

# The Intriguing Story of Captain John Oliver

Up until the present time (2017) my years of searching for our John Oliver (estimated born about 1821) has proved a dismal failure.

However, perhaps that has now changed thanks to snippets found by myself and members of the family in books and files on the internet.

I had been brought up to believe that John Oliver may have been a Frenchman who was lost at sea along with his ship. This assumption came about because, as a ship's captain, he came to Australia from New Caledonia, which was under French control.

We know that John married Jane Ann Richards, whom I found was born 11 Nov 1832, at Phillack, Cornwall, UK, the daughter of John Richards and Jane Mitchell who were married 1 Mar 1828 in Phillack. The Richards family came to Australia on the "Julindur" in 1849.

Originally, we only knew that John and Jane had a child, John George William (b. 29 Oct 1852, Sydney), and then I found another, Louis Charles (b. 14 Oct 1857, Glebe, Sydney).

Louis died 17 June 1915 in Cronulla, Sydney, NSW, Australia, of a "Haemorrhage from a wound to the throat -- self-inflicted". (A polite way of saying suicide.) It lists his father's occupation as "Sea Captain". It lists the Informant as Lily Hawkins, cousin. This is most likely Lilian (nee Richards), daughter of Benjamin Richards who was Jane Ann's brother.

Louis was never mentioned in family circles or records and, I assume, that was because of the belief that suicide was a mortal sin.

When I found Louis' birth certificate, it lists his father as a "Pilot". This indicated to me that, at that time, he may have been Piloting ships up and down the Australian East Coast.

An intriguing thing was that this certificate also lists the "Previous Issue" as "2 boys living" and the mother as informant. However, at that time, I had found no third child, only John George William and Louis Charles. I realised that it was possible that, as Jane, at times, travelled with him on the ship, a third child may have been born at sea or in New Caledonia and not recorded in Australia (particularly if, for reasons shown below, he wished to stay clear of Sydney for a few years). It gives the father's age as 35, mother as 25 and that both parents came from Cornwall, England. This put an end to the speculation that John Oliver was French.

*(One interesting possibility is the story that one of the Oliver's came to Western Australia. Since I came over here I have been told by one Oliver family that they only have to look at me and their photo albums to know that we are somehow connected. Looks aside, I haven't found any connection . . . as yet! I have often wondered, as John and Elizabeth [nee Woods] Swarbrick, who were obviously very close friends of JGW and Sarah Oliver [nee Woods], brought their family west around 1900.)*

John Oliver appears variously as a seaman, ship's captain, master mariner, and pilot (a pilot in those days usually referred to a ship's captain who plied the east coast of Australia).

John vanished from our history around 1860 and it was understood that he went down with his ship on one of the journeys he made back and forth to the South Pacific Islands.

One story told me by an old aunt is that his wife, Jane Ann (Richards) was once served a human leg there, and another story that there may be some kind of monument to the Oliver's as founders of a settlement in New Caledonia. Other rumours say he was into "blackbirding" (bringing island workers to the Queensland cane fields). This may be correct as most cane workers were brought from that region of islands and new information shows he was definitely involved in the sandalwood trade.

The internet is an amazing source of information and increases exponentially year by year; it has now brought me much information on the history of Captain John Oliver.

With the aid of other members of the family, friends in New Caledonia, and the internet, I have been able to piece together a rough timeline of some of John's exploits.

A Death Records list put up by Cercle Celtique Nouméa for New Caledonia shows the following listing:

19 February 1859: John Oliver, 35, English trade captain, working to the service of France as a pilot of New Caledonia station, born 1st March 1823, Forway (England), married to Jane Anne, registered no 1861 Corvette La Thisbé – Parents: + William et + Charlotte Jane, living in Forway.

It can be reasonably assumed that "Forway, England" is a phonetic spelling for "Fowey, Cornwall, England". I have also found it spelt as "Forssay".

Now, I have also found a death notice in the Sydney Morning Herald dated March 12, 1859:

#### DEATHS

On the 14th of February, at Port de France, New Caledonia, on board the French man-of-war-ship Thisbe, Captain John Oliver, Government pilot at the above-named place, and many years master, sailing out of this port, aged 36 years, leaving an affectionate wife and 3 children, and a large circle of friends to lament his loss.

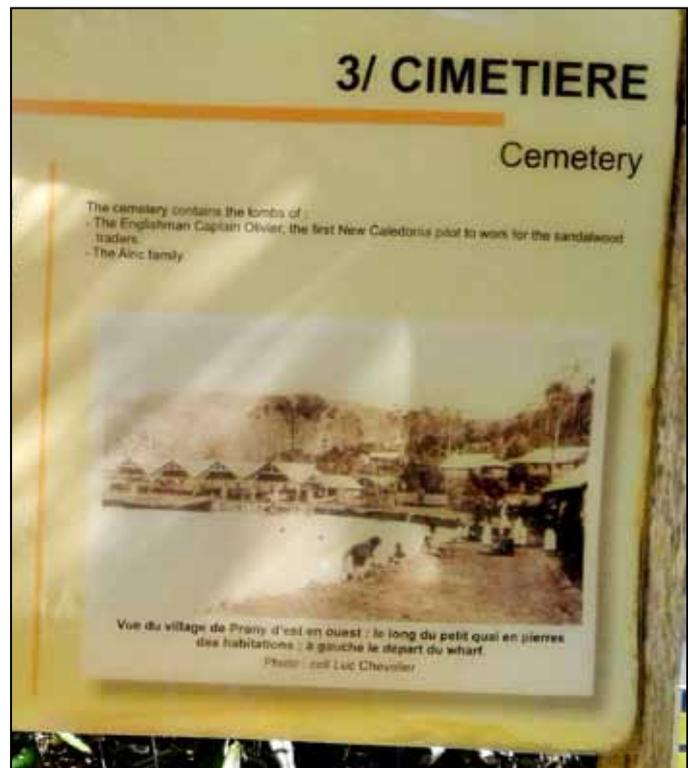
*(Note the death date is wrong but the age may be correct.)*

It is now known that John Oliver died from a heart attack aboard *La Thisbé* in 1859 and was buried on Casy Island in New Caledonia. Note the English translation on the sign (*also note French spelling of name*):

The cemetery contains the tomb of:

- The Englishman Captain Olivier, the first New Caledonia pilot to work for the sandalwood traders.
- The Alric family.

Further internet research came up with a number of books on the subject of trading in the South Pacific. Notable were books by Jane Samson: "Imperial Benevolence: Making British Authority in the Pacific islands"; and Dorothy Shineberg: "They Came for Sandalwood – Study of the Sandalwood Trade in the South-west Pacific, 1830-1865". Another I have come across that mentions Robert Towns and Captain John Oliver is "A History of the Pacific Islands" by Deryk Scarr.



