

GRYPHON II TAKES THE LONG WAY HOME

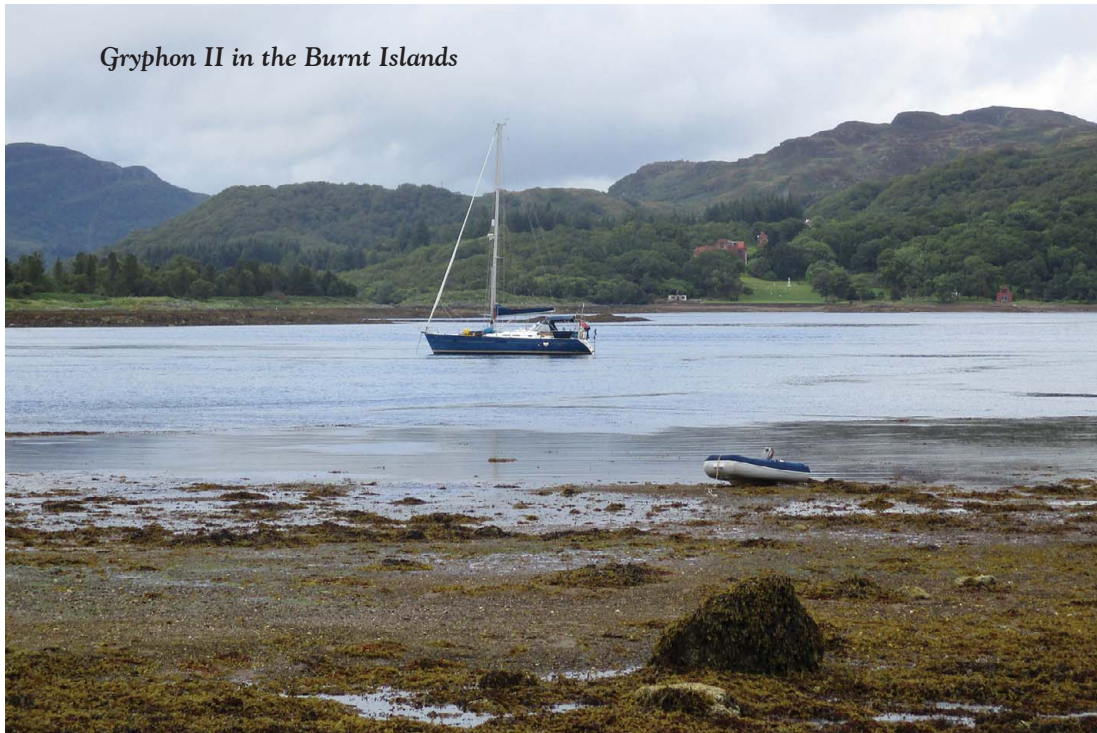
Chris and Lorraine Marchant

(Chris and Lorraine made their first ocean passages in 1981/2, when they completed an Atlantic circuit in a 27ft Albin Vega. Twenty-eight years and five boats later they again left UK shores, this time aboard their Beneteau Oceanis 423 Gryphon II, and after a classic coconut-milk-run circumnavigation – see their blog at <http://blog.mailasail.com/gryphon> – by July 2015 were again nearing home...)

As we sailed from the fabulous Azores to UK home waters our wonderful six year circumnavigation was drawing to a close. We needed to get home for various reasons but we both wanted more – who wouldn't? So we decided to have more. We live in Suffolk, on England's east coast, but decided on the long way round so headed east for Ireland, then on up to the west coast of Scotland. We've always wanted to transit the Caledonian Canal and now was our chance – we would cut across west to east and then down the coast to Suffolk and home.

First, however, was an important reunion with our daughter who flew up to meet us. Hattie is no great fan of the open sea, so the west coast of Scotland was the perfect place to spend a week with us and Gryphon II. We welcomed her aboard at Kip Marina in Inverkip near Greenock, and sailed off into some stunning scenery with dolphins, seals and guillemots for company.

