

Seeking summer

Whirlaway takes the long road to Scotland

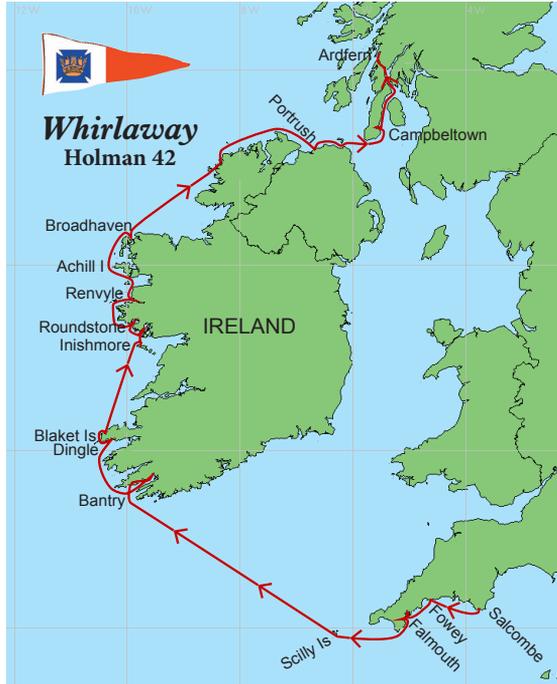
Jonno & Rosie Barrett

Awarded Juno's Cup

After our grand plans for Norway grounded on the reality of work, we set off for Scotland at the end of June, planning to add a bit of spice by going up the West Coast of Ireland. We had a bit of a Mission on the way and a grab bag of memories of years past.

It was a summer of *carpe diem* because tomorrow's weather generally looked iffy. We started with a nice sail to the Fal, followed by a couple of days hiding from the rain and wind at Mylor before we set off to Scilly and on west. The crew were Rosie, myself and a now boatless friend, John Ungley.

A night at sea, found us approaching Bantry Bay on an evening of gathering gloom and very low cloud. We were keen to get in having had the sort of passage that makes golf seem attractive: near gales, lumpy seas on the nose, rain, fog, all contrasting painfully with our sunny departure from



Tea Sound. But no light could we see. At last, about half a mile off, the Bere Island lighthouse loomed through the low cloud base and gave us the confidence to push on into Pipers Reach at Bearhaven, where things opened up a bit. We felt our way into Dunboy anchorage, using the now lit port-hand beacon for a handy back bearing. With an unlit rock in the bay, however, and a dark night, we were glad of the plotter.



Morning at Parknasilla

I have a love hate thing with our plotter. I hate it for stealing a good EP and the satisfaction of a landfall well made; but that night I felt love pure and simple as I welcomed my bunk. It had been a tiring sail.

At 51 years old, *Whirlaway* is the youngest of the team and has had a busy life, having been raced by her designer, Kim Holman, cruised in the Caribbean and for a time based in Corfu. She's a powerful boat, but despite being perhaps the least creaky of us all, our too-fast close reach had shaken her up a bit, so a yard was needed.

Morning revealed a rural anchorage under the ruins of the castle and big house. We set off for Lawrence Cove on Bere Island, very high on our list of favourite harbours. In no time *Whirlaway* was slipped and the magical Sean Murphy arrived to commune over wooden boat stuff. In a first hit of nostalgia I remembered visiting there 40 years ago in a leaking wooden boat on the way to Arctic waters. We weren't heading so far this time, though the chill breeze of this summer made you wonder.

We moved ashore, wondered about dinner, were told it was three miles to the hotel but to borrow the truck – and to have a good evening and not worry as there are no Garda on the island to interrupt our lurching drive home. The truck was extensively pre-dented.

Provisions are basic, but the island is proudly served by two ferries. One is handy for visiting Castletownbere with its excellent suppliers and good chandlery on the quay. Its very international fleet of large fishing boats gives it a cosmopolitan feel and we visited it twice. The second ferry provided a first class connection with a bus to get to Cork by 12 am – ideal for John as, sadly, he left us to go home.