All tell the story of John Oliver as Captain of the ship, *Royal Sovereign*, owned by Captain Robert Towns (1794-1873), a merchant who made a fortune in eastern Australia and for whom Townsville, Queensland, was named.

The books spell out the savagery and deceit practiced by ship's captains in the lucrative sandalwood trade and later the "blackbirding" (bringing islanders to work in the Queensland cane fields).

It is also most likely they brought many Chinese to Australia on return trips from selling the sandalwood in China. (It was the enormous influx of Chinese in the latter half of the 1800's that saw the introduction of the "White Australia Policy". Rather ironic, as I was partly responsible for the changing of the immigration policy in 1966 and the final abolition of the White Australia Policy a few years later.)

Murders, on both sides – islanders and seamen - were committed in the course of negotiating for sandalwood, and some captains were charged after complaints by other captains (probably trying to get rid of opposition traders).

One such captain was John Oliver. The following extract is from Jane Samson's book:

"Even when the case against a British subject seemed clear, so did the legal obstacles to prosecution. Robert Towns was shocked when he heard that another of his captains, John Oliver of the sandalwood *Royal Sovereign*, had kidnapped two high-ranking men from New Caledonia in exchange for a large cargo of sandalwood in 1853. Oliver shot one of the captives himself, leaving the other one for a rival chief to dispose of. There also appears to have been trouble about a woman Oliver took aboard the ship by force. Towns, who heard about the incident from another of his traders, detained Oliver and his crew when they reached Sydney. Oliver duly appeared before the Water Police magistrate and was released on bail pending his trial. Towns then wrote to Captain Home for help with the prosecution, but his letter went astray under suspicious circumstances on the same day that Oliver, his wife, and most of the *Royal Sovereign's* crew left Sydney. The case collapsed when the lone naval ship on station could not be spared to pursue them."

The second book, by Dorothy Shineberg, gives the story in a slightly different light:

"The islanders often solicited traders and missionaries for help in destroying their enemies; for a load of sandalwood that could not otherwise be obtained, the temptation to unscrupulous persons to lend their services to this end would have been great. In fact, a classic case of just such a practice was brought before the Water Police Court of New South Wales in 1853, putting the matter beyond doubt.

"On information laid by a rival trader (Captain Lewis), it was alleged that Captain John Oliver, of Town's schooner *Royal Sovereign*, had delivered two chiefs to Nakety, New Caledonia - one dead and one alive - to the people of Canala, in exchange for sandalwood. The charge was sustained by two of the crew who served under Oliver in the *Royal Sovereign*. The witnesses testified that their ship stayed for two and a half months at Canala (September-December 1852) without procuring sandalwood for it was the season for planting yams, and that (as is the custom of the place) the sandalwood was under taboo, and that there was no chance of getting any until the yam planting was over. The captain, who was on the most friendly terms with the Canala chief, then ordered full sail for Nakety, about five miles from Canala, 'where a tribe resided notoriously hostile to that of the latter place,' There two local chiefs were inveigled on board; one was shot and the other bound hand and foot. The schooner then sailed back to Canala where the chief, with a number of his people, came out in a double canoe: to them were delivered the surviving

Nakety chief and the dead body of the murdered one. What was done afterwards by the islanders to their dead and living victims, 'the witness could not tell'; but Captain Oliver and 'a Malay interpreter', who had taken an active part in the kidnapping at Nakety, then went backwards and forwards between the schooner and Canala, and 'in the course of a few days plenty of sandalwood was forthcoming, and upwards of 20 tons was soon shipped.' Captain Oliver was committed to take his trial in the Supreme Court and released on bail. As no record of this trial can be found, it is presumed that he 'bolted', as Towns had predicted.

"It is important not to see this and similar crimes exclusively through European eyes. From the Melanesian viewpoint the white men acted essentially as agents or servants in the transaction: there is no reason to believe that the affair was regarded in any other light than as services rendered for a consideration. This very story of Oliver's 'service' was told to me in greater detail and with relish by the great-grandson of the Canala chief for whom it was performed, and this is certainly the way in which he viewed the incident."

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Report of a *Schooner* arrived in Port Jackson, this *19<sup>th</sup>* day of *May* 18*53*.

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Vessel's Name ..... "*Royal Sovereign*" Remarks  
 Where Registered ..... *Sydney*  
 Tonnage ..... *159*  
 Master's Name ..... *John Oliver*  
 From whence ..... *Ile of Pines*  
 When sailed ..... *9<sup>th</sup> Inst*  
 Lading ..... *50 Tons Sandalwood*  
 Agent ..... *Capt Towns*

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Cabin \*  
 Passengers' Names.



### Photos supplied by friends in New Caledonia before the cleanup of the graveyard

Left:

This grave is alongside that which has been identified as John Oliver's (see later in this story). This is probably the grave of one of the Alric family.

As can be seen on the plaque shown below, a number of the Alric family have been buried here in this tiny graveyard on Casy Island.



Following the timeline, I have found that Captain John Oliver cleared Sydney for the South Sea Islands on 5 August 1852 and returned 18 January 1853 with 50 tons of sandalwood. Allowing for the slow turn-around of events in that time, John's 'bolting' would have occurred somewhere late 1853 or early 1854. I cannot find where the ship "cleared" Sydney in that time under Captain Oliver which indicates he left without reporting. However, Sydney ship's logs show Towns' schooner, *Royal Sovereign*, entered Sydney Harbour 17 June, 1854. I have also found a reference to 24 June 1854: "The Royal Sovereign, schooner, left Sydney for the South Seas six weeks ago, and has returned to port in consequence of the Kanaka portion of the crew having refused to perform their duty." The reasons for this 'mutiny' are not disclosed. The time frame here is confusing as approximately 6 weeks prior it is listed as entered Sydney from the South Seas. However, it has to be assumed that all was settled as another listing shows the *Royal Sovereign* as being expected in Sydney April 1855. All these references are from newspaper listings so may not include everything.

However, I have found a newspaper story relating to the Charging of Captain John Oliver with manslaughter.

