

Northern exposure

Martin Tregonning has brought his business acumen to one of the world's most remote outposts.

BY ALEX WRIGHT

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MORE THAN 11,000 miles separate the Shetland Islands from New Zealand, but for Martin Tregonning, who now lives on the remote islands off the northeast of Scotland, it is like a home away from home.

Tregonning, 51, was born and raised in the New Zealand coastal town of Whangaparaoa. He relocated to the outpost of Dunrossness on the southern tip of Shetland in 2007 and has now been accepted as a native.

But he has never forgotten his roots and now finds himself leading what is undoubtedly the world's most northerly Anzac Day celebrations in Lerwick in April every year.

"It's really like home from home," he says. "We live in a very small rural community; the closest that I could liken it to being [is] a New Zealand country town but with more extreme weather."

Culture shock

While Tregonning hasn't had to adapt much to the windswept scenery, he admits that moving to such a remote location, 200 miles off the mainland,

was initially a bit of a culture shock. What it has going for it is a strong community spirit, he says. "We're heavily reliant on ferries to bring goods in. There's a much smaller availability of goods and there's not the level of business support and infrastructure you would expect in larger places ... I recently had a client who was having internet connection problems, so I went in to their business and laid a telephone extension cable for them.

"That said, I know all my neighbours and it's a very safe place. There's also a great sense of loyalty – for example, if someone needed an accountant they would go to the one they knew in their village."

And he's never far from the nearest Kiwi or Aussie either. He estimates there are about 60 New Zealanders and 30 Australians living on the islands, most of them there either because their family originated from there or because they married a local.

"Most Shetland families have relatives in New Zealand and vice versa," Tregonning says.

"Everyone you talk to seems to have a New Zealander in the family."

Anzac Day celebrations

Tregonning attended his first Anzac Day in 2008, but really got involved with running it two years ago and took it over full-time this year. A group of about 40, including ex-service people and one Vietnam veteran, gathers at the war memorial in Lerwick on the Sunday closest to the actual day to hold a remembrance service, read poems and lay wreaths, as well as singing the New Zealand, Australian and Māori anthems. A trumpeter plays the *Last Post* and *Reveille* before and after the two minutes' silence.

"It's a very traditional service," says Tregonning. "Afterwards there's always someone who has brought some homemade New Zealand biscuits or sweets and some bloke who brings a bottle of rum for us all to share.

"But Shetland also does extremes very well. One year it might be sunny, clear blue skies and the next rain, snow and sleet. This year it was bucketing down and we got soaked to the skin."



Change of horizon

Tregonning graduated from the University of Auckland in 1990 with a degree in accountancy and commercial law. He went on to work for SGS as a company accountant and then as an administration manager at Eurostar Trucks before deciding to broaden his horizons and move to England in 1995. After a brief stint with Warner Home Video in London, he started applying for jobs outside the capital and landed a role as group financial controller at Hamptons International in Bristol before joining Eduserv as finance and contracts director.

During that time, Tregonning met his wife-to-be on holiday in Turkey and they got married and had two children (his third child was born later, in Shetland). Deciding that they wanted to return to his wife's family roots in Shetland, he started applying for jobs again and was offered the position of finance director at NorthLink Ferries in Lerwick.

"Naturally I jumped at the chance," he says. "We had been going up and

down to Shetland for holidays and to see the family for many years and we wanted the children to get to know their family and cultural background better, so it was a no-brainer."

But Tregonning was made redundant in 2008, a year after joining NorthLink Ferries, following a restructuring of its parent company CalMac. After that he had various roles including non-executive director at Central Garages, Shetland Heat Energy and Power and Shetland Abbatoir Cooperative – he even owned and ran a car dealership, Hillside Motors Shetland, for two years before selling up.

Going solo

Tregonning decided to set up his own practice in October of the year he was made redundant, working part-time before going full-time 18 months ago. The practice services local clients, most of them small businesses ranging from furniture makers, cafes and property rentals to software developers and day care nurseries.

And it's the variety of work that he enjoys the most. "A lot of my clients

like the fact that I have worked in industry and gone through many of the same problems as them," he says. "The only downside is that you are expected to be an expert in every field."

Recently Tregonning found himself fronting a promotional video for accounting software provider Sage UK. Its production crew shadowed him for a day as he demonstrated how he uses its cloud accounting software at his clients' premises, and turned it into a case study.

Sea and sheep

In his spare time, Tregonning finds himself operating as a "full-time taxi driver" for his three daughters, and keeping chickens. He is also an active member of the local drama group and even appeared as an extra in the BBC TV drama *Shetland*.

When not doing that, he just enjoys the beauty of the islands.

"Shetland is just a wonderful place to live," he says. "I live right by the sea and my neighbour is a sheep." ●

ALEX WRIGHT is a London-based journalist.