

HOW TO RETIRE GRACEFULLY?

Rev Bob Shepton

(Flying Fish 1991/1 carried an article by the Rev Bob entitled Never Again... He's plainly not taken his own advice, however, as since then he's written for us no less than 22 times, usually about 'expeditions' in his own 33ft Westerly Discus Dodo's Delight, but occasionally about deliveries, or crewing on superyachts.

Bob's second love – or possibly his first – is climbing, and many first ascents in Greenland and the Arctic have started from the deck of Dodo's Delight. However in 2017 he stayed a little closer to his Scottish home...

The photos are courtesy of Chris Prescott and Stuart Macdonald.)

It was my privilege to take Dave Macleod, Britain's top rock-climber, and his team of Nat and Chris to St Kilda, for Dave and Nat to do another superb new route there and Chris to film it. I had met Dave from time to time locally, and somehow in conversation the idea of going across in *Dodo's Delight* came up. "That would be fun", said Dave.

Eventually a date was fixed for June. In May the weather was strangely fine and settled in Scotland, but by June we were back to the usual depressions marching across the Atlantic with attendant rain and wind. But on 10 June Dave and his party arrived at the pontoons by kind permission of Linnhe Marine near Appin, together with Stu Macdonald who had been volunteered by a friend as sailing back-up as although Dave and team were expert climbers they had done no sailing. They brought their gear aboard, chose their respective bunks, stowed their food, and then I walked them round the boat identifying features and functions. They endured a safety briefing from me even though this was a private expedition, and adjusted lifejackets in case they should feel the need of them. We left the solid dinghy on the grass, again by kind permission, and we were off.

The aim was to get as far up the Sound of Mull as we could that afternoon to

introduce them to sailing. It served its purpose though conditions were light, and we continued motor sailing with sails up. There was one moment of crisis when the engine started 'hunting' and almost cut out, but after I changed a fuel filter it started again and

Dave – training must go on







*The crew: Chris,
Dave, Stu and Nat*

ran smoothly. Relief – I did not fancy anchoring in Village Bay at St Kilda without an engine, due to its reputation of sometimes having to abandon at a moment's notice. We changed watches every two hours and put into Loch Drumbuie opposite Tobermory for a pleasant, settled night at anchor.

The next day was more challenging. Two reefs in the main – somehow three reefs got in there at one stage – and the No.3 jib. It seemed to take a long time to reach Ardnamurchan Point, though the climbers enjoyed spotting possible routes on the Morven coast as we went along, and then the weather deteriorated further, to showery



*Dave in unusual
mode as winchman
on a sailing boat*



with strong winds. The log reads 'Lively sailing'. We were aiming ultimately for the Sound of Harris, but it was unpleasant and I did not think my team were really ready for night passages yet. I made the decision to go into Canna, which we reached with some drama at the end – the genoa wrapped itself round and round the wrong way as we tried to furl it, and we couldn't get it to unfurl for us to roll it up the right way. At last Stu suggested turning downwind, which worked – we were able to unwrap it and then wrap it round the right way, the unflappable Dave obeying instructions on the helm. These climbers are used to the odd crisis. There was a rumour you had to pay for picking up a mooring in Canna so we put our own anchor down, and paid for it next morning after a stormy night with a huge mass of kelp.