## THE CHARGING OF CAPTAIN JOHN OLIVER WITH MANSLAUGHTER

**Article from the newspaper, The Empire, Sydney, Monday, September 12, 1853**

*(I have transcribed this verbatim for authenticity rather than correct the grammar and punctuation.)*

WATER POLICE. - SATURDAY. – The Water Police Magistrate and John Campbell, Esq., J.P., occupied the Bench, and were engaged in hearing a charge against Captain John Oliver, formerly commander of the schooner *Royal Sovereign*; the charge was, that he had been accessory to the murder of a native of one of the Sandwich Islands. Mr. Robert Johnson appeared for the captain. Thomas Skellett, and William McEwan, two of the crew of the *Royal Sovereign* appeared as witnesses, and with great reluctance gave their evidence. From their statements it appeared that the *Royal Sovereign* belonged to Captain Towns, and left this port in August, 1852, for traffic amongst the South Sea Islands. Captain Oliver was at that time the commander, and after calling at Anatum, Tanna, Stewart's Island, and the Isle of Pines, anchored the vessel off Kannala, in the island of New Caledonia. The object of the captain in coming here was to obtain sandalwood; he was, however, able to get very little, although he was on terms of great intimacy with the natives, and after a short stay directed his course to Neccati, a settlement about four or five miles distant in the same island. The inhabitants of these two latter places have for many years been on hostile terms. The vessel anchored near Neccati late in the evening, and in the morning many of the natives came on board, bringing some females with them. Three of their chiefs also came; one of whom shortly afterwards returned to the island to get shells, and the other two were hospitably entertained by the captain to breakfast, and subsequently to dinner, in the cabin. The natives come on the ship in great numbers, so as to excite some little confusion. About half-past two in the afternoon the witnesses heard the report of a gun or pistol, but could not tell where it was fired, nor did they see any fire arms in the hands of any one about the ship. A few minutes after this one of the witnesses saw the body of one of the native chiefs lying apparently dead on the ballast in the hold; and on going into the cabin saw the other chief tied down on one of the lockers; the chief desired witness to release him, calling out – "you let me go." Witness replied that he could not do that without orders, and left him in the same position. None of the natives

were in the cabin at that time, the only person present being the captain, the first mate, and Rangī, the interpreter. About five o'clock in the afternoon, all the natives left the vessel except the two chiefs, and the five females. With these seven natives on board, the captain proceeded to sail across to the settlement of the hostile tribe; but the men indignantly remonstrated with the captain for the proposal, demanding that at any rate the women should be restored to their own homes, and not delivered to the cruelties of the rival chiefs. To this the captain assented, and the females were accordingly taken on shore as near as possible to the spot they came from. The captain then steered for the hostile neighbourhood of Kannala, and on arriving, went on shore with the interpreter, and stayed some time in communication with the natives. Shortly after returning to his vessel, a great number of the Kannala natives came on board, and seized hold of the tied-down chief and the body of the murdered chief, and lowered them into their boats; the captain standing by, and allowing the living and the dead chiefs, who had come to his ship in the fullest confidence of friendship, to be delivered over to the tender mercies of a horde of savage cannibals. What precise negotiations were made with the natives for this booty did not transpire; but it appeared that the captain was amply compensated for the service he had rendered. On landing previously at Kannala he had been unable to obtain any quantity of sandalwood; now he was more successful, and in a few weeks obtained twenty tons of this article. This was in December of last year, and with this cargo brought the vessel home to Sydney. He then ceased to command the Royal Sovereign, and was appointed captain of the Spec, which he has now just resigned. On cross-examination by Mr. Johnson, the witnesses admitted that they did not examine the body of the dead chief, and that although a shot was fired the murder might have been effected by a blow from a club. There might have been some danger to the crew of the ship from the Neccati natives thronging the deck in such confusion. They also stated that the captain had given orders to be very quiet with these natives; and that it was the practice with the people of these islands not to sell or even cut down their sandalwood until they had planted their yams. They further deposed that they saw another of the natives standing over the dead chief, with a club in his hands. Mr. Johnson on behalf of the captain urged that no offence whatever could be charged against his client. The Bench directed the attention of the advocate to the warrant charging the captain with being accessory to the manslaughter of a native of Neccati. Mr. Johnson then contended that in the first place there was no proof that the chief had been murdered; the witnesses had not deposed to any marks of violence, and a fit of apoplexy would at any time cause instantaneous death. Even if the man had come by his death in a violent manner, still there was no evidence to show that it had been inflicted by a European. There were many natives about – one in particular was seen bending over the dead body with a club in his hand. He would content that, with this uncertainty hanging over the man's fate, it was impossible to convict the captain of being accessory to the murder. The Bench, however, replied, that they had made up their minds to send this case a higher tribunal, although admitting that the evidence for the prosecution was in many respects meagre. But even were the evidence still more dubious, they would still be unwilling to give a final adjudication in a matter of so much importance. It might be inferred from the dismissal of such a case that the captains accustomed to trade with the South Sea Islands for sandalwood, could kidnap the natives with impunity. The present charge was of so grave and serious a character, that it would be for the public benefit that it should be submitted to further enquiry. They therefore ordered that Captain Oliver should be admitted to bail, himself for £200 and two others in £100 each, for his appearance at the next Gaol Delivery to take his trial for being accessory to the fact of manslaughter.

## MURDER CHARGES DROPPED AGAINST CAPTAIN JOHN OLIVER

*I have found the following article in the Sydney Morning Herald of 22 September 1853:*

WATER POLICE OFFICE. - With reference to the case of Captain John Oliver, commanding the brig Spec, who, on the 10th Instant, was committed by this bench to take his trial at the Supreme Criminal Court, for being accessory (after the fact) to the manslaughter of a chief of one of the South Sea Islands. The Attorney-General has notified to the Water Police Magistrate, his intention not to prosecute upon the evidence, which has been as yet adduced. He, however, has suggested, that, in a case of so much suspicion, the evidence of other seamen who were on board the Royal Sovereign, at the time of the alleged killing of the chief, should, if possible, be obtained with the view to further proceedings.

This supports my belief that charges must have been dropped for lack of real evidence allowing John to safely return to Australia where his third son, Louis, was born in 1857 in Glebe, New South Wales.

It also supports my earlier theory that if John had returned to Sydney, and was operating as a "pilot", then all charges to his "murder trial" must have been dropped. As can be seen by the tone of the Empire story, I don't think any charges could have been made to stick and therefore not proceeded with. Also, to my way of thinking, he could not, in NSW, have been found guilty of a murder or manslaughter committed in another country not under the control of the English (New Caledonia became a French Colony in 1853).

If the Captain John Oliver who died in Noumea in 1859 is our John Oliver (and I have now confirmed this beyond doubt), then it would appear that he must have returned to New Caledonia where he worked for the French as a pilot before his death.

We now know that he was acting as a pilot on *La Thisbé* when he died; also that John and Jane had a child born in Caledonia in 1856 – "the first white child born in Caledonia." (See story further down.)

After John's death it has now been found that Jane had 3 more children between 1860 and 1866 to "unknown" fathers - Henri Richards (b. 3 Jan 1860, died 17 Sep 1860); Marguerite Richards (b. 20 Jan 1862, died 28 Nov 1865); Prosper Edouard Richards (b. 26 June 1866, died 17 Aug 1866). No doubt some there knew who were the fathers. Notice she stuck with the French spelling of names.

