

Fish 'n' ships in the Irish Sea

Oban to Whitehaven

Adam Bridger



Pastime had spent the summer cruising the west coast of Scotland and the Outer Hebrides. She was left securely moored in Kerrera marina, Oban. Our cruise was to take her to her winter berth in Whitehaven, Cumbria.

However, the first challenge was to reach Oban on 19 August by public transport during a rail strike. Bracing myself for a grim six hours' journey, I caught the 0200 Megabus from central Leeds to Glasgow. The bus was full of people slumped over trying to get some sleep as many of them had

started their journey in London. The bus had a toilet, but you would have had to be desperate to use it.

The onward bus from Glasgow to Oban was a positive pleasure as its 96 mile route follows the banks of Loch Lomond, through The Trossachs National Park, pressing on to Crianlarich before heading towards Loch Linnhe. Regular users clearly expect to have a good chat on the way. One chap who sat next to me said he took the buses from Perth to Oban just to go shopping and have a day out.

After 12 hours of travel, I arrived at Oban and took the ferry to Kerrera marina where I cast off *Pastime* from her mooring and motored over to the



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The Happy Crew

North Pier pontoons in Oban. Many friendly hands helped me berth in the midst of the inevitably badly timed rain squall.

My crew of Frank, Alasdair and Chris arrived over the next 24 hours having each devised their own way of beating the rail strike. We have had an annual cruise for many

years and make a happy crew. On Sunday 21 August we were all present, fully provisioned and ready to set sail.

After a beat down the sound of Kerrera we found ourselves beam reaching in a westerly F4 and with the tide beneath us flew through the Sound of Luing, past Corryvreckan and down the Sound of Jura. The day was an absolute delight, bright sunshine, a sparkling sea and a fresh breeze. Less delightful however was the number of dead seabirds especially gannets floating in the water, victims we suspect of avian flu.

The wind died with the daylight and we anchored in Drumyeon Bay on the East side of Gigha. There is a perfect little inlet in the bay just inside Ardminish Point, very pretty with purple heather and yellow lichen on the rocks.

Monday had a forecast of F5 easterlies and the sea turned rough as we headed for Rathlin Island on the north eastern tip of Ireland. Poor Frank is usually sick at some point of our annual cruise, and this was his time. We put him below knowing he'd bounce back.

Another inevitable fact of cruising life is that ship encounters will occur at the most awkward time, in this case we had to avoid a west bound container ship in a rough cross sea, F5 winds and the Traffic Separation Scheme to factor in.

We rounded the western end of the island to avoid the worst of the overfalls. We were extremely glad to enter the shelter of Church Bay on the south of the island and enjoyed a short beat up into Rathlin harbour. I had wanted to visit Rathlin for some time and it did not disappoint.

We had an effusive welcome from Charlie the harbour mistress who took our lines and invited us to stay as long as we liked. The harbour was uncrowded and inexpensive. Charlie pointed out the fish and chip van, the shower block, small shop and the pub, which also didn't disappoint.