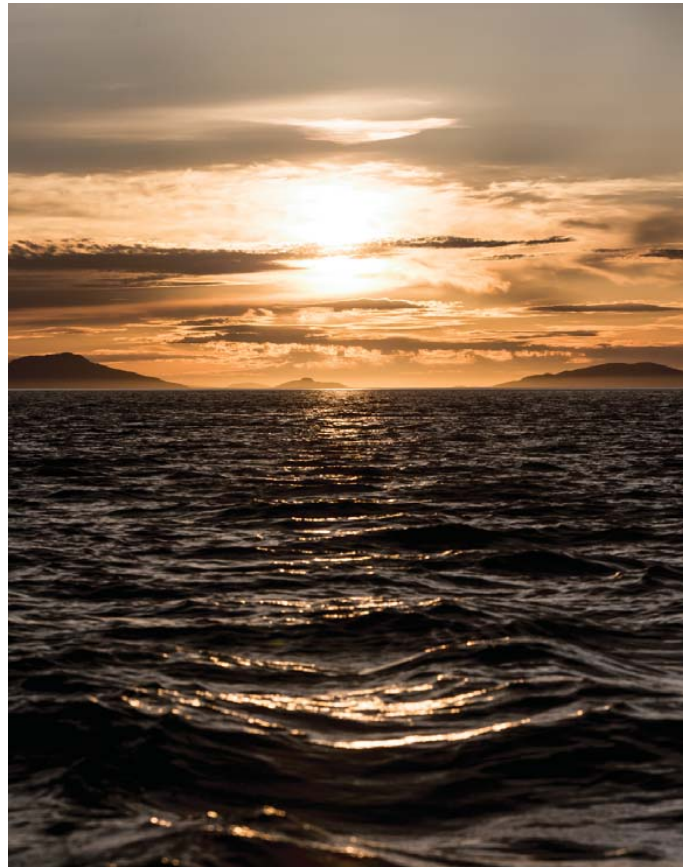
It was lively in the harbour, but better outside with not too strong a wind even when we cleared the shelter of the island. Close-reaching we still could not clear the northwest corner of Skye and had to motor-sail, but there was not the wind and clag of the day before. Neist Point gave much interest as Dave and Nat had done a hard route there with Chris filming sometime back, and then to my surprise the wind backed sufficiently into the south for us to have a pleasant sail across the Minch to Lochmaddy. It strengthened considerably as we approached so we followed the ferry route in on engine. We were just investigating putting our anchor down at the far end when Chris murmured, "So no showers and restaurant?". There were pontoons in the distance by the ferry wharf – was he serious, surely we were meant to be hardened sailors and climbers, eschewing such luxuries?! "I'm prepared to pay" he said – wow, these guys are quick on the uptake. "Well, okay then, though I'll never live this down...". We moored against a pontoon at the second attempt in an awkward wind with people kindly taking our lines, also at the second attempt, then went ashore and had an excellent meal at the Lochmaddy Hotel. Thank you, Chris, and I'm forced to admit that it was a very pleasant evening.

Next morning a man approached the boat, "Is this *the Dodo's Delight*? I'm just reading your book *Addicted to Adventure* which I'm enjoying. Will you sign it for me, please?". All very flattering and I got Dave to sign it too, so he now really has a bumper issue!

The Sound of Harris

Then the gas alarm went off – in trying to light the stove I had let out too much gas before I realised we needed to change bottles. I opened a side portlight and pumped the bilge dry as gas sinks, and it eventually stopped. Then the switch for the VHF gave up, so we changed another little-used switch over and the radio sprang back into life. And then Dave, a prodigious tea drinker, had ordered a huge pot of tea, or was it two, at a neighbouring café.

We started late. The Sound of Harris proved good and bad. We followed the Cope Passage and initially all was fine with obvious buoyage to follow, but then suddenly there were none. My old chart-plotter showed a whole lot more buoys but they were not to be seen, although there were still plenty of rocks and shoals to the north. Was this a cost-cutting exercise, reminiscent of the way that first Oban Coastguard was closed



After the Sound of Harris and before the force 7



down, then Clyde Coastguard, and now we are left with only Stornoway to the north and Belfast to the south for the whole of the west coast of Scotland? I learned later that after the military had largely left St Kilda this buoyage was removed, so in a sense it was indeed a cost-cutting exercise!

Looking around it appeared that the ferry route to Leverburgh was still well buoyed, so I ordered a radical turn to starboard to follow the green buoys and red posts marking this excitingly shallow route. A ferry passed us going the other way and we nudged over precariously to let it past. So on to Leverburgh where we put an anchor down in the open roadstead. It was only 1530 – should we continue on to St Kilda? But I was still not happy with the thought of a night passage with a novice crew, and arriving at midnight to sort out what to do at St Kilda, so we stayed and left early next morning. Decisions, decisions! Ocean sailing is easier – you just get out there and take what comes, and the next waypoint is a thousand miles away with plenty of ocean to play with.

The buoyage north from Leverburgh made the remaining exit from the Sound easy, and so into the Atlantic. I phoned Stornoway to learn the shipping forecast for the Hebrides. “South or Southwest force 5–7”. “Thank you, it’s going to be a hairy passage then”, and it was. Force 5, force 6, gusting into mid to strong force 7s from ahead. The sea gradually built the further out we went and Chris especially, who did a long trick at the wheel to spare his partner Nat, got thoroughly soaked with spray and waves as he sat behind the wheel. At 1100 there was a violent shaking of the whole rig – whatever was the matter? Then I saw the inner foresail sliding down its stay, so rushed forward and fortunately was able to pull the rest of it down easily. The halyard and sail had obviously parted company. There followed a somewhat stormy interlude on the foredeck, tying the sail with one of its sheets along the starboard

Skipper at work, Dave getting his head down between watches





The climbers and all their gear kindly being given a lift ashore by the RIB

guardrail, with the odd wave coming over the top. Finally it was secured, albeit roughly, and I made it back to the cockpit with my soaked hat falling over my eyes with every step. We do this for pleasure?

