

## ***Ellida's Northern Cruise***

Getting to know my new old boat

Donald Begg

*Awarded the Irish Cruising Club Decanter*

I acquired my new old boat, *Ellida*, at the close of the 2021 season. She is an S&S Swan 38, so no spring chicken, but she was built at a classic yard to a design known for its seakeeping and sailing ability. She replaces *Lydia*, my Bowman 48, so is smaller and less of an ocean gobbler. But, like *Lydia*, her heavy displacement and emphasis on stability put her on talking terms with Neptune. Importantly, she is handier for the marinas and anchorages of European coastal sailing than the big 48. During the winter she has had new electrics, electronics, sails and her mechanics have been pampered.

I felt the best way to get to know each other was to go to sea. I sailed from the Hamble on 18 April via Yarmouth to Weymouth then the usual juggle to get tide and wind right for Portland Bill. Onward to Dartmouth and Plymouth, always nostalgic for an old naval hand (do soldiers feel the same way about Aldershot?), then Falmouth and Newlyn. Fortune smiled, the sun shone, the wind was from the east, but a bit too much motor sailing for real satisfaction.

From Newlyn I rounded Land's End and had my first overnight to Kilmore Quay, County Louth. Conditions were good to begin with. There were numerous fishing boats in St George's Channel. As they were brightly lit and trawling at slow speed, the single hander's regime of catnap and lookout was workable.



## Ellida's Northern Cruise

By daylight the wind, thankfully from the south, was hitting 30 knots with steep seas, making for some uncomfortable moments whilst getting fenders and lines prepared before tackling the narrow approach channel to a small fishing harbour with limited manoeuvring space. It went well, the little marina was comfortable, the friendly welcome typically Irish, the Guinness was cool, and the wind whistled overhead. Passport? Nobody's bothered.

Coming out of Kilmore there was an unpleasant two mile motor into the wind, still gusting 30 knots, but once clear of St Patrick's Bridge I could turn my stern into the weather and had a cracking sail, 7 knots through the water under genoa alone, slaloming through the wretched plethora of double lobster pots, up inside the Irish equivalent of the Great Barrier Reef, to Arklow. Thence another downwind sail to Dun Laoghaire (Dunleary to you and me) outside Dublin, then on to the pretty little marina at Carlingford in Carlingford Lough.

Here's the rub. Carlingford is six miles up the lough and the streams run at up to 7 knots, so you need a favourable tide to get in or out (Strangford Lough just up the way is worse still). There are no anchorages outside the lough. So if you go out on the ebb, as you must, you are committed; you won't get back in for six hours and the next harbour is Ardglass, 25 miles further on. On the day of my departure the wind was whistling and williwaws were tumbling down the side of the hill. Predictwind said SE'ly 25 knots. But high water was 1400, and getting later every day, so I needed to get a move on or risk being stuck. Out I went, to be spat into the Irish Sea with a spring tide against 30 knots plus wind and horrible conditions. Luckily the wind and tide were with me once I was clear of the reefs, and the run to Ardglass was mercifully quick. A night in the well sheltered and charming marina assuaged morale.

The next day the wind had moderated to 20 knots and veered to the south. Tide was to turn in my favour for the North Channel in the early afternoon, so I sailed at midday, once again 7 knots through the water under genoa alone, came into Lady Bay in Loch Ewan, Stranraer at 2100, and dropped the pick for a night's sleep. An early start the next day got me past Ailsa Craig, into the Clyde, and comfortably berthed at Ardrossan marina by 1500, where I left the boat for a couple of weeks.

Our youngest daughter, Katie, joined me in Ardrossan. Delightful and helpful company she was too. My only criticism is that she is a vegetarian, and we all know that the aroma of frying bacon is an essential adjunct to sailing.

On a sunny (last for a while) 5 June we sailed up the Clyde to Loch Fyne and on to Ardrishaig, where we entered the first lock for the Crinan Canal, ready for an early start the next day. Seven and a half miles, I had said to myself, easily done in a day. As I'd little experience of locks I asked the lock master whether we would need a 'pilot'; he reassured us we didn't as the canal staff would look after us. And so it proved. From our start at 0800 we found charming and helpful people at all 15 locks. We had a lovely day of canal barging, arriving at Crinan just before the 1600 deadline, and were allowed to moor for the night in the sea lock.

