welcome extended is much warmer than that apparently given to yachts at the more frequently visited bases near the Antarctic Peninsula.

Sites of Special Scientific Interest

There are four SSSI areas in the South Orkney Islands. These are: Moe Island (SW of Signy Island), Lynch Island (in Marshall Bay, off Coronation Island), part of the N coast of Coronation Island and the southern part of Powell Island. Full details of these SSSIs can be found in Sally and Jérôme Poncet's booklet, *Southern Ocean Cruising*.

Echo Sounders

Due to the greater density of the cold water, echo sounders will give a much-reduced performance. On *Badger*, it was noted that the range was only two-thirds of normal. Low air temperatures may mean that some models will not function reliably.

SIGNY ISLAND

60°42'S 45°37'W

Chart 1775: *Approaches to Signy Island*

This is a relatively low island, S of Coronation Island, with less snow and fewer glaciers than elsewhere in the South Orkneys and consequently, it is one of the few places where there is good walking ashore.

FACTORY COVE, BORGE BAY

60°42'S 45°35'W

Chart 1775: *Plan of Borge Bay*

This is probably the best anchorage on Signy Island and, next to Falkland Harbour on Powell Island, one of the best in the South Orkneys.

At Factory Cove, at the S of the bay, is the BAS base, which is built on the site of the old whaling factory. The base has been continuously manned since it was built in 1947, but 1995 was to be the last time it is used for the winter. Thereafter it was planned that there would be a smaller, summer only base, occupied from November until April, with only eight people in residence.

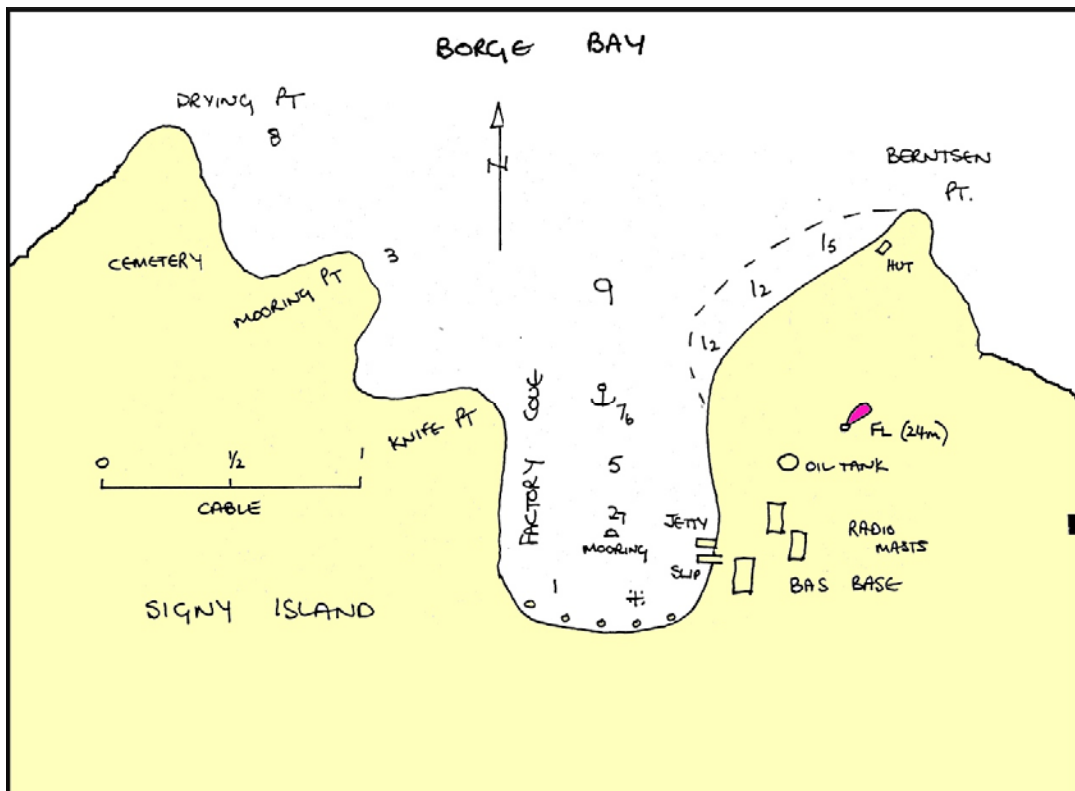
The chart of Borge Bay is on a very large scale and Factory Cove is, in fact, quite small. Badger was anchored E of Knife Point, half way across the entrance in 7.5m. There was good shelter from all but the N and NE. Shelter from this direction could probably be obtained by anchoring S of the Mirounga Flats or E of Balin Point, at the N end of the bay.