I don't believe she should be criticised for this as women had no means of support other than that supplied by men. Whether the same man fathered all three of the children, we don't know.

Jane then returned to Australia with the 3 Oliver children and married Donald Lamont on 2 November 1868, in Sydney, NSW, Australia. Jane and Donald had a daughter, Rebecca Elizabeth, born 5 June 1869. Donald Lamont was born in Dundee or Perthshire, Scotland about 1833.

Their daughter, Rebecca Elizabeth Lamont, married Robert Roberts in Sydney 29 Mar 1888; they had 5 children, Robert D (1889), John Livingstone (1891), Robert B (1893), Frederick (1895) and Alice L (1904).

Cornwall was, and is, full of Oliver's. Around the time of John Oliver's birth there were 5 John Oliver's christened in Cornwall.

More information is still coming to light about John Oliver's time in New Caledonia working for the French (see later update in this story).

The "*La Thisbé*" referred to in the death notice belonged to the Imperial Fleet and John was regularly registered on this ship in the French Navy files as a marine pilot until he died.

It would appear from various references that, as well as acting as a Pilot for the French, he captained a number of ships during the 1850's for Robert Town's – probably until he fell out with Town's over the killing of the island chief.

Captain John Oliver apparently went on to be captain of the brig, *Spec*, and later travelled on it back to New Caledonia under a different captain.

**An extract from *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 April, 1855, reads as such:**

### **LOSS OF THE SPEC.**

The brig *Spec*, of 161 tons, Captain Barrack, sailed from this port for the Island of Port de France, with a full cargo for the French Government, and having on board Captain and Mrs Oliver and child as passengers. She arrived there safely, discharged her cargo, and then proceeded to a small bay 6 or 7 miles down the coast for the purpose of taking the copper, anchors, chains, &c., of the ship *Hannibal*, which had been wrecked there a few months before. She arrived and anchored there, when shortly afterwards it came on to blow a heavy gale of wind and the vessel parted her chains, drove ashore and became a total wreck. The pilot of the French Settlement and several French man-of-war's-men were on board at the time. Seven men were unfortunately lost (we believe four of the French seamen and three of the brig's crew). The captain and the remainder of the crew walked over to the French settlement, where the captain at present remains. The opportunity afforded by a frigate going to the Isle of Pines was taken by three of the seamen, and when on the passage to that place they fell in with the *Favourite*, and Captain Allen kindly took them on board and brought them on to Sydney. The *Spec* is the property of Captain Smith, and is uninsured.

The inference from this, and further extracts indicating Captain John Oliver was, at one stage, captain of the *Spec*, is that he was still going back and forth from Australia to New Caledonia in 1855. Therefore he must have still been in good standing with the owner's of the *Spec* for which he is mentioned as becoming captain after leaving the *Royal Sovereign*.

It also mentions "child" (singular), so this must have been John George William (my g-grandfather), as William Benjamin Felix was then born in New Caledonia in 1856.

There is some confusion (in my mind) about the *Spec*. It would appear that there were two ships of this name operating in Pacific waters; one referred to as a brig and the other a schooner. As far as I can ascertain, John Oliver was captain of the brig, *Spec*, for a period of time.

It appears, for some reason, the captains used to change ships rather frequently.

## **TWO CAPTAIN OLIVER'S**

In reading through the various books on the period in question, it appears there were two Captain Oliver's in the South Pacific waters.

Another journal extract is indicating that Captain John Oliver was captaining HMS ships as well as acting as a pilot for the French long before he was skippering schooners for Robert Towns (as *this is clear enough to read, I have not transcribed it*). However, it is my opinion that this following extract refers to Captain Richard Oliver, who, according to all I can find, captained *HMS Fly* from 1847 to 1851; his commission being to survey New Zealand and Pacific waters and was obviously in New Caledonian waters around the same time as our Captain John Oliver. Captain Richard Oliver was considered an accomplished artist who left a legacy of pencil sketches and watercolour paintings done during his voyages (see *two of his pics on the following page*). Still, it makes interesting reading as it supports the belief that "trading" prisoners between native groups was, if not quite common, more frequent than anyone wanted to believe. Could they have been related?

<sup>1</sup> **Captain** Oliver, of H.M.S. "Fly," who passed some days at Uea, in May, 1850, informs me, that during that time he visited both Nikēlo's village of Achio, which he describes as consisting of a few conical huts, and that of Fajawāe, the residence of Uiningāe or Joquer. On the latter occasion, the young chief, who had come off a considerable distance to the ship, then under way, accompanied **Captain** Oliver to the shore, in the evening, when he landed to obtain some equal altitudes of stars. The gig was soon surrounded by a crowd of people of both sexes, and whilst the women were laughing and joking with the crew, some of the boat's brass crutches were cleverly stolen by the men. The chief, when the theft was reported to him, although affecting great anger, showed at first no anxiety to recover the stolen articles; but **Captain** Oliver, to whom they were indispensable, insisting, and refusing to accept the chief's invitation to his house until they were restored, messengers were sent off, and the men of the tribe, to the number of about a hundred, assembled by torch-light. Not knowing for what purpose they were summoned, they all appeared armed, and having been addressed by the chief, the crutches were *found* in the sand, on the beach, and harmony restored. The chief, who spoke a little English, said, "Great fool Uea man, steal little thing he no want, big ship come and kill him." After the affair was settled, **Captain** Oliver consented to go to the chief's or common house, which was a long barn-like building of great length, the ordinary houses being conical, like those of New **Caledonia**.

Uiningāe is described by **Captain** Oliver as a fine-looking young man, somewhat darker in colour, and with crisper hair, than Nikēlo, although some mixture of the copper coloured race was apparent. The chiefs of **New Caledonia** are said to have a strong desire for wives from this island, and it is customary, when a party from Uea goes over to build a large canoe (they having no timber of their own fit for the purpose), that the right to fell such as they may require is purchased by the surrender of a daughter of the principal personage. When at Yengen, in **New Caledonia**, **Captain** Oliver fell in with a party of Ueans, who had come over with this object. There were four or five men, with their wives, and several young girls, among whom was pointed out the daughter of the leading man, who was to be left with the **New Caledonian** chief, as the price of the materials of the canoe.

There are any number of extracts from various books covering this and similar exploits, but all indicate to me that they are during the time of Captain Richard Oliver of the Royal Navy.