At least we were able to lay the course, in a rather wavy-navy fashion with an inexperienced crew, and at last St Kilda loomed out of the mist in the distance. There was a gale force 8 forecast for Rockall to the south, so we headed straight for the northern side of the island. A violent gust as we passed close to a headland almost knocked us down, but we put into Glen Bay, to the fury of the resident seals. It is deep, so we put our anchor down close to the shore and set about establishing a line ashore for good measure. These strong climbers were able to paddle the dinghy ashore against the wind and stitch up the lines, which was just as well as we spent the night really lying to this rather than the anchor which dragged along the rocky bottom. We also put an old CQR out astern, just in case the wind went into the north, hauling the climbers back on a line against the wind when they had laid it.

After a windy night with williwaws gusting down from the hills above, it grew a little calmer in the afternoon. We spent some time cobbling together a system of joining and buoying the line ashore to the line from the CQR so that Stu and I could pick them up later if we had to abandon Village Bay. We were then able to fetch our main anchor, and threw out the buoyed lines for later reference, and so made our way in calmer conditions to Village Bay on the south side. There was already a German yacht and, horrors, a cruise ship in the bay, and certainly the conditions were much calmer – though that is a relative term in Village Bay, as there is always some swell and the wind goes round and round without rhyme or reason. We anchored close to the pier, where some RIBs from the cruise ship were circling around waiting to pick up their clients from their foray ashore. I had a sudden inspiration, and beckoned to one of them. “I have



The climbers' tents in a fine spell

Britain's No.1 climber aboard, I suppose you aren't allowed to take them and their gear ashore, are you?" "Oh, who's that?" But she kindly loaded them and their mountains of climbing gear onto her RIB and took them ashore. This turned out to be a great boon, as they were taking a lot of gear with them to camp and climb and it would have taken multiple trips in our small dinghies to get it all ashore.

The cruise ship left, followed by the German yacht, and the next day a smaller, tough-looking ship arrived. She looked vaguely familiar, and on checking she turned out to be a vessel which I had last seen in scenic Prinz Christian Sund in Greenland. It was all happening in St Kilda. This was a maintenance day for us, and Stu proved

Conferring together at the camp site



amazing. He has worked in wood and metal, and in spite of being a thalidomide baby and having no fingers on his left hand he was up and down that mast like a yo-yo. We soon had a messenger down the mast and had reeved a halyard for the inner foresail. But by then the sea had grown rougher so we aborted for the moment.

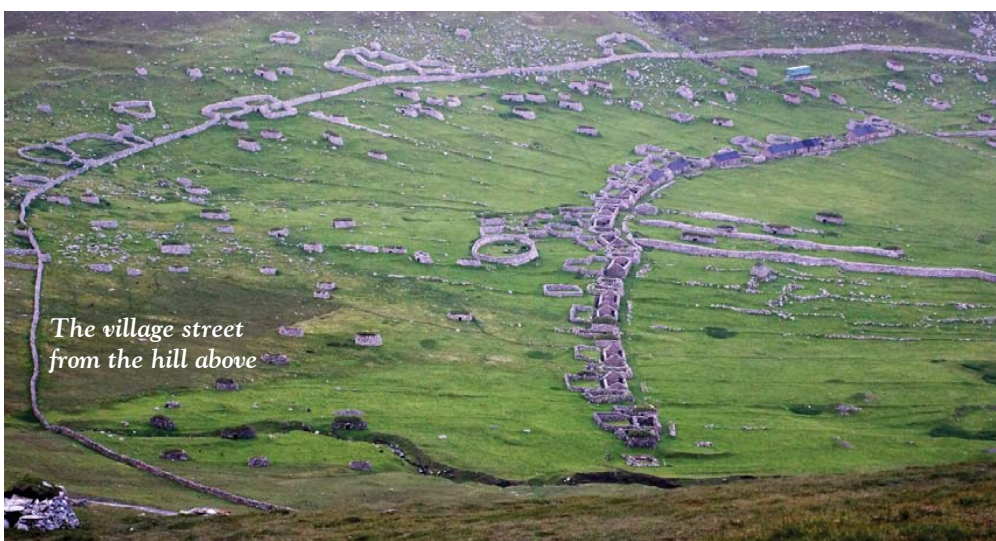
The moment lasted for two days, with quite a lively sea running in the bay. The climbers meantime were stuck in their tents. Memories of Chris Bonington and Robin Knox-Johnston, gale-bound together in *Suhaili* in Akureyri in Iceland after sailing and climbing in Greenland. Robin expressed surprise in his book that Chris was taking it so well. 'Climbers have to get used to waiting for weather as well, you know'. Here we were again.