We were sad to see him go, but Rosie and I looked forward to some gentle day sailing together, with perhaps the odd 'soft' day as we worked

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our way up the Irish coast.

As if.

With a building sou'westerly, we were glad of the shortcut through Dursley Sound. The swell rolled into what looked like a blind bay until the narrows eventually appeared, offering a sheltered way into the Kenmare River under the cable railway that connects the mainland with Dursley Island. As the swell and low cloud became worsen, we eschewed Derrynane and bore away for ten rapid miles up the bay to the Garnish Island anchorage at Sneem.

'The great thing about scuddy, damp, cold arrivals,' I said to Rosie, 'is when the morning is so different.' We've been married a while, so I knew to duck as I said it.

But in fact we woke to a sunlit scene, yachts anchored on their reflections with the hills behind, and we enjoyed a bit of make and mend. If there has to be a deck leak, why is it always directly over your head as you stand by the cooker?

After drifting and then motoring to Dingle, the Kenmare River was lovely. It was a shame to go past so many places, but we'll be back. Meanwhile, with more murky weather in prospect and a lot of Ireland left, we had a bit of catching up to do.

We needed time for *The Mission* in Connemara, or if not a mission, at least a lunch date. You need a bit of structure in any cruise, I always feel, so why not lunch?

Tourism has discovered Dingle, but it still offers good suppliers (especially Murphy's Ice Cream, making two Murphy's we like to consume). We sat out another wet Sou'wester in their helpful marina, glad to walk ashore in the rain.

If you'd wondered whether to sail clockwise or anticlockwise round Ireland, you needed only to see the exhaustion on the faces of a nice Finnish couple working their way south as they arrived from Shannon. If there'd been a bus on the quay they'd have been on it and gone.

Out west, Great Blasket Island provided a memorable if roly anchorage for the evening, with the most westerly islands of Europe towering with green slopes and abandoned white cottages above a seal filled bay. I wish we'd spent the night, but there was caution in the forecast again, so we slipped on to shelter



Anchored off Great Blasket

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on the mainland at Smerwick. It was dull but sheltered. We had a long day ahead: 70 miles to the Aran Islands in Galway Bay.

The sun, the reaching breezes and that eternal chill gave us time to reflect on the huge impression that the Cork and Kerry coasts had made. A warm welcome but with some challenges, among them finding a pub without a fiddler). But what a dramatic coast. From the sea, you can understand why folk tales tell of giants throwing rocks around and you glimpse the spirituality that inspires settling on Skellig Michael (named for St Michael, an unlikely enough place for the first M&S, but from little acorns...). It is a cornice rock five miles into the Atlantic. Why live on it?

For those of us from the Channel, there was richer wildlife too: Kenmare's Minke Whale and seals at Blasket were easily identified, but the range of seabirds had us reaching for the books.

On we reached, enjoying the first of some great long day sails that stay in the memory. This one led us to the Connemara gateway of Inismore in the belt of Aran Islands that form a breakwater in Galway Bay. Square topped like an aircraft carrier, the metaphor is cemented by frequent aircraft fetching and carrying day trippers in profusion to go biking, horse and carting, and walking from Kilronan to the memorable cliff top fort of Dun Aengus. The pretty cove of Portmurvy offered an easier jumping off point to get to Dun Aengus and beat the day trippers; but if you do oversleep, go anyway, it's spectacular.

After a whole day with no signal, digital life reappeared and we caught up with, well, everyone in the world I guess. Ireland had impressive phone coverage, which was very handy in a year of such volatile weather, but slightly undermines the 'sailing on the edge of the world' thing.

Seeking peace, we headed for South Connemara in a promised F3, but actually F6.