Gryphon II in the Burnt Islands

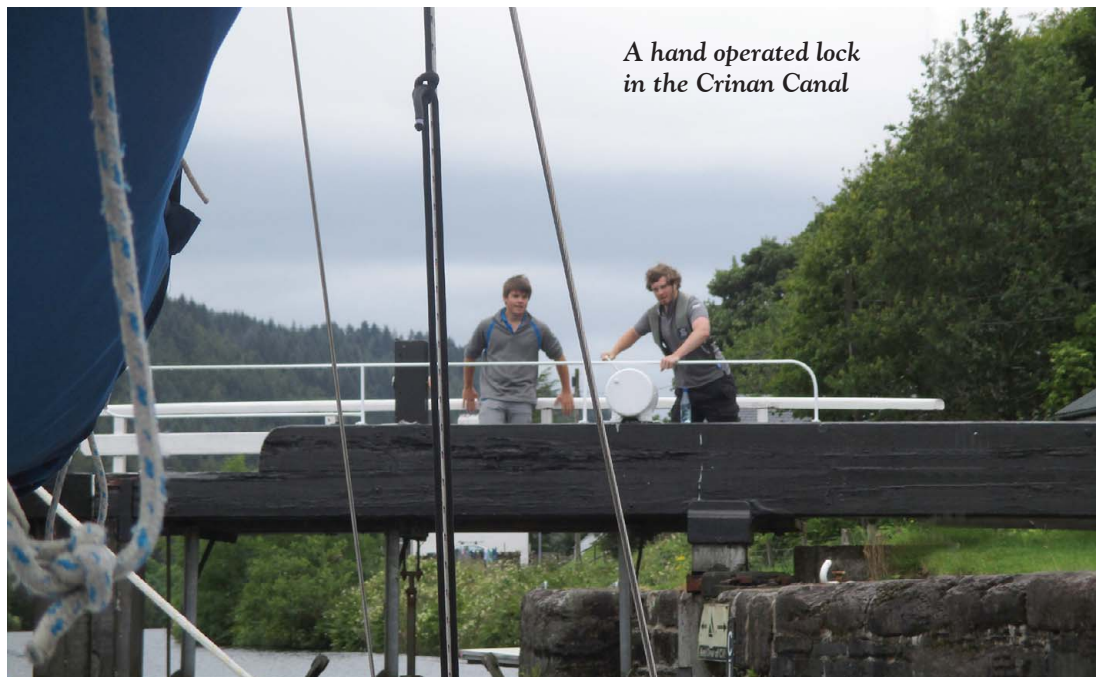




Summer's winter was back and the layers went on...

The Kyles of Bute to the Sound of Jura – 55°55'N 5°11'W to 56°06' 5°38'W

The Kyles of Bute gave us tranquil sailing and anchorages in the sheltered waters of this serene area, while transiting the Crinan Canal added something a little different and enabled quicker access from the Kyles to the Sound of Jura. We couldn't believe how few boats were on the water and we mainly had perfect anchorages to ourselves. The islands and hillsides are sparsely populated with tiny white houses and churches reflected in the clear waters. The weather continued damp and much too cold for



our liking, but it meant that there were no midges which in Scotland is a real bonus. Hattie seemed to have brought some better weather with her so walking and scrambling over rocks on the islands was a warmer treat, but that brief spell soon ended, summer's winter was back, and the layers went on.

The seafood in this area is wonderful, with Oban said to be the seafood capital of Scotland's west coast. There are plenty of excellent restaurants to choose from with interesting approaches from the water, some with little jetties but others where a beach landing is the only way in. Wellies were a must, but we made the most of the fine cuisine and had some very enjoyable evenings, then hot-wellied it back to the dinghy so as not to be caught out by the tide.

The Crinan Canal cuts through Kintyre from Loch Fyne to the Sound of Jura. It was definitely not busy – there were no other boats during our transit, and going through the locks alone made things easier. All the cross-country locks are hand operated by the keepers, a cheerful and helpful crew in teams of two who control a set of three or four locks between them depending on the distances. This was great for us as we didn't have to handle the heavy lock gates ourselves. Once in the locks the keepers hooked our ropes over the cleats for us, which made life a lot easier than in many canals we have travelled in the past. Hattie did a sterling job on the foredeck, keeping *Gryphon II* in good position as the water powered in.