According to Russ Manning, the boatman at the base in 1994-95, Borge Bay can be subject to a NNE föhn wind, coming down from the Sunshine Glacier and that these can blow at up to full gale force. Föhn winds can generally be forecast by a 'roll' cloud over the Sunshine Glacier and a rise in temperature of a couple of degrees, which often tends to happen around midday. The föhn wind effect is usually fairly localised, with completely different conditions only a few miles away.

FACTORY COVE, BORGE BAY



Factory Cove, looking NE towards Sunshine Glacier



PAAL HARBOUR

60°43'S 45°35'W

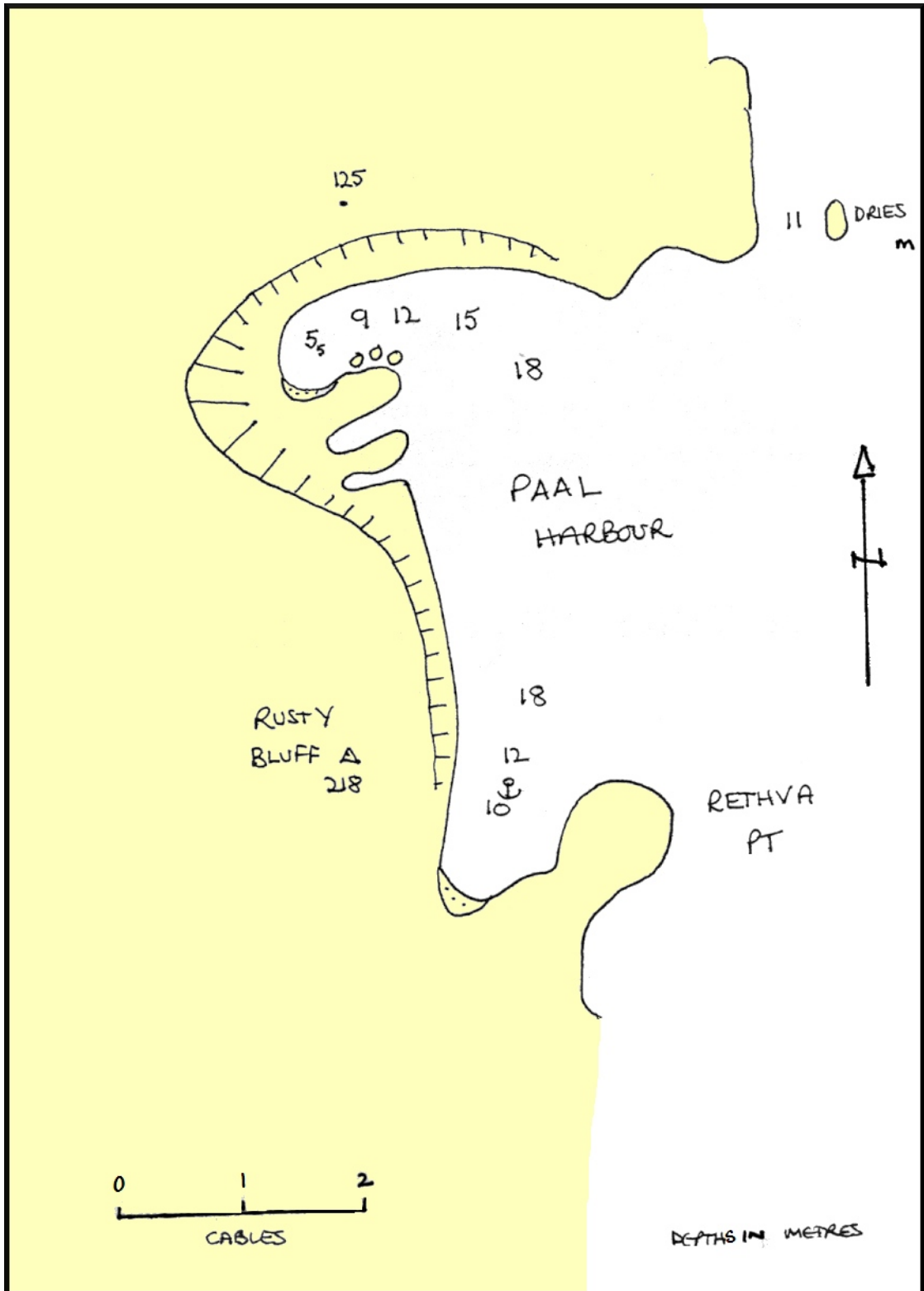
Chart 1775: *Approaches to Signy Island*