We found a terrific coast, with offshore skerries protecting inland harbours and offering interesting pilotage, coral strands and sheltered sailing. It's not unlike Brittany, but with only a handful of boats to be seen. We shot up to Kilkieran Cove, passing a red sailed Galway Hooker on the way to spend a quiet night at anchor under the somewhat aromatic seaweed factory. Then off again, inside the skerries and up to Cashel Bay where we watched their angling club weigh in - 680 lbs in one day from two rods - and enjoyed a couple of their catch. It brought memories of Irish holidays of my youth; cold, drizzly, grey and yet with childish excitement abounding. I was less rose tinted as we crawled out to shift anchorage in response to a middle of the night wind shift, but delighted in the morning as our oggling at the weigh in was reciprocated by a local boatman who brought damp holiday makers on a boat trip to see the yacht. We felt like proper gentry.

Careful pilotage was called for. With no helpful Breton beacons, one

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rock was as grey as another as we made our way to Roundstone. We approached past the red gaff sails of the baker's dozen of Galway Hookers enjoying their Regatta. It was nostalgic for us, and the more so as we saw the Curraghs racing, skin covered, six oared and going like smoke.

It was also nostalgic because, well, that was *The Mission*. In far off days, 1962 in fact, two families, the Barretts and the Widdakers, towed an Enterprise and discovered Connemara.

We stayed in a wonderful hotel at Renvyle in West Connemara and none of us have quite got over it all. Family sayings flow down the ages: 'and all for pleasure entirely' was one awestruck fisherman's response to our painted and varnished joy. And there are many more. 'I'm on the line and me Uncle's on the gun' is surely an excellent strategy for the racing fraternity. So the centrepiece of the summer was to be a reunion lunch



Galway Hooker



Jonno and John at Renvyle

at Renvyle. Waiting in Clifden were John Widdaker and his wife Lainey, ready to shed a tear. We bused over to meet them – it really wasn't a day to be sailing. Clifden still offers all the provisions and shops you'd need, though these days bright paint cuts through the grey and mist.

At Roundstone, John was delighted to find the Hookers assembled, recalling the highlight of a Hooker trip to offlying Inishbofin. As the south-westerly veered and moderated, we bashed round Slyne Head in a rising westerly, although a sunny one today, bearing away to a fast reach north as we finally made our westing.

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Rosie and Lainey

We shot past Clifden and Cleggan Bays with the high islands of Inishshark and Inishbofin to windward, shaded in the western sun. A goodly north-westerly swell pushed us into Ballynakill Bay. We were tempted by Inishboffin – we all like an island – but time and

The Mission said not, and I'm grateful for it. Running into the Bay with the swell behind us, we wound past the sheltering islets of Freaghillaun and headed to the wonderful anchorage of Fahy Bay, probably my favourite of the trip.

With Tully Mountain on one side, and the dramatic Twelve Bens behind, the Bay is picturesque in a Victorian way. Supplies are a problem, the best bet being a two mile dinghy run to LetterFrack, but we finally managed to sort a taxi to Renvyle (not a place to anchor off in a NW breeze) once we discovered that the bay is locally known as Ross.

At last the climax of *The Mission*.

We tear-stained travellers returned to the hotel of our memories, delighted to find the next generation of families inspecting our parents' signatures in the register and enjoying a jolly good dinner. It's the sort of grail that appeals these days.

Reaching past Renvyle towards Clare Island, we saw the only other yacht for a week. It was aiming for the natural Fiord of Killary Harbour (Oh, had we the time!) as we headed north again.

With the sun shining from an azure sky, twinkling blue seas and F5 on the quarter, we were attired in shorts and T-shirts - although on top of them another T-shirt, sweater, snug and oily top. Sunny perhaps, and in some ways reminiscent of the Trade Winds, but in Ireland you avoid all that tiresome warmth.