# CAPTAIN JOHN OLIVER HELD IN HIGH REGARD BY PILOTAGE MARITIME IN NEW CALEDONIA

The Pilotage Maritime in New Caledonia still, to this day, appears to have a high regard for Captain John Oliver. The following extract is from their website

<http://www.pilotage-maritime.nc/presentation-pilote-maritime.php>

## ***Website English translated from French:***

“The discovery of sandalwood on the Isle of Pines in 1840 helped to increase traders’ interest in New Caledonia. This wealth soon provided Australian ships with a back-load on their voyages to import tea from China. This trade explains the early presence of British and Australian seamen along New Caledonia’s coast and in the Loyalty Islands.

“John Oliver, captain of the British vessel Speck (should be Spec, I believe), was the first pilot commissioned by the French government, by order of Man of War Captain Tardy de Montravel, on 03 May 1854. On his death, Oliver was buried on Casy Island, in Prony Bay where his grave is still visible. James Paddon, a sandalwood captain and a wise trader, also piloted French vessels during their first visit to Port de France (Nouméa).

“On 01 November 1856, Governor du Bouzet created the first pilot station in the Isle of Pines. But a decree issued on 30 May 1859 set up pilotage regulations at three stations: one on the Isle of Pines, one in Woodin Canal (Pilot’s Bay), and the third at Port de France.

“Year after year, the pilotage service became better organised. The main station was established on Amédée Island, well marked with a metal lighthouse, prefabricated in France and erected in 1856 by order of Emperor, Napoleon III. A pilot cutter was cruising a few miles off the barrier reef, between Dumbea Pass and Mato Pass. Approaching vessels were boarded and led inside the lagoon through Boulari passage by a first pilot, to a position situated one mile north of the lighthouse where a second pilot was taking over to bring the ship into Noumea. The cutter was based at Amédée Island and the first pilot had to remain on station for one month.

“On 31 December 1887, pilotage in New Caledonia was privatised. On 09 September 1909, the service was made compulsory for overseas vessels and was carried out exclusively by the Pilots’ Company.

“On 02 December 1936, pilotage regulations were reshuffled by decree, in order to fit in with the 1884 regulations regarding professional syndicates and with the French law of 28 March 1928, ruling Pilot Stations. Today, eleven pilots are organised in a professional syndicate, regulated by governmental decree. The pilot station of New Caledonia is ISO 9002 approved by Lloyd’s Register Quality Assurance since 1997.

“Today’s the pilotage it is more or less 10 pilots along with as many crew members and shore based personal, 4 pilot boats, one office and one workshop. The new pilot station completed by the end of 2009 is still on the same location in downtown Noumea.”

*(I have copied this verbatim.)*

Casy Island, today, is a reserve with no-one living permanently on it. There were buildings there that were used as a resort until either damaged by a cyclone or simply neglected. The owners apparently left New Caledonia and, in 2018, the buildings were torn down and removed.

I got in touch with the Pilotages Maritimes and, although they couldn't give me much information, they passed me on to Valérie Vattier of the NC Maritime Museum who delved into the records and sent me a little information and continued to look for more.

Valérie made 2 relevant points :

The first being their interest in the history -

“The history of the maritime pilots in New Caledonia is very interesting. Step by step I try to collect some documents about it. It is the case for John Oliver but my research is not complete.”

The second is a little more informative:

“But from another source I know that John Oliver was in New Caledonia in 1854 because that year the French Captain Tardy de Montravail named him “pilot for the coasts of New Caledonia”. For that he received 20 pound sterling by month and was invited at the officers table. When he was not in service, Captain Oliver and his wife received his salary in nature with food!

“In 1858 when France decided to create three pilot stations in New Caledonia, the minister asked to keep John Oliver as a pilot. But he died just after.”

Nadine De Lily (Cercle Celtique Nouméa) and Valérie have sent me more information. However, it was handwritten French which I had roughly translated.

As mentioned earlier, one of the articles is about the birth of child to John Oliver and Jane Richards, William Benjamin Felix, born 23 April 1856.

This is, without doubt, the third child mentioned in several of the certificates in my files.

The English translation of the birth certificate (dated 25 April 1856) is roughly as follows:

John Oliver, pilot working for the French Government (father) and Jane Richards (mother - without occupation), born in England and married, gave birth to a son, William Benjamin Felix on 23 April 1856 at 10 o'clock at night.

It goes on to say:

The first European birth in Port-de-France, April 1856 - “The child was presented to us” writes Navy writer Petitjean-Roget, named civil status officer by the governor of Bouzet. Note that this first white Caledonian was ... an Englishman!

What this means is that, as I stated in an earlier paragraph, John and Jane must have returned to Sydney following William B F's birth, as Louis was born in Sydney in October 1857. They must then have returned to New Caledonia where John continued to work as a French Pilot before his death in 1859.

More of the French, roughly translated to English, gives added knowledge of the death of John Oliver.

What it shows is that John Oliver died at sea aboard *La Thisbé* 19 February 1859 approximately 36 miles out from “Port de France” (Noumea) at 1 pm. No cause is given in this report. He was later buried on Casy Island in Prony Bay, New Caledonia.

It also lists his father as William and mother as Charlotte Jane.

Consequently, William Benjamin Felix's birth is not listed in Sydney records. However, I have found the marriage of a William Benjamin Felix Oliver to Louisa Connolly at Waterloo in 1878 when he would have been 22.

They had 4 children:

Births –

OLIVER, Ethel Maud – born 1878 Redfern; father: William Benjamin; mother: Louisa.

OLIVER, Louisa Pauline – born 1881 Redfern; father: William B F; mother: Louisa Elizabeth.

OLIVER, William B F – born 1882 Redfern; father: William B F; mother: Louisa. William married Amy Isabella Clements 19 Oct 1904 in Redfern, NSW.

OLIVER, Arthur Horace – born 1884, died 1890 from heart disease; father: William; mother: Louisa.

I have also found the marriage certificate for the son, also named William Benjamin Felix Oliver (1882), married Amy Isabella Clements (1882) 19 October 1904, Redfern, NSW.

This record tends to confuse things a little as it places the name “Felix” as the first name for both father and son. It also states that the father, William B F (1856) is deceased; however I have not yet found an actual death date.

I now have transcripts showing that William Benjamin Felix Oliver (1882) died 4 Feb 1907 in Camperdown, NSW, aged 24 from TB and that Arthur Horace Oliver (1884) died 8 September 1890 in Glebe, NSW, aged 6 from heart disease.

Transcripts show that Louisa Oliver (wife of William B F Oliver – 1856) remarried 14 July 1885 in Waterloo to Henry Springett (1857), indicating that William must have died shortly after the birth of their fourth child, Arthur.

A tragic family showing a host of early deaths: John 35, John G W 37 (TB), Louis 58 (Suicide), William B F (1856) about 29, William B F (1882) 24 (TB), Felix Henry (1885) 18, Arthur 6 (heart disease).