The next bay to the S of Borge Bay also provides anchorage. This bay is bordered by high cliffs to the N and W, with lower ground to the S. Strong winds from N and W may well give rise to williwaws. Depths in the bay are deeper than suggested by the chart, *Approaches to Signy Island*.

The inlet, at the NW corner of the bay, has reasonable anchoring depths, but it is very small and it would be necessary to take lines ashore in order to prevent swinging. There is a stony beach at the SW end of the inlet.

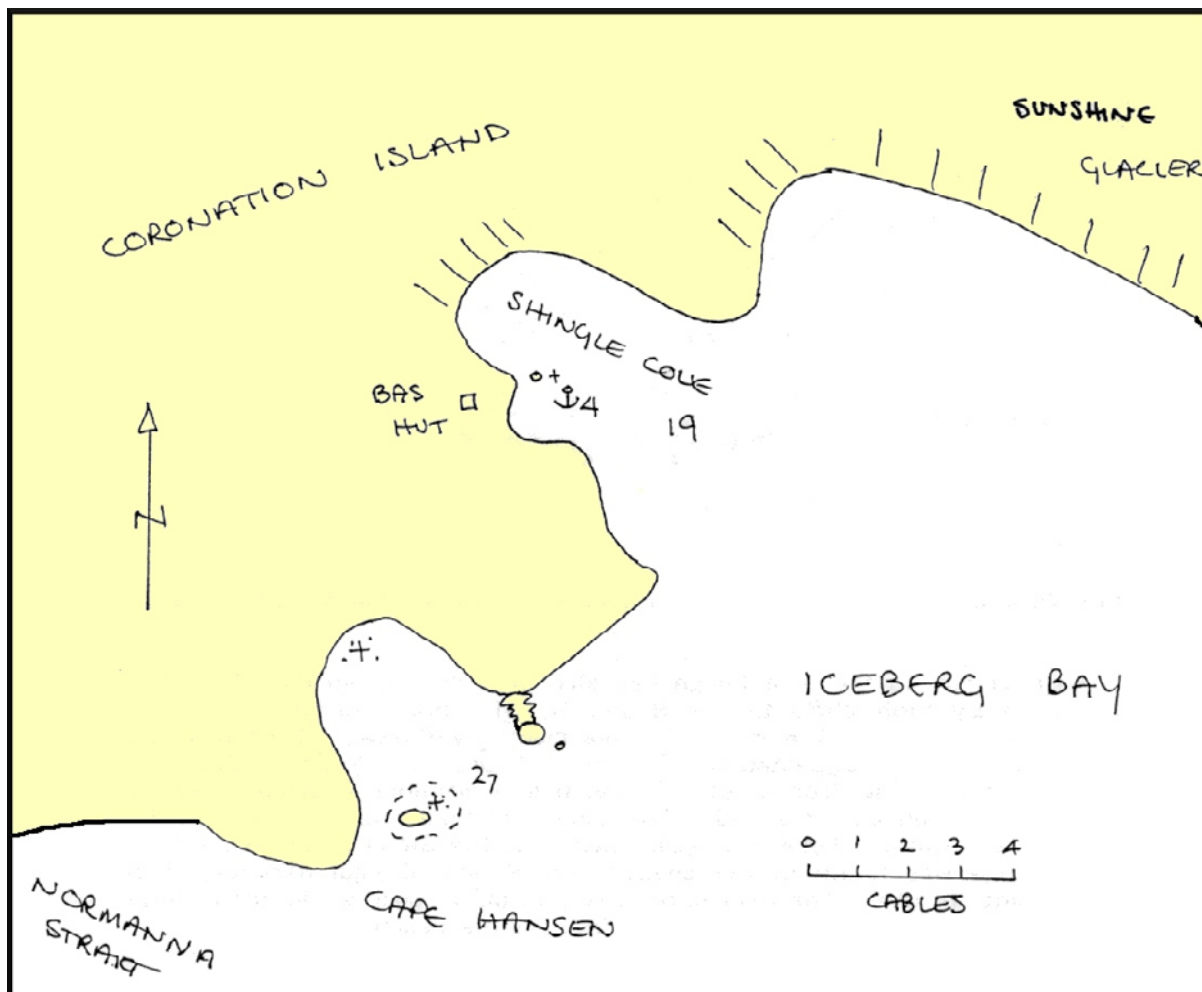
Anchorage was found in the cove at the S end of Paal Harbour, W of Rethval Point in 10m. There is sufficient swinging room to lie to a single anchor. At the head of the cove, there is a pebble beach.