While I've grown into boats with cookers and so on, John and Lainey still do dinghy cruising, having taken their Ness Yoll all over the place. Living in Cumbria as well, they proved to be a hardy crew. Lainey had not felt great going round Slyne Head, but now she was in her element and grins became fixed all round. The first leg, forty odd miles of island strewn bay, was a joy as we flew across to the headland of Achill Island.

The huge cliffs cricked our necks as we rounded them. Apparently they are the highest cliffs in Europe. Then we tramped inside the skerries of

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Inishkea. Breezy enough and dead run enough to focus the mind, but the break from the swell was welcome as the evening drew in. The swell across Frenchport entrance was unwelcoming. We headed on past Eagle Island and gybed round Erris head to enjoy a flat water reach in a rising F6, which shot us across the last half dozen miles into Broadhaven. Here, with another dirty night in prospect, we were pleased to find a buoy. Not so pleased later on, as the buoy was just in the tide, so the wind over flood tide brought entertainment with fenders as we overrode the buoy. It also brought some reservations about the concept of activity holidays.

In the morning, the rain went through by mid-morning. We continued on again, chasing up the Irish coast to arrive under the shelter of Aran Island at two in the morning. We were surprised by the big swell as we rounded the north end of the island and it took us a while to get settled in the anchorage because we arrived at the same time as the last ferry from Burtonport. We found a nice anchorage close in off the slip, but with a biggish gale on the cards, shelter in two days time might be a problem, so we headed on, encouraged by the rain clearing as the tide started to set with us.

Although more or less irrelevant further south, as you approach the Bloody Foreland - the NW corner of Ireland - tidal streams will help or hinder quite significantly. We got it right leaving late morning, and with the wind free and a good tide beneath us, we sailed past



Sunset over Malin Head

Tory Island and on to Malin Head. As we passed, the tide turned, but still in our favour as the tide splits and the ebb runs east from Malin. On a dying breeze, casting off salt encrusted topmost layers (leaving only about five more) we enjoyed a beautiful pink and grey sunset behind, and arrived at Portrush in early dark. We touched on a shallow patch a few yards east of the leaders on the way in, but didn't stop until we moored to the pontoon on the wall. A railway announcer would no doubt style it 'Portrush for the Giant's Causeway' and with yet another 40kt forecast, a bit of tourism seemed in order.

Small, busy and welcoming, with a splendid new yacht club and showers, Portrush was a success. Apparently the ground swell is no fun in a south or south-westerly, when going up the Bann to Coleraine is the answer. It was fine for us in a westerly. Later on we were suitably awestruck by the footsteps of giants.

Suddenly we had time in hand, with four days to cover the next 70

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Whirlaway

odd miles directly up the Sound of Luing to Ardfern, but another goodly south-west blow was forecast with not many places to hide.

So we took the scenic route, carried by a spectacular tide along the North Coast of Ireland, making up to 11kts over the ground inside Rathlin

Island. We hit North Channel at slack water and shot round the Mull of Kintyre into the Clyde. It was another great reach, mostly in sunshine until the good old Scottish rain welcomed us to Campbeltown. Hiding from the weather with a distillery visit, we enjoyed Campbeltown's end of the line feeling, with its kindly people and incongruous, though closed for refurbishment, art deco cinema.

So far Scotland had provided the daytime rain we'd not seen since Roundstone, but that changed as we headed 'inland' through the Crinan Canal. The sun came out and the wind dropped. The four of us were kept busy. Our newly replaced fender socks were destroyed as the four of us locked our way through.



Jonno and Rosie

A welcome innovation was the provision of some 'hunky' (I'm assured) students spending the summer serving the locks. Less welcome was the increased charge! A too long lunch in a canal-side pub left us stuck at the canal's summit overnight.

And there, in that short evening calm before the midges arrive, we sat at a waterside picnic bench in T shirts and shorts. Just T shirts and shorts. And we felt warm(ish).

Arriving in Ardfern, the warmth of our welcome by the Pictish division of the RCC gave us an end of cruise memory that sent us home looking forward with relish to next year's plans.