Waiting while the basin fills

The lovely old lock-keepers' cottages are all now in private ownership, many as holiday homes or holiday lets, but they keep their old world charm in this very scenic canal. Facilities for boats are excellent, with showers and laundry rooms, all well-kept and, best of all, heated. There are plenty of places to stop, which is just as well as the transit is a surprisingly tiring business. A number of boats are based in the canal, a perfect place to be for getting





A fairly typical canal settlement

to either side of Kintyre without having to go right round the Mull. Staying overnight in the centre section gave us a leisurely start on the downward locks, which eventually took us to the sea lock basin at the top of the Sound of Jura. Surrounded by picturesque buildings and stunning views the sea lock makes for a wonderful climax to a very enjoyable journey.

With only a few days of Hattie's holiday left we needed to move on toward Oban, from which she would get the train to Glasgow and fly back south. We left through Crinan's sea lock into the Sound of Jura, and headed north past the Gulf of Corryvreckan where the water runs wild through powerful overfalls and a whirlpool which is said to be the third most dangerous in the world. All this is caused by the uneven sea bed and tidal currents being squeezed through between Scarba and Jura. We passed a good distance away so all was well.

Sailing on from Jura through the Sound of Luig and up to the Firth of Lorn we stopped at the Black Islands, which are hauntingly beautiful in their isolation. Not a thing moved except

Gryphon II in the Crinan Sea Lock



***The Crinan Sea Lock
– and Gryphon II –
seen from the
nearby hillside***

for the breeze – there were no seals or birds. The cold, the light and the clouds made these islands feel other-worldly. We spent the night in an idyllic anchorage, still and silent. But too soon, it seemed, we had to move on. We wanted to experience more of this place and will have to go back one day, but after saying goodbye to Hattie the Caledonian Canal beckoned.

***The Caledonian Canal –
56°50'·2N 5°06'·8W to
57°23'·32N 4°19'·64W***

The Caledonian Canal cuts through the Great Glen of the Scottish highlands from the Corpach Basin near Fort William to the Clachnaharry sea lock at Inverness. It includes the famous Loch Ness as well as Loch Lochy, the jauntily named Loch Oich, and Loch Dochfour which lies in perfect alignment. The Glen is a massive geological fault tearing through the underlying rock and resulting in these four deep lochs; it links the Atlantic to the North Sea through over 60 miles of outstanding Scottish landscape. The transit needs time – a boat can



The Black Islands



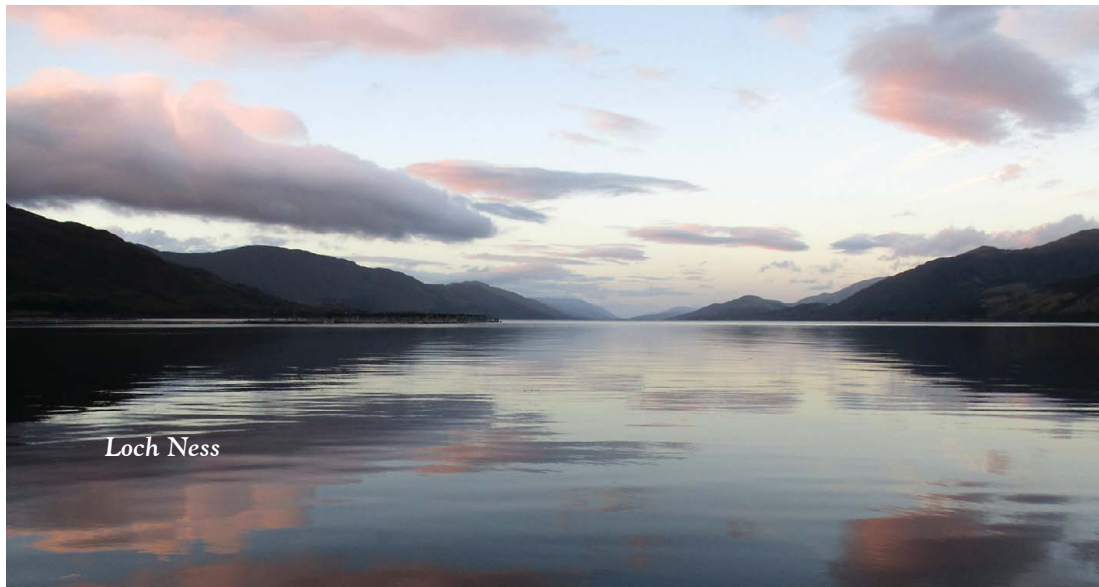
*Entering the Caledonian
Canal from Fort William and
the Corpach Basin*