The cause of several is unknown, but now, from personal experience, knowing there is a hereditary heart problem, I wonder how much bearing that has on their deaths.

### **STORIES AND VIDEOS WORTH A LOOK:**

I have been following the YouTube videos of Brent and Ana on their sailing catamaran, *Impi* and, in doing so, spotted an area of shallow water referred to as “Basse Oliver”. It can reasonably be assumed that this was named by John Oliver during his navigation and charting of the New Caledonia reefs.



# Casy Island

Casy Island is situated in Prony Bay in the south of New Caledonia. Captain John Oliver was buried there after dying at sea some 30+ nautical miles off Noumea. It is currently uninhabited although was so in earlier times.

Recent research by a local organisation has found that it was originally named (or known as) Oliver Island; probably because John was buried there alone before it was officially named.

As can be seen, sections of the island have been left desolate by mining. I understand Nickel mining is the major source of revenue for New Caledonia.



*Above: Casy Island with Impi anchored just off the jetty that is the main access point to the island.*

*Right: Margaret and I laying the plaque in memory of my gg-grandfather, Captain John Oliver.*

*The cemetery is a small area situated approximately in the centre of the foreground peninsula of the island.*



## THE FOLLOWING IS UPDATED INFORMATION GAINED WHEN WE VISITED NEW CALEDONIA

We had the privilege of visiting New Caledonia in 2018 where we were given an extremely warm reception by all those interested in the history of Captain John Oliver and his part in the early development of the maritime pilot's position that is an integral part of sailing through this beautiful, pristine part of the South Pacific.



Prior to leaving Australia for New Caledonia, and after discussions with those in NC that were involved, I had plaques made for both Captain John Oliver and the dog, Mouss, whom I felt deserved recognition for the 14 years he lived alone on the island and the world-wide attention his story has brought to this beautiful part of the world.

Primarily because of the videos created by Brent and Ana depicting the plight of Mouss (or Moose) there has been a large effort by various groups to help finance animal welfare in the islands. This is Mouss' legacy.

We were privileged to be flown, by the Pilotes Maritimes who, out of their respect for their pioneer, shared the cost of John's memorial with me, down to Casy Island and along the paths taken by the original pilots and, indeed, by the present pilots today. Local stone was cut and honed and transported to Casy Island to receive the plaques.

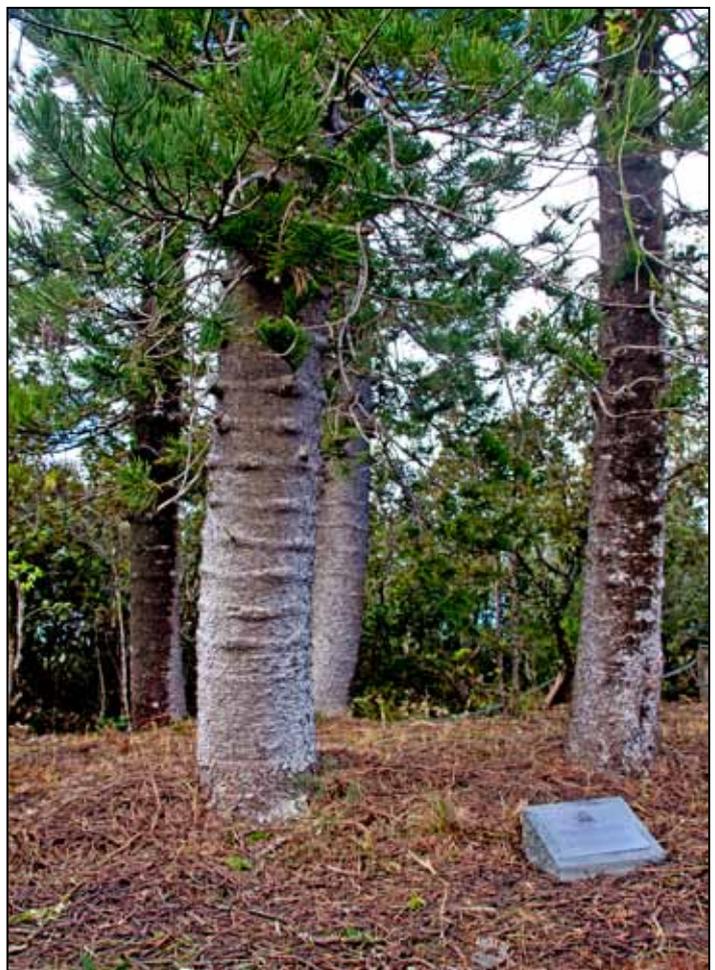
We were taken to Prony Bay and by boat to Casy Island where we were met by members of the Pilotes Maritimes, Brent and Ana off Impi, TV and news people.