## Donald Begg



Youngest daughter, Katie

the weather for the next few weeks was unrelentingly awful. That said, it was a terrific event, some good sailing, convivial company, wonderful scenery when we could see it and memorable experiences.

From Kerrera we sailed up to Loch Aline for a night at anchor, then up the Sound of Mull to Tobermory. Here, to my regret, Katie left the ship in order to return to London and work.

On my own, I sailed north round Ardnamurchan (entitling the boat to a sprig of heather at the bow?) on to Arisaig to join the other boats, through the intricate approach channel with much help from Bob Bradfield's Antares Charts. Thence to the marina at Mallaig, where I was joined by Job de Groot and Taco van der Dussen from the Netherlands, old and delightful sailing companions.

With Skye close to port we picked up a mooring at Doune for lunch, then crossed to Loch Na Dal, Skye for another mooring and an excellent dinner ashore at the Duisdale Hotel. Up at 0415 to catch a ferocious tide up Kyle Rhea, filthy weather through the Kyle of Lochalsh, and then a downwind sail to the fleet gathering at Plockton, drinks ashore and a good dinner at the hotel in congenial company. The next day the weather was so bad that trips ashore in my small dinghy lacked appeal, so we spent an entire day on the boat chatting, sampling Job's cooking and mixing the occasional gin and tonic. As Job and Taco reminded me, they are busy working lawyers and rather enjoyed the experience of idling away an entire day.

In the morning we had a good beat to windward from Plockton across to Raasay and up the Sound to an overnight mooring in Portree. After a fast beam

An early start at 0610 to ride the northbound tide. It was cloudy, but flat calm with good visibility, so we motored. This gave us a better feel for the surge of massive bodies of water beneath and around the keel as we shot the Dorus Mor and the Sound of Luing, with the dreaded Corryvreckan close to port, up the Firth of Lorn at 11 knots over the ground. In fact it was too fast, we were enjoying ourselves and didn't want to arrive unnecessarily early, so we anchored in Puilladobrain for a leisurely breakfast. Then on up to Kerrera marina, Oban where we berthed at 1230.

The best retrospective joke about the Scottish Meet is that we all loaded portable barbecues in anticipation of sunny beach parties. Dream on! The

## Ellida's Northern Cruise

reach in a 25 knot southeasterly across the Little Minch, approaching North Harris in half a mile visibility, we joined other boats in a charming anchorage at Eilean Thinnarstaig in Loch Claidh. Next day, flat calm, we motored up to Stornoway for fuel and a minor engine repair, the advantage of the flat water being that we saw several whales, a few dolphins, any number of puffins and one otter. Repair complete by early afternoon we re-joined the other boats at another delightful anchorage in Loch Mariveg. Our final day was an easy downwind sail to the marina at Stornoway for the meet's final dinner. The rally was impeccably orchestrated by Chris Elliot, Bob Bradfield and others. Job and Taco left the ship at Stornoway, their company to be much missed. Graham Stoddart-Stones joined me; we had last sailed together across the South Atlantic three years ago.

No peace for the wicked: on the morning after the RCC final dinner at Stornoway five of the RCC boats, and later a sixth agreed to continue northwards to the Faroes. The wind was fair, my plans for a quiet day of provisioning and recuperation were dashed, peer pressure bullied us to an ungentlemanly 0740 start. There was a big sea at the tidal confluence as we rounded the Butt of Lewis, with Cape Wrath (I think) just visible in the distance, easier conditions as we drew north past the desolate Sulsker Bank and Rhona. Indeed the wind was so fair that, by the following morning most of us were motor sailing. I say morning, in fact it never got darker than twilight. We completed the 210 miles to Suðuroy by 1800 on our second evening, visibility poor in the rain offshore, but brightening as we came into Vágur Bay. And brightening is the right expression, because the town

Festival in Vágur





## Donald Begg

looks lovely: the Faroese paint their houses in bright colours. The first impression is one of charm and orderliness.

My retrospective thoughts on the Faroes are mixed. We had some good sailing. The Rak downloadable tide tables were essential for coping with strong streams. The people are charming and welcoming. We sampled good and occasionally exotic, food. The scenery is spectacular. But overlying it all is the greyness and wetness of the weather, the temperature never above 13 or below 9 degrees. The people are busy, cheerful, in no way inhibited by their climate, the houses and vehicles are modern, there is no sign of poverty. The conviviality of a club meet is challenged by the fact that liquor is only sold in designated and infrequent stores, on our route Tórshavn was the only one.