PAAL HARBOUR



CORONATION ISLAND

SHINGLE COVE



60°39'S 45°34'W
Chart 1775

On the W side of Iceberg Bay there is an anchorage in Shingle Cove. Anchor off the shingle beach on the SW shore in about 4m. Care should be taken to have swinging room to clear the underwater rocks to the N of the beach.

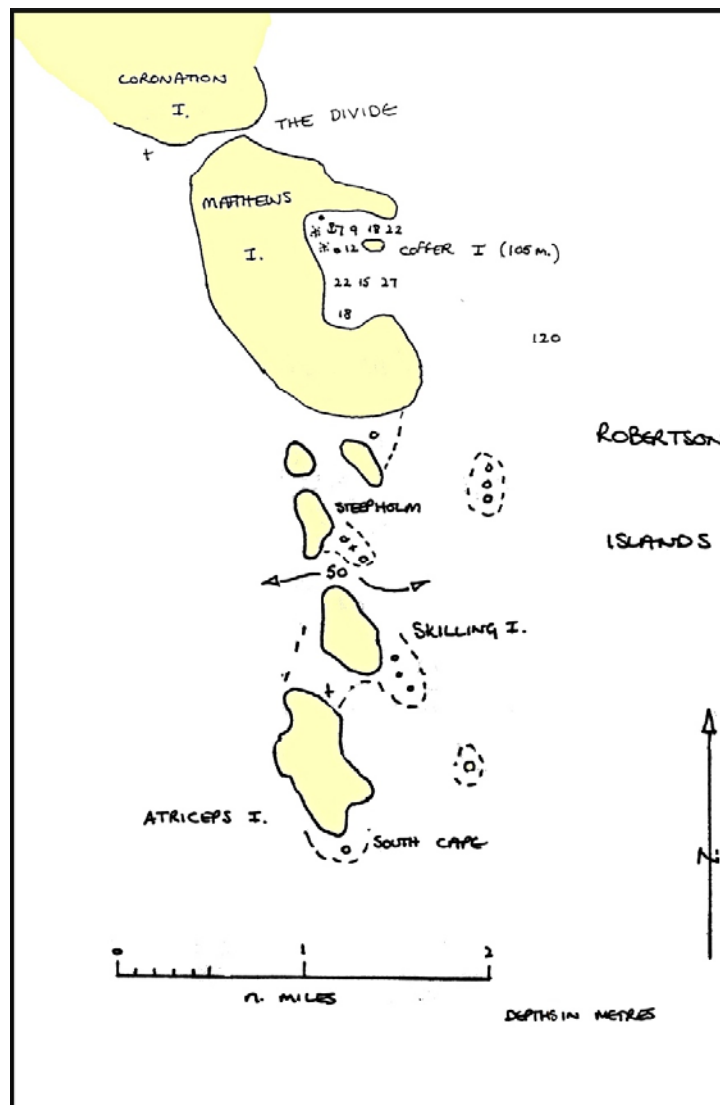
On the shore are a colony of penguins and a BAS refuge hut.

This cove is a popular stop for the cruise ships.

ROBERTSON ISLANDS

60°46'S 45°09'W
Chart 1775

Between Steepholm Island and Skilling Island, there is a clear passage with a minimum depth of 50m observed. The rocks and the reef extending SE from Steepholm Island are much more extensive than shown on the chart. Keep S of this reef.



MATTHEWS ISLAND

60°44'S 45°09'W
Chart 1775

On the E side of this island is a bay, which appears to be the old crater of a volcano, Coffe Island being the core. The NW part of the bay has reasonable depths in which to anchor. The entrance N of Coffe Island is clear, with gradually shoaling depths. To the W of Coffe Island, is a narrow channel with a least depth of 12 m.

