

Round Scotland

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Solace a "swing keel" Southerly 33 had been laid up ashore at Kilrush on the Shannon in Ireland. I had spent a few days in the early spring of '93 antifouling etc. and now three of us assembled. Ray had helped to bring her here. Morrie, my nephew's father in law, was an elderly NZ backpacker doing Europe.

We were eager to get underway. The boatyard lifted Solace into the water. I tried to start the engine, but nothing. We floated a warp across and then pulled her onto a marina berth. I tried bleeding the injectors etc. but no success. The boatyard chief diagnosed failure of the high pressure fuel pump, which he removed. He parcelled it up, we gave it to the driver of the service bus, who took it to Limerick. It returned in the same manner four days later. The engine was reborn. The delay had been an opportunity for Morrie to give us lessons in bread making.

We locked out eagerly and anchored in a bay close to the river mouth. An early morning start found us at Inishbofin by evening, regretfully bypassing the Aran Islands, scene of Robert Flaherty's film "Men of Aran". On the foreshore there we examined a traditional Irish Currach, made from thin battens covered with tarred canvas, as depicted in the film, harking back to an older Ireland.

At a further point up the coast, we were about half a mile offshore when a keen eye spotted a line crossing in front of us in the fortunately smooth water. We took evasive action but we still came broadside up against a line of small floats which were supporting a continuous net. The line was initially dragging along under our bilge but gradually we worked away from it. We then followed the net to its end, perhaps now a mile offshore, where it was unattended and marked by a float and a small flag, which we rounded and continued on our way. This was presumably a net intended to intervene in the run of the salmon. If it had been at night with a sea running, who knows. I had a similar happening on the river Tamar, but at least then there was a boat on the end with people shouting and waving.

Having been delayed in Kilrush by the unreliable Volvo engine we galloped round the north west of Ireland to Moville on the river Foyle. We anchored and went ashore, Morrie to visit the local church where he traced some of his forebears, we to explore and dine. When me and Ray returned to the trusty Avon dinghy we found one of the oars was snapped in two. This was a fixed pattern, not one of those pesky folding types, but still with an alloy tubular loom. Making no contact with the silent group of youths watching us, we searched for and found a suitable piece of wood. Ray produced a sturdy yachtsman's penknife which I was incredulous to find was very sharp. How unusual is that. I whittled the wood, we drove it into the alloy tube and it served.

The timing of our departure from Moville was predicated on the need to pass the tidal gate created by the Mull of Kintyre. We needed fuel so we put into Portrush, there was a delay, which cost us later. However the sun was shining, sailing was pleasant as we passed, Rathlin Island, the Giant's Causeway and crossed to the Mull. I cooked a meal, a small issue of wine was made. We were relaxed, about a mile off the lighthouse, but the tide was turning against us. Then we felt Solace lurch to a sudden gust, the sky darkened, rain began, dusk was arriving. Very quickly everything changed. The Mull disappeared, the untrustworthy yachtsman's Decca Navigator said we were moving steadily South but making no progress. Rain became a downpour, visibility nil, wind increased, engine running hard, sails driving, but little progress according to the untrustworthy Decca. The Decca which in benign conditions when you tested it appeared to work, but when "the chips were down" seemed to fail you. Could it be trusted or had it jumped a lane? Did it mean anything?

Fortunately the main compass, hand bearing compass and towed Stowe log could be trusted as I had used them for many years. The tidal atlas was very small scale but I did the best dead reckoning I could manage. The problem was that we were trying to traverse the width of the Mull and then make a fairly tight turn inside Sanda Island in very strong and rapidly changing tidal stream flows. I have just unearthed the chart I used that day it is absolutely covered with markings, clock times and log readings. I note that I started with 24 hour times and then slipped to 12 hour times, stress was telling. Why I did not bear away and make a wide sweep around Sanda island into open water I cannot imagine. My only explanation is that perhaps I still at that time had more faith in the Decca than I came to have later. But then suddenly for the only time that night a gap appeared in the scudding clouds, the rain eased and I saw the top of Sanda, silhouetted by the moon, very briefly. The hand bearing compass was around my neck. The motion was lively so the needle would be swirling plus or minus 20/30 degrees. Wedge yourself, hold steady and wait, there, did the needle hover, keep holding steady, then a hint of it hovering again a second time at the same reading, be patient keep steady, yes, a third hover, got it. The height of the island was given, I guessed the distance off from this. No chance of measurement as it quickly disappeared, impossible anyway as sea level was not visible. I made a mark, set a course and we were then heading into more open water, phew. Gaining confidence, I forecast the time, when looking up ahead, we would suddenly see a flash from the lighthouse as we entered its sectored light. My crew were impressed when it arrived on time. What the division between skill and luck was that night I am

not sure. Now that navigation is no longer required much "entertainment" is missed.

In the early hours we arrived in Campbeltown. The next morning a kindly chap who was headed off for a cruise offered us the loan of his mooring at Helensburgh which was where we were bound. We had a good sail past the other Aran Island, into the Clyde and on to the mooring. Returning from ashore in the Avon dinghy, Morrie was in the bow, Ray rowing and me astern. Because Morrie had been with us for a fortnight we tended to forget he was actually a landlubber. He reached for the boarding ladder, painter in hand but failed to make it fast. He attempted to mount the ladder as his feet pushed the dinghy away. As he became ever closer to the horizontal the outcome was certain and suddenly there he was floundering in boots and heavy coat. Fortunately I had designed the ladder with a drop down section that put the lower rung about two feet below the water so Morrie was able to save himself. As I said to Ray at the time we remained very calm, we didn't panic. I don't remember Laurel and Hardy basing a sketch on this idea, perhaps Stanley was a poor swimmer. We dried him off and put him in a bunk to warm up. I tied his boot laces together and hung them over the boom to dry. Next morning they had gone. Would they float? A search was started. We clipped the top of the submerged breakwater, to the nearby marina, with the tip of our iron centreboard, but thought little of it. Shortly a launch was rushing towards us. I was puzzled as to why. It transpired that he had come to rescue us. No boots were found.