We spent two days in Vágur, enjoying a Saturday of festival, high spirits, local costumes, rowing regattas, and a fireworks display. We then sailed to Sandur, a peaceful harbour and village which seems to serve as a dormitory for the capital Tórshavn two islands and a regular ferry away. The next day across to Hestur, our course requiring robust geometry against a ferocious tide stream. We had an eerie night at Hestur, a pretty and well protected harbour and village, with a good pontoon with electricity and water, but eerie



*Ellida in Hestur, 62 degrees north*

because we saw no human or lights in the village, nobody to charge us for our stay and electricity consumption, let alone to welcome us to a bustling hostelry.

Then on to the relative cosmopolitanism of Tórshavn where the RCC boats spent several congenial days with two well organised dinners and a fascinating (if pricey) bus tour and country hike. A minor disappointment: we saw no wildlife, although there must be lots of it around. Rally organisation by Henry Clay, who unfortunately was unable to come with us, and VC Tim Trafford was terrific.

## Ellida's Northern Cruise

The Faroes were barely affected by the original Covid pandemic. But now, we learned, there was some of it about. A yacht recently departing for Iceland had been struck. On the afternoon of our fourth day in Tórshavn, I felt distinctly unwell. Covid or flu, I don't know, but I had the disappointment of cancelling my attendance at a rally dinner in a Michelin starred local restaurant and confining myself to the ship. Graham had Covid a month before, so was anti-bodied up.

We had planned to sail the next morning, Sunday. But it was blowing old boots, and I did not feel well, so we stayed put. One advantage of participating in a convivial rally: Elspeth Gilmour passed the invalid a container of chicken soup, and Wendy Stewart one of chicken casserole. My thanks to both ladies of the lamp.

Wednesday we sailed at 0815. I felt much better once out in the clear sea air. We had a stiff breeze on the quarter, a hint of sunshine, two well reefed sails, and scooted across an unpleasantly lumpy sea. We completed the 185 miles to the Sound of Yell in 26 hours, not bad for the old girl. I had expected arrival to be in the evening, but as it happened we entered Yell at 1130 just as the stream was turning south, so decided to carry on the final 33 miles to Lerwick where we moored in the small boat harbour at 1630.

Lerwick is agreeable and friendly. We had a pleasant walk around the cliffs to nurture my improving health, enjoying the merest hint of better weather. Local politics are interesting. They consider themselves to be Shetlanders, not Scots, and fly their own version of the saltire, I'm not sure whether they feel affinity to England but their opinion of the SNP is unprintable.

With westerlies threatening to peter out, we sailed from Lerwick at 0700 on 9 July. We had 14 hours of good sailing in bright, if cool, weather before the wind dropped to 10 knots and we asked Mr Volvo to help keep up our speed. The desolate looking Kraken oil field went by to starboard, the Frigg field to port. At 1200 on our second day we sighted Utsira and at 1830 we berthed at the marina in Tananger in time for a good dinner at the (one) hotel. We had meant to keep sailing a little each day, but discovered that a lot of wind seems to cram into the Skagerrak. Whilst there, we saw more pink on the wind chart than anywhere else in Europe. So we spent three days at Tananger, sailed the 45 miles to Egersund, lovely passage through the narrow channel inside Eigerøy island, and stayed a further three days in Egersund. Both towns were colourful and friendly, but with little to see in either, although we did take a bus into Stavanger from one and a scenic train into Kristiansand from the other.

Sunday 17 July the wind dropped and we motored out into a flat calm. Off Farsund we were into the Skagerrak proper and were rewarded by a SW breeze, giving us 5 knots on a beam reach. We didn't want more than that, the distance to run was 128 miles which was too far to make in daylight, but we didn't want to arrive at Thyborøn in the middle of the night. The notable event being a thirty degree turn to stay clear of a tanker which showed no sign of having seen our lights or AIS. We berthed on the dock at Thyborøn at 0700.