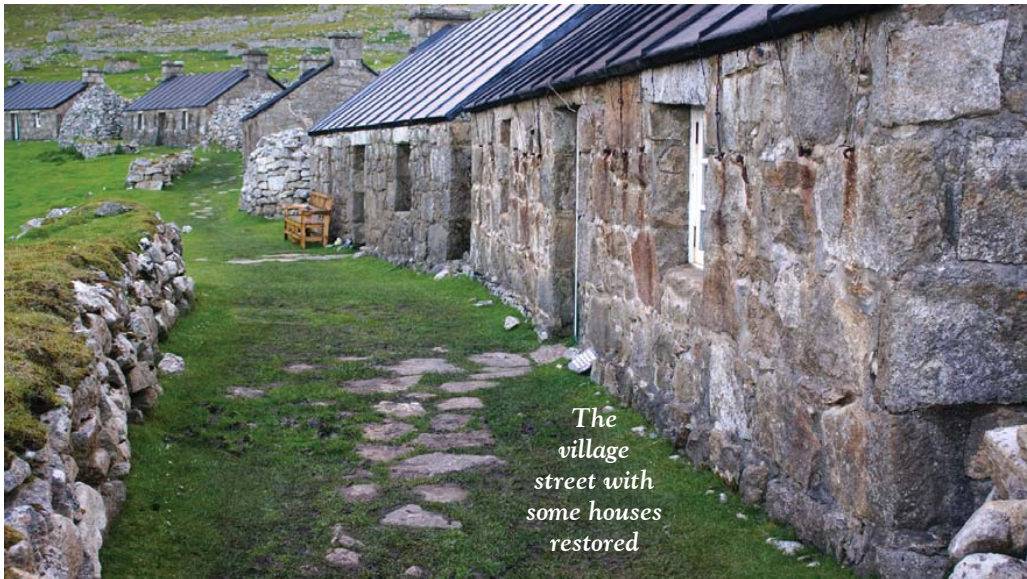
St Kilda today, old and new

And what of St Kilda itself? As Nat Berry wrote later in an excellent article for UKClimbing:

St Kilda is situated on the fringes of the British Isles, and at the margins of many an imagination. A volcanic archipelago rising sharply out of the North Atlantic 41 miles off the west coast of the Outer Hebrides, the islands of Hirta, Dùn, Boreray, Soay,



*The village street
from the hill above*



The village street with some houses restored

and their surrounding seastacks standing guard, are often described as being 'at the edge of the world'. The remotest part of the British Isles, St Kilda is believed to have been inhabited as early as the Bronze Age, with settlers arriving on the island 4000 to 5000 years ago.

By the late 1600s a hardy group of around 180 St Kildans rented the land around Village Bay, paying their rent in kind to distant landlords – the MacLeods of Dunvegan on Skye – and receiving imported goods in exchange for their labour and produce. Bird fowling, agriculture and fishing provided the islanders with food and clothing. Cragmen

risked life and limb to snatch eggs and birds from nests by hand and fishing rod on the cliffsides, scrambling barefoot or in socks with plaited horsehair ropes tied around their waists. For the St Kildans, climbing was not a pursuit of leisure – it was crucial to their existence.