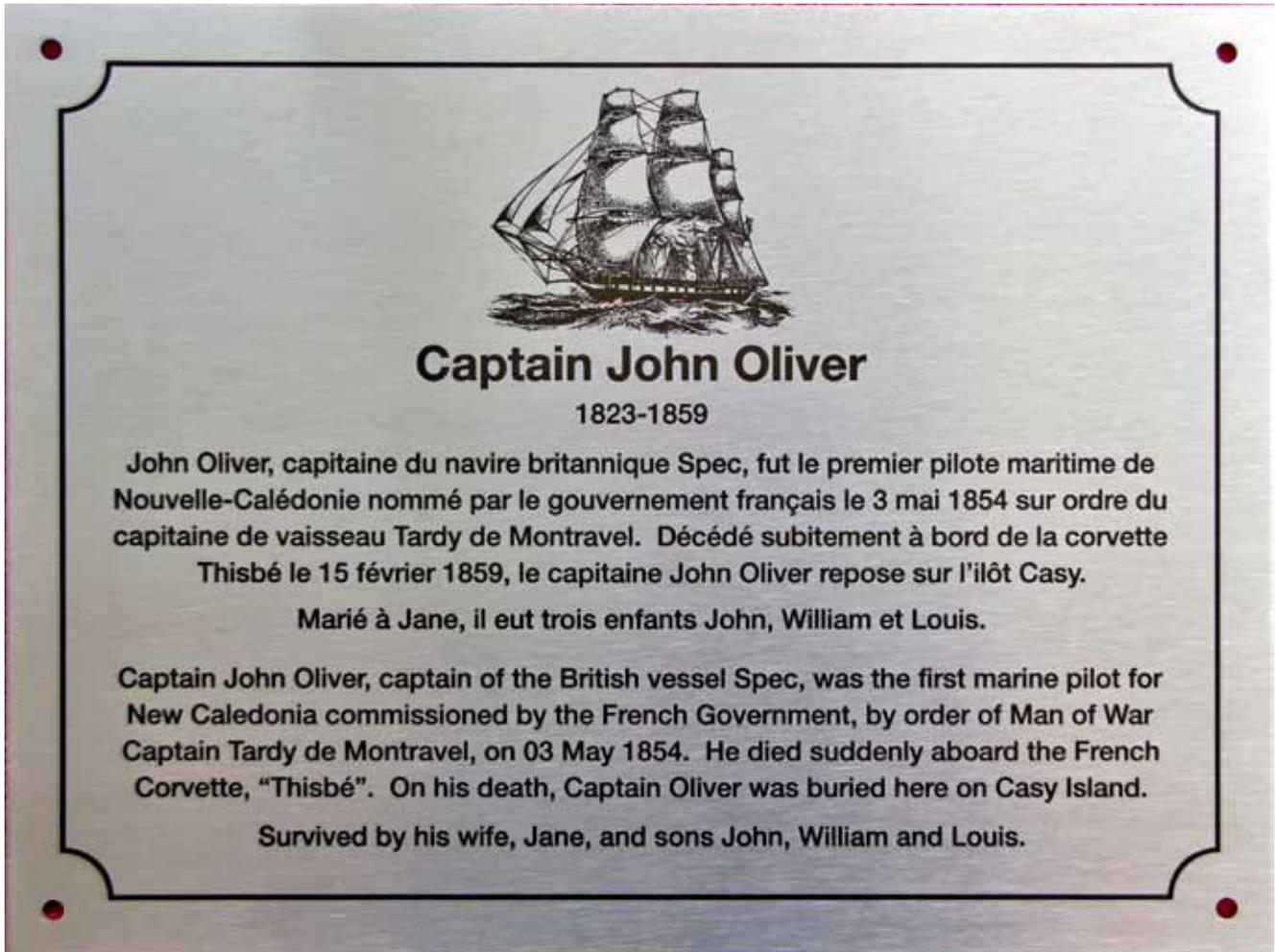
The Pilotes Maritimes is very proud of its history and are determined to preserve that history.

Paths had been mown and the small cemetery cleared of the ever-encroaching island growth and I understand there is a plan to further develop the accessibility for tourists to visit and walk the island.

Now for that which is of extreme interest to me and my family...the grave site. In researching the traditions of the past, it was found that burial protocol required that trees be planted at all 4 corners of the burial site. This allowed for us to easily identify John's final resting place.

The 4 trees now reach far up to the heavens with the ground in between raised above that of the surrounding area.





John Oliver was very highly thought of by Captain Tardy de Montravel as can be seen in a quote by him published in a French book written by Maurice Raymond de Broussard. It explains how “French captain Tardy de Montravel discovered, in 1854, a well-protected bay which he called ‘Port-de-France’ (Port de France became Noumea in 1866). But Tardy de Montravel took on board an English pilot because this one perfectly knew the Caledonian coast and spoke many local languages. This pilot was John Oliver.”

Therefore, as the pilot for de Montravel, it is possible that John Oliver was the first to indicate the best place for the future Noumea.

The fact that John could speak “many local languages” indicates that he had been in the Caledonian area for quite some time.

This is supported by the fact that he was captaining a cutter called *Phantom*, of 13 tons, sailed from Tanna, 15th October 1849, to Port Jackson 21st October 1849. (*State Records Authority of New South Wales.*)

I have also found reference of *Phantom*, Captain Oliver, departing Sydney for the South Sea Islands on 14 April 1849.



*Right: Emmanuel Cardon (Pilotes Maritimes), Myself and Margaret.*



It is easy to see why John Oliver loved the South Sea Islands, in particular New Caledonia.

It is, without doubt, a tropical paradise made up of hundreds of islands and extensive reefs that make it extremely dangerous for all who sail in the surrounding waters.

Hence, the absolute necessity to have a well-organised Pilotes Maritimes body...even with today's excellent navigation aids.





Extensive reefs and islands dot the entire area.

Reefs usually extend well out from the islands, making it necessary to be extremely careful when anchoring.



The main island of New Caledonia is an extremely mountainous region with roads winding in between the mountains and, when necessary, rising over them.

*Tracking the life and times of John Oliver is an on-going project, so now, in 2018, I still cannot tell you whether he was of French descent, or native to Cornwall....the search continues.*

# Moose (or Mouss)

An interesting aside to the information on Casy Island are all the stories that Brent and Ana, from their yacht, *Impi*, have placed on YouTube and the internet.

One of the most endearing is about an abandoned dog called “Moose” (or in French, Mouss). Some claim he was not abandoned; however he was left to live alone...not the life a loving dog would choose.

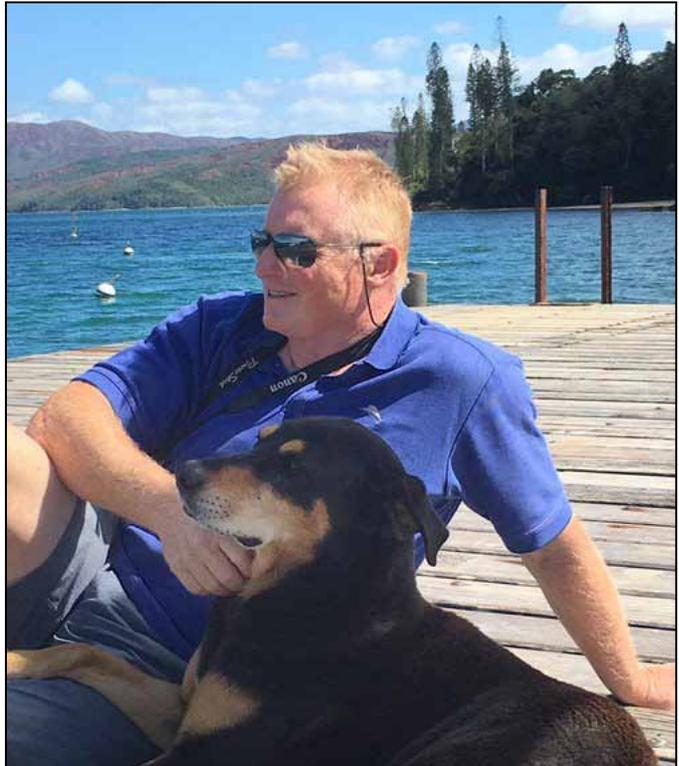
One story is that when everyone left Casy Island and they tried to take away the dogs on it, “Moose” refused to go. He learned to feed himself by catching fish and any other seafood he found edible. Plus he became a “household” name among all the visiting yachts who would also see that he was fed.

Because of my gg-grandfather being buried there, I came to think of Moose as the “guardian of the island”.