## Donald Begg

I'm sure that Denmark possesses lovely spots and charming villages. Maybe they exist on the Baltic side, but we didn't see any on our way down the North Sea coast. Thyborøn is a busy offshore industry and fishing harbour, with a smattering of tourists coming for the beach and an interesting maritime warfare museum which majors on the battle of Jutland. Hvide Sande is more of the same without the museum. We didn't see Esbjerg proper because the unfinished marina, like a Costa hotel in the seventies, is well out of town.

The feature of note in these parts is the shallow water, a new experience for me, very *Riddle of the Sands*. From Thyborøn onwards we were sailing with 10-12m depth, in through the Horns Reef channel beside the huge wind farm which now adorns the reef, up the long Esbjerg approach channel where the wind over shallows produced an unpleasant sea, on down to the German border. The most wake-you-up navigation was the approach to Hornum, just in Germany. You pick up the buoyed channel, port hand buoys only because the channel is so narrow, a heart-in-mouth moment crossing the five metre bar in a following sea, then back north up to the town inside a line of breakers to the west. I took good note of the comment in the Cruising Almanac that 'in strong W'lies this coast is a formidable lee shore'.

Graham Stoddart-Stones left the ship in Hornum. An excellent seafood dinner crowned a month of impeccable crewmanship and good company.

On my own again, I enjoyed one of the best sails of the cruise so far, clear sky and a 15-20 knot westerly, down the Hornum channel. By now, almost indifferent to shallow water, I crossed the mouth of the Elbe through intricate but well buoyed channels, a spurt of engine to nip across the continuous traffic in the traffic separation scheme and into Jagdhafen at Cuxhaven, where I left *Ellida* for a short spell. I returned to the boat in Cuxhaven on 23 August, rested and hoping to get past the busy season for the German and Dutch marinas and coastal waters. I sailed at mid-morning on 24 August, just before the start of the westerly stream. Crossing the Elbe as soon as I could find a gap in the steamer traffic, like a hedgehog eyeing up his chances at the edge of the M1, up through the buoyed small ship channels north of the main thoroughfare. With little wind I motor sailed to the island of Heligoland. With returning wind I had a good sail to a crowded marina in Norderney, and then to Borkum. The notable feature was lots of shallow patches, but generally good buoyage. There are pros and cons to single handed sailing. I enjoy the challenge and the independence. But high on the list of cons is the gymnastics required to lower (or hoist) a mainsail on an old fashioned at mast boat in a short sharp sea over shallow water.

27 August I sailed from Borkum into Dutch waters, searching for the buoyed inner channel along the coast, the start of which is separated from the main Borkum channel by about 200 yards. Depths in the inner channel are shown as seven or eight metres on the Navionics chart. I'll hop across, I thought. Suddenly I was in steep overfalls with the depth down to three metres, a bit closer to LW and I'd have

## Ellida's Northern Cruise

been aground. Luckily I was through it quickly, but it was hairy; the clear lesson being you can't count on charted depths in areas where the sand shifts. I then had a pleasant sail to the entrance channel for Lauwersoog and shallow water again. The well buoyed channel was clearly a good 100 yards from where it was shown on Navionics, so I put my trust in the buoyage. Suddenly, I had around 100 yards of very unpleasant overfalls as the wind met the outcoming tide of the river. The boat and I were well shaken. This was despite a depth of 10 metres, which in these parts is like the Mariana Trench. Then, bliss, a lovely sail up the river to Lauwersoog, in through the Robbengatsluis (first of many) into Noordegat marina. Standing Mast Routes (SMR) are designated routes through the Netherlands where the canal bridges will lift, more or less on demand, to allow sailing yachts to make their



Leeuwarden

passage. It took me seven days to cruise from north to south, a delightful experience blessed by sunny weather.

The first two days took me 40 miles through the Friesland countryside from Lauwersoog to Harlingen with an overnight stay in Leeuwarden, both charming towns. The northern canals 'guarantee' a minimum depth of 1.95m, inadequate for my 2m draught, but the local advice that I could make it was right. The only times I touched the soft muddy bottom was

during one or two of my attempts to moor at the bank, and it was easy to reverse out. These northern parts are an interface of sailing and farming. I doubt whether *Ellida's* engine has ever inhaled so much methane. The staff at the bridges are alert, you get a lifting bridge and a green light shortly after they see you, and through you go. If need be, the VHF channel is shown at each bridge and English is spoken (it's also spoken when the bridgemaister thinks you are dallying and wants you to get a wiggle on).