Anchor in about 7m, mud and weed. There are a couple of drying rocks near the W shore, so check your swinging room carefully.

There was no ice in the bay, when visited.

Matthews Island is very high, which causes the wind to be gusty and variable. Consequently, it might not be a safe anchorage in very strong winds. Otherwise, it is very sheltered, except from E.

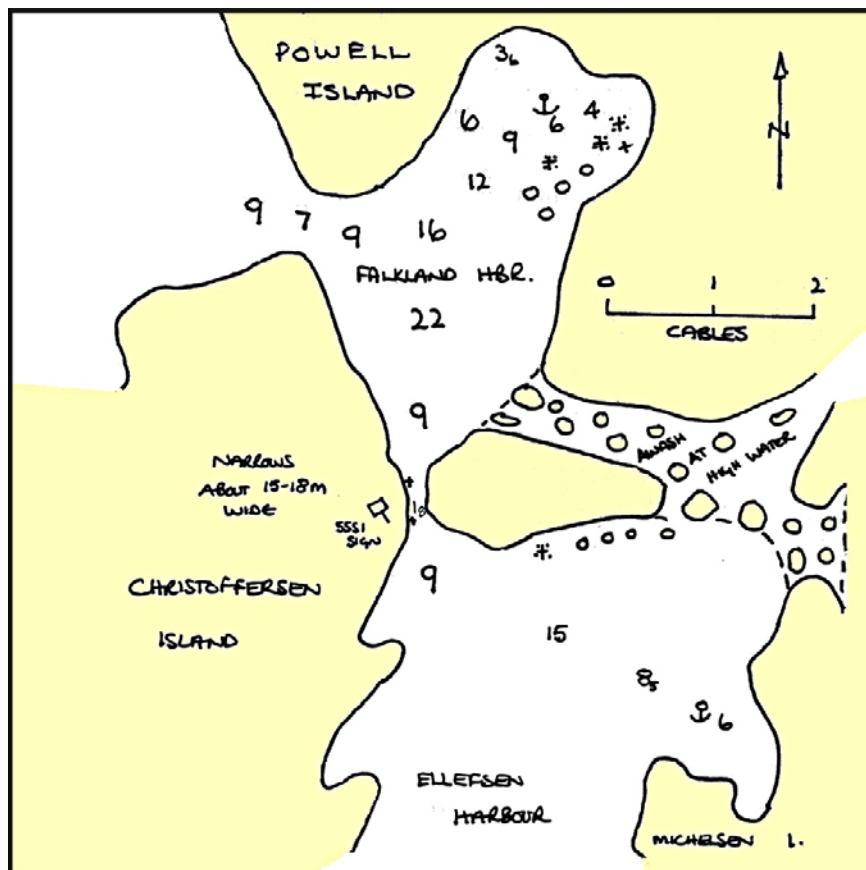


Matthews Island, looking E towards Laurie Island, with Coffe Island to the right.

POWELL ISLAND



Falkland Harbour, looking S, with narrows to the right



POWELL ISLAND

FALKLAND HARBOUR

60°43'S 45°06'W

Chart 1775: *Powell Island and Washington Strait*

This is probably the best harbour for a yacht, to be found in the South Orkneys. Although it is not recommended by the Admiralty Pilot, this must be because of its small size and restricted entrance. Both these factors make it ideal for a yacht.

Christofferson Island protects the bay from the W and the main entrance is N of this island. A minimum depth of 7m was found and the entrance is just over 100m wide. The other entrance is E of Christofferson Island, from Ellefsen Harbour, having a minimum depth of 1.8m and being less than 20m wide.

The N part of the harbour affords the best shelter and there are reasonable depths for anchoring. Anchorage was found in 6m, stiff mud, as shown on the sketch chart.

The NE corner of the bay has several rocks, above and below water, so check that your swinging room clears these hazards. There is room to lie to a single anchor. *Badger* rode out a W'yly gale here, in moderate comfort with no severe gusts. The relatively shallow entrance stops large pieces of ice from entering the bay, but when visited, there were several small pieces grounded on the lee shore.

The whole area surrounding the anchorage is a SSSI and special permission must be obtained before landing ashore. A large penguin colony (Adélie, chinstrap and gentoo) covers much of the shoreline and a good viewing platform is obtained by anchoring in the middle. There are also sea elephants and the occasional leopard seal.