Whenever they were in New Caledonian waters, Brent, Ana and *Impi* would return to the island to check on Moose. When they found him not well, they arranged for a vet to fly in and treat him.

I looked forward to meeting Moose when I finally got to visit New Caledonia and Casy Island.

Sadly, that would not happen as Moose passed away late in 2017.



*Brent relaxing with Moose.*



I'm sure his spirit still wanders the island, keeping the spirits of my Captain John Oliver, and those of the Alric family, company.

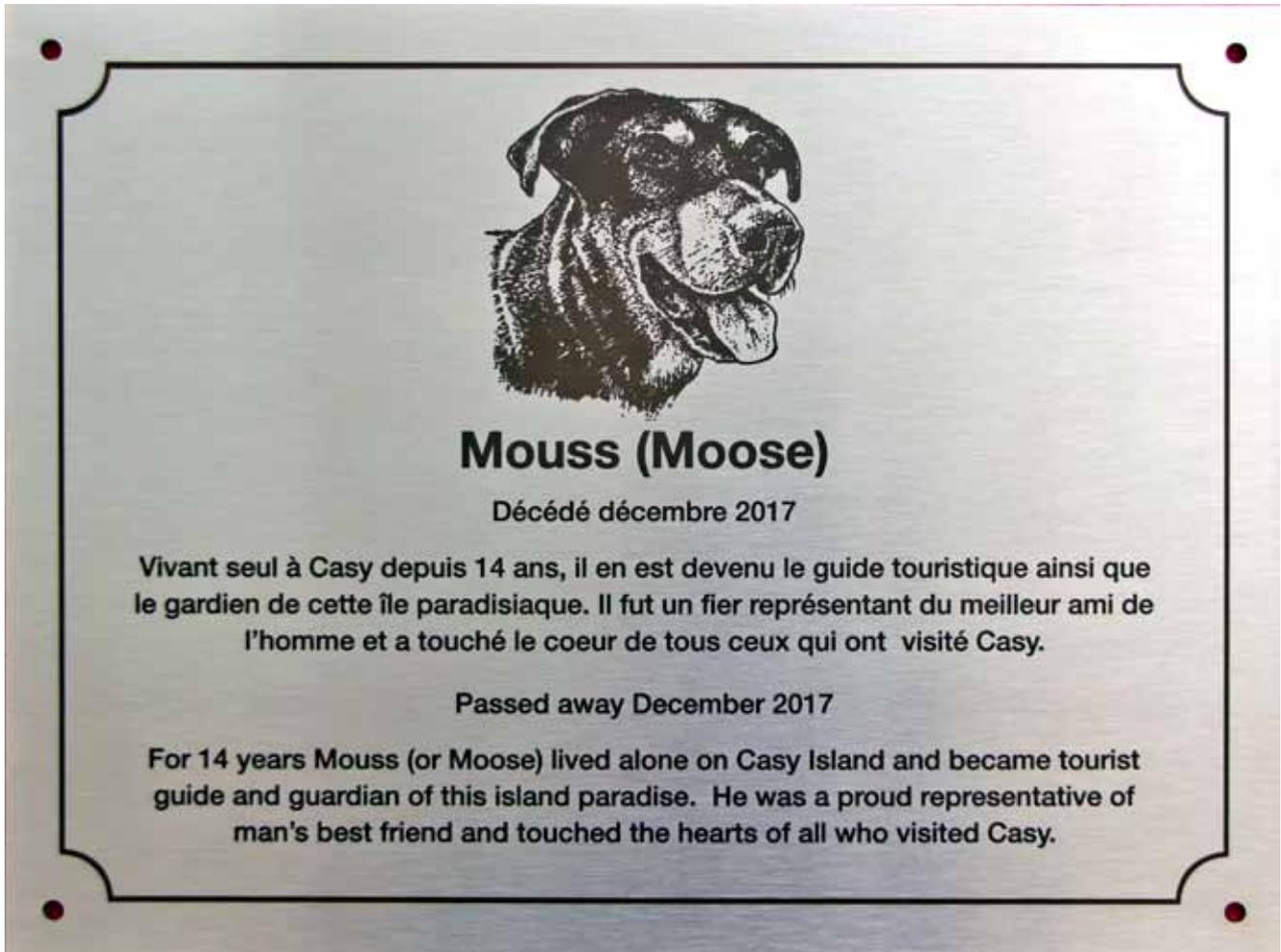
I felt that Moose deserved to be recognised for his ability to live alone on, and “guard”, Casy Island.

Therefore I had a plaque made and a stone support slab to be placed where all can see it when they visit Casy island.

Brent and Ana have made many videos of their travels, including quite a number covering various parts of New Caledonia. They fell in love with Moose and, hence, returned time and again to Casy island to check on him.

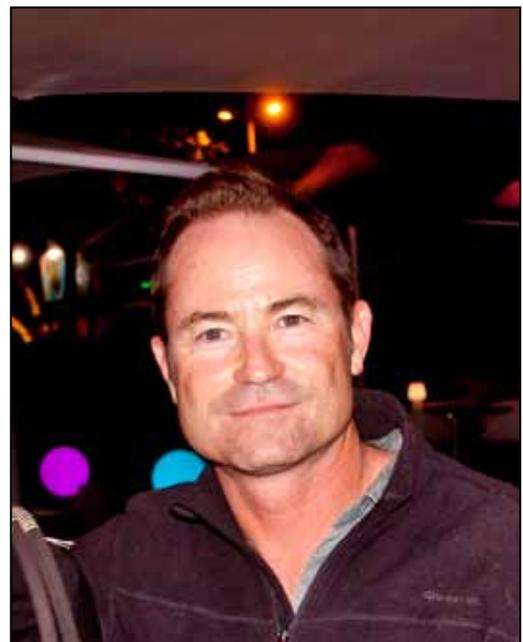
Because of their videos, Moose became recognised around the world and this brought about the raising of funds and drawing the attention of animal welfare groups to the plight of many animals on the islands

surrounding New Caledonia where they needed veterinary help to control and vaccinate the local animals. Because of the distances and difficulties to visit these many islands, it was not financially viable for vets to do all that was necessary. The money raised because of Moose's popularity has helped to make this possible.



So now Moose has his own memorial there on Casy Island where visitors from all over the world can visit and say, "Thank you, Moose, for all you have done".

*Right is Guy Kane, the "Flying Vet" who was brought to help Moose when he became ill.*



*Below is myself and Margaret, left, and Ana and Brent standing beside the plaque recognising Moose. The memorial has been placed just above the entrance to the jetty where all who come ashore can see.*



*If you want to see more about Moose (Mouss) and New Caledonia, Brent and Ana have placed many videos up on YouTube. Just type their name, along with Catamaran Impi, into YouTube or your browser.*