From Harlingen there is a 10 mile sea passage, with a buoyed channel and four metre depth, then the Kornwederzand bridge and lock into the IJsselmeer. The



## Donald Begg

lock was cheerfully busy with ten or so yachts bustling to go through at the same time. Cue for two policemen to spot my ensign and politely ask for my passport and ship's papers, no hurry, finish tying that rope first, we can see that you're on your own and busy, but we have a job to do. Much amusement and some moral support among the other yachts. In compensation, I had a lovely sail for the remaining 18 miles to Medemblik.

The next day the ten miles to the lock into the Markermeer was followed by a further 29 mile sail to Marina Amsterdam. As I approached Amsterdam my new cockpit B&G chart plotter failed. It had been misbehaving, cured by switching it off and on, this time it wasn't coming back had somehow taken my old wind/log/depth instruments with it, all especially essential in shallow water navigation. This meant an unscheduled extra day in Amsterdam where I was lucky to find an electrician who could get the instruments running again. Although from now on I only had a chart plotter down at the navigator's desk necessitating much hopping up and down from cockpit to chart table. Who needs a gym?

I was joined in Amsterdam by Taco van der Dussen, last seen in Stornoway. It was delightful to have a skilled crew member with whom to share the unadulterated fun of the next 24 hours.

The famous (as I now know) midnight convoy is a means of getting all yachts transiting either north or south through the numerous Amsterdam bridges in one go. We were six boats gathered in the Houthaven at 2330 and were given the first of a series of green lights at 0030, passing through the sleeping (mostly) city, mooring at 0330 just before the A9 motorway bridge near Schipol. Up at 0730 for the opening of the bridge and on for a long day through the lovely countryside, past Gouda, Rotterdam on to charming Dordrecht where we moored in the Marteensgat marina at 1840. The only worry was that we were very low on diesel and, being Sunday, there were no fuel stations open on the canal. But we made it with a few litres to spare, 81km 33 bridges and two locks in 24 hours. Dinner in Dordrecht with Taco and old crew member Bart Nieuwenhuizen, then I was on my own again.

Marteensgat marina to the Dordrecht bridge is about a mile, the lifting bridge is on the left of the fairway, then another mile to the junction with the busy Dordtse Kil shipping channel to port. I stayed on the left, to be on the inside of the fairway. I could see a big barge coming up the Kil, and slowed down so as to slip to shoreward and then behind it. Suddenly a police launch stormed up alongside me,



Taco van der Dussen

## Ellida's Northern Cruise

the skipper shouting that I was on the wrong side of the channel and commenting volubly on my ancestry. He told me to fall in behind him, which I did, thinking that I was being escorted to penitentiary. In fact he and I slipped behind the barge, then he led me across to the right of the Kil, the way I had been planning to go, and sent me on my way, with a gasp of relief and an unreciprocated friendly wave from me. I muttered *soto voce* that I'd had a bridge watchkeeping ticket before that skipper was born, but one doesn't argue with policemen.

It was 20 miles to a comfortable night at the excellent Sint Annaland marina, then the next day a further 20, nice sailing in a 15 knot southerly, through the Zeeland bridge, overnighting in Roompot marina.

Once through the Roompot lock it was out into salt water again, rough, tidal, breezy with occasional thunderstorms. I had a good 39 mile sail to Zeebrugge, waited for 30 minutes while Port Control slotted me in through shipping traffic, into the rather stark marina. I waited for two days while fresh westerlies passed overhead, the monotony relieved by a train ride to lovely Bruges.

The Queen died and I wore my ensign two thirds of the way up the topping lift. I'm not sure of the etiquette, but it conveyed my thoughts.



After Zeebrugge it was a 40 mile sail to Dunkerque, with an expensive taxi ride to passport control for an exit stamp. Next day 41 miles to Dover and the usual fun of dodging across the Traffic Separation Scheme. Two further days' sailing got me 65 miles to Brighton, then a further 65 miles to the Hamble. I crossed my outbound track at 1425 on 13 September.

What a summer cruise. My thanks to the people who provided such good company at various points.

The initial object of the cruise was for old boat and new owner to get to know each other. This was accomplished. I would be flattered if I thought that the boat had as much respect for me as I have for her.

Skipper and boat now well acquainted