Replacement boots were obtained in the local market and Morrie left to go backpacking, Ray also - not backpacking. There was a fortnight's hiatus (socialising). Jim who had crewed for us when racing on the Medway in former times now lived locally. So we set off, Jim, together with John Brown, who trained up from Chatham, and me. We spent the first night anchored off Rothesay and then proceeded to the entrance to the Crinan canal at Ardrishaig. Our transiting the canal coincided with the West Highland Yacht Week so the canal was busy. There were four boats in the first lock, two behind two. We were in the front rank along with another fat boat and because our combined beam was excessive we got into difficulties jammed together between the lock sides. The two boats behind were narrower. I explained the situation to the boats behind and suggested that for the next lock one of them change places with one of us. The response was simply stated, "no". This was so unexpected I presumed that I had not been understood so I repeated my argument. The response again in an assertive tone was the single word "no". That was that. In the next lock we two were grinding together and as the water level rose Solace suddenly popped forward and our bowsprit lodged itself under a cross member on the lock gate. Much shouting stopped the inflow of water but damage had been done. In the picture Solace is at the back presumably when sense prevailed at a later lock.



We continued through the canal until we came to an empty wooden jetty. One of the inconveniences when carrying a mast on deck is that the flimsy headsail reefing gear overhangs the end of the mast. When designing Solace's system I allowed for this by making it possible to detach the bottom several feet, which we did. We broke the furling drum down, peacemeal, catching all the Delrin balls, hammered the flanges flat and reassembled it. It turned. Fortunately the bowsprit was made of stainless steel and although distorted it was sound to go.

We locked out in the morning and passed through the Gulf of Corryvreckan. It was slack water and no hint of whirlpool was seen. Pilotage was interesting through the Sound of Luing, between Mull and the mainland and on to Tobermory. The bay was crowded with anchored boats, but as on a previous visit, having the advantage of the lifting keel, I was able to pass through them and find sufficient swinging room a short row from the shore.

The next day we passed Muck, Eigg and Rhum then proceeded through the Sound of Sleat between Skye and the mainland. The ferry was still working but its days were numbered because the Skye bridge was being built. We anchored for the night at Plockton the scene of family holidays that Jim remembered fondly from his childhood. It was a short hop to Portree on Skye where we picked up a visitors buoy. Ashore we made what was my second visit to a small hotel by the harbour. The first was about thirty years earlier when Margaret and I arrived having driven two up on a Lambretta motor scooter from London. It was no longer a temperance hotel.

Then on to Scalpay part of Harris in the Outer Hebrides, not the Scalpay adjunct to Skye. We anchored in the compact natural rockbound harbour but only after giving the only

shallow part shown on the sketch map a friendly tap with our centreboard. For me, and probably others, an island has a certain romance, from the very fact of being an island. I ask you, how unreasonable was it then for the islanders to consider their convenience more important than this sense of romance by subsequently having themselves joined to Harris by a bridge? Albeit an elegant one.

We hopped up to Stornoway and then crossed the North Minch back to Kinlochbervie on the mainland, round the corner at Cape Wrath (which fortunately was a misnomer in our case) and headed for the Orkney Islands. We passed that remarkable sea stack The Old Man of Hoy fairly close, entered through Hoy Sound and anchored off Stromness. Passing through Scapa Flow there was not much indication of its chequered history as an important naval base in two world wars. Passing this way and exiting to the south we avoided the possibly more lively part of the Pentland Firth between Hoy and the mainland. However marked on the chart off Duncansby Head is a possible tidal stream flow of 9 kts. I remember having to steer at a marked angle to our direction of travel. Not a place to be in a boat in a blow.

We stopped at Helmsdale and then on to Nairn, which I knew from a previous visit, and was a convenient spot for Jim to leave us. The conditions were so light that even the surface of the Moray Firth was smooth and unruffled. What was surprising, and would only be apparent in these conditions, were the many fins we saw piercing the surface, belonging to which species we could not tell.

A few years before, John and I had sailed from east to west along the Moray Firth, now we were doing it in reverse. I can't recall on which of these trips it was that I remember seeing, while looking south over the Cairngorms, what seemed to me, a classic system of lenticular clouds forming wave bars, of the pattern that has allowed a glider to set the UK maximum altitude record there (38,000 ft).

We turned South around Rattray Head, stopped off at Peterhead and Tayport on the river Tay then continued



hopping our way down the right hand side of England to home base at Gillingham.

I think the picture shows Solace off Rothsay. You can see that the boom is rather fat. This was to accommodate an "in the boom" reefing gear which I devised. It worked, albeit with the occasional need of a block of wood and a hammer. In front of the mast are a pair of sloping telescopic spinnaker poles. Underneath you might just detect some socks drying or even a row of dead rabbits. Actually they are warps drying so clearly we were experiencing some of the wet stuff. The high clewed Yankee jib which can just be discerned furled on the forestay, was actually two identical sails joined together with a common luff, which laid one on top of the other going to windward, but which could be split apart, each leaf having its clew attached to the end of a telescopic pole when the wind was well aft the beam.