ELLEFSEN HARBOUR

60°44'S 45°06'W

Chart 1775: *Ellefsen Harbour*

This is very much second best to Falkland Harbour, as a haven, but is an attractive and interesting spot. Anchorage was found near the E side of the harbour, off Michelson Island, in 6m. When visited, there was much more ice here than in

Falkland Harbour.

The harbour is well sheltered, except from the S, although there were some severe gusts observed, coming off Christoffersen Island, during a W gale.

LAURIE ISLAND

This is a high and mountainous island, with many glaciers.

SCOTIA BAY

60°44'S 44°42'W

Chart 1775: *Scotia Bay and Mill Cove*

A narrow isthmus of shingle, at the head of Scotia Bay, connects the two halves of the island. The isthmus was the overwintering site of the Scottish National Antarctic Expedition in 1903-04 and the remains of their stone hut can still be seen. An Argentine base, run by the Navy, now occupies the site. It is the oldest, continuously manned base in the Antarctic.

Anchorage was found in the W part of the inner bay, in 8m, under the high cliff.

The holding was poor and there were frequent gusts of wind from every direction. A SW gale hooked into the bay and *Badger* started dragging her anchor, making it necessary to clear out. It is suggested that this anchorage should be treated with great caution and it is best avoided in any bad weather.

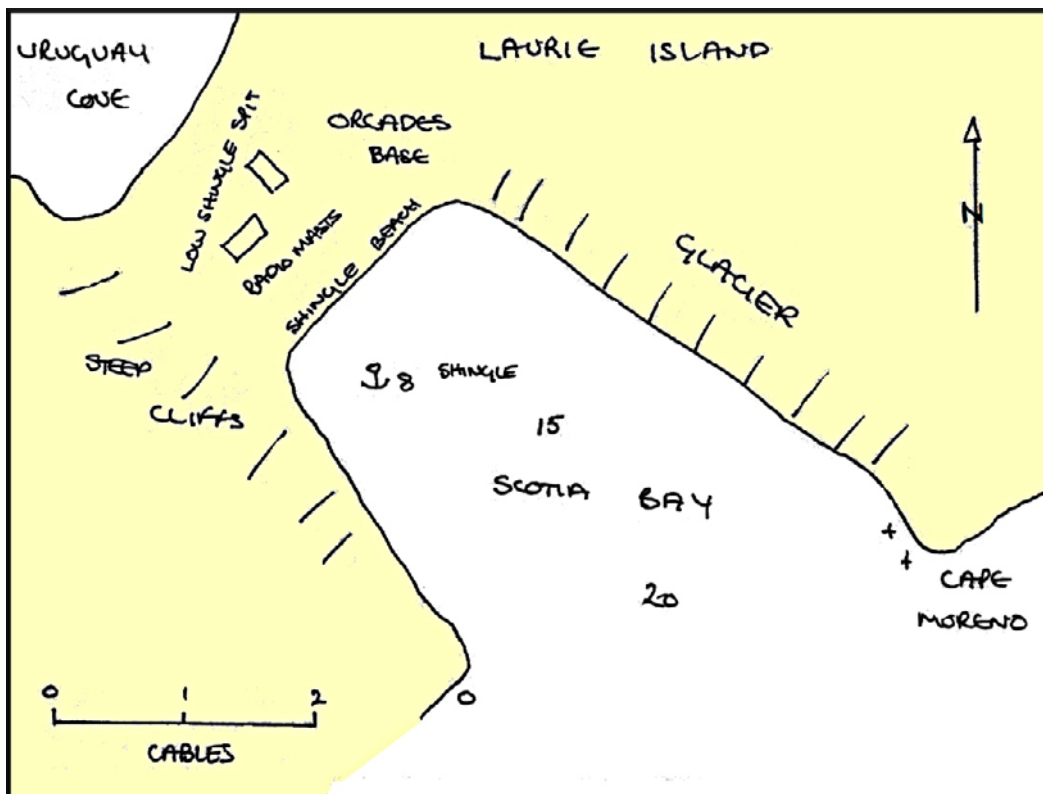
The base personnel could not have been more hospitable and a very warm welcome was extended. Apart from visiting the base, there is little to see ashore.

The steep shingle beach has some swell on it, which makes getting ashore a little difficult. When visited, there was no problem with ice in the anchorage.

SCOTIA BAY



Scotia Bay, looking SE from Bruce's Hut



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