*Neptune's Staircase, a
flight of eight locks carrying
boats upward at the start of
the canal, is a very popular
stop for curious tourists*

be taken through in 2½ days but that would be a rush, the scenery demands longer and there is plenty to see.

In 1803 work started on the canal to enable naval and other sailing vessels to make passage from the Atlantic to the North Sea without having to face the treacherous waters of the Pentland Firth and Cape Wrath. We were quite pleased not to have to contend with those ourselves given the state of the weather, which had us shivering despite the





Loch Ness

unaccustomed layers under our oilskins. The Caledonian is the foremost canal in Scotland, with such august names as William Jessop (who died before its completion) and Thomas Telford to its credit, although many other engineers were involved. It ran furiously over budget and wasn't fully completed until 1847. It has long locks – 46 metres – but by the time it was finished steamships had got so much bigger that they couldn't use the canal ... sounds like a familiar scenario.

Even so it helped develop the highland economy, as it encouraged trade between east and west as well as with Northern Europe and Scandinavia. Now it's also an important feature of the local tourist trade, but that's obviously very weather dependent. We saw very little boat traffic although there were quite a few walkers about and some hardy canoeists. Other visitors touring the highlands arrive by road to various towns and villages along the canal, so local business seems to do well, especially those selling tartan and tweed goods, whisky and the usual souvenirs like tea towels and Scottish shortbread. Restaurants are very good at promoting local produce as a key feature, which benefits their trade, and venison, haggis, Cullen Skink, fish, smoked fish and other seafood is available in abundance. We're hooked on Cullen Skink, a delicious soup of smoked fish, leeks and a broth laced with cream – yummy!

We spent a black and silent night anchored in a small bay near the River Garry in Loch Oich. The highlight of the lochs was Loch Ness, however, with all its history and mystery to think about while sailing through. At the western end is Fort Augustus, a vibrant small town which has plenty to offer, then, leaving its flight of five downward locks behind, the canal opens out into Loch Ness. We never did see Nessie – just a gigantic lizard-like thing which swam under the boat and seemed to slither into the depths below!

Other overnight stops in the canal were spent on the pontoons at the canal-side or just before and after lock gates. Here the crews are provided with hot showers and laundry rooms, often with a pub or restaurant nearby to help the evening along. Sadly the canal-keepers no longer have use of the pretty lock-keepers' cottages – all they have now are small wooden sheds. Most of the keepers work hard to keep their locks



A lock-keeper's shed

looking pretty, though the keeper of one lock told us that the damp weather made mowing the lock sides rather like painting the Forth Bridge – no sooner finished than it all had to be started again! Unlike the locks on the Crinan Canal, these are electrically operated. There are also plenty of swing and sliding bridges to pass through, so there's often a bit of waiting about and it's helpful to call up the lock and bridge keepers in advance.

Loch Dochfour brought us to the last stretch of canal, which took us down through the flight of four locks at Muirtown. We stopped just after this and had a couple of days at the Seaport Marina visiting Inverness and the local area, all rich in ancient Scottish heritage and essential warm socks, before taking

the Clachnaharry sea lock out into the North Sea for our passage south.

Chris controlling Gryphon II's stern in the Clachnaharry Sea Lock