One of the puffins for which St Kilda is famous

It is perhaps ironic, although not altogether unsurprising, that the gradual demise and subsequent evacuation of the St Kildans in 1930 came about through increased interest from tourists and contact with the civilised mainland. Self-sufficiency dwindled, and the harsh living conditions of the blackhouses, unpredictable North Atlantic climate, and lack of able-bodied men, led to a decrease in morale as the inhabitants looked to retreat from the increasingly inhospitable island. In 1957 St Kilda was

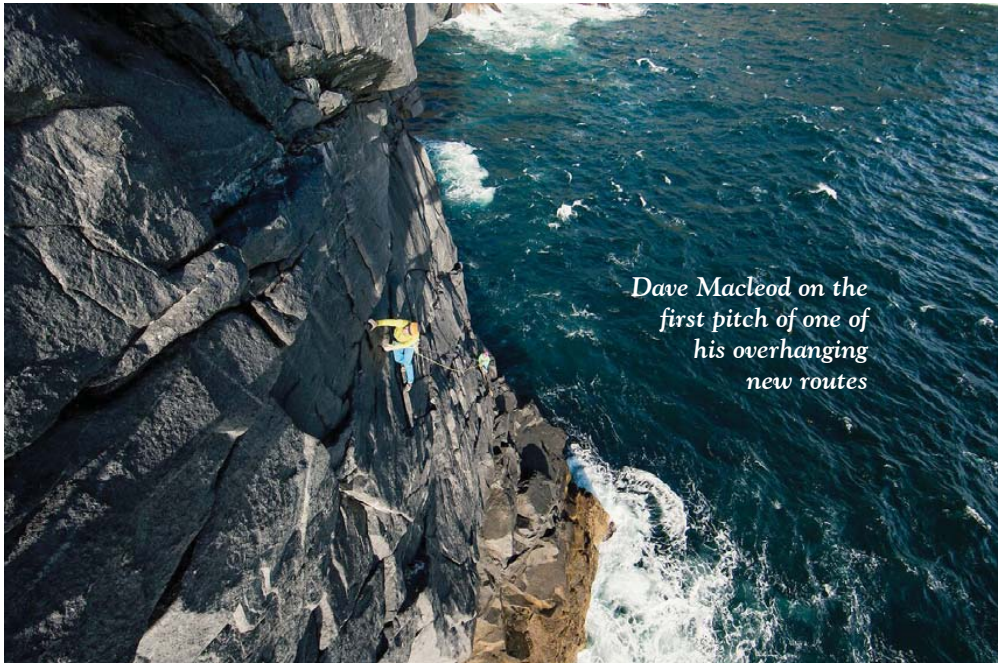


A typical cleist where birds and eggs were stored for the winter

bequeathed to The National Trust for Scotland by the 5th Marquess of Bute, and in 1986 was inscribed by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site in recognition of its natural heritage. In 2006 the cultural landscape of St Kilda was also inscribed, making St Kilda one of only 35 places in the world listed as a dual World Heritage Site.

School children from a different era





*Dave Macleod on the
first pitch of one of
his overhanging
new routes*

So we waited, in wind, mist, drizzle and spray, rolling at anchor in the bay. The days went by. Dave was fairly relaxed but I think Chris was feeling the pressure to make the film. After three days of waiting Dave was at last able to start work on the

Nat Berry seconding up a pleasant finishing groove





*Nat on the famous
Mistress Stone, where young
St Kildan men were tested
to see whether they were
man enough*

route in the evening, and over the next two days he climbed two new world-class routes on the west cliff of Hirta – intricate, technical, hard, over prodigious overhangs, quietly and skilfully seconded by Nat, though on her own admittance with some strange unheard of climbing moves! Honour and the film were satisfied. Stu and I were not so clever trying to rescue the lines and CQR in Glen Bay in rough conditions. Suffice it to say that we lost the anchor and some warps, but we still had a boat...

Unaccustomed as I am ...



*Modern technology – Dave
preparing to launch the drone*

The passage back was one of contrasts. We put out to sea at 1015 on a Wednesday, and had some adventures launching and retrieving a drone for pictures. Chris nearly lost his fingers catching it. We then continued motoring, and motoring, in very light airs all the way across to the Sound of Harris, through the Sound keeping to the Stanton Passage on the Harris side, across to Skye and down to Canna. Next morning we waited for the wind to go round, finally putting out at 1400 and enduring a strong, gusty passage with heavy rain. More waiting in Loch Scresort on the east side of Rhum for a change of wind direction and then back to motoring, past Eigg, past Muck, past Ardnamurchan Point, down the Sound of Mull and up Loch Linnhe, picking up my mooring at 0235 Friday morning.

“Well done, guys, a really successful and enjoyable expedition. But hey, ocean sailing is easier...”



Dodo's Delight leaving St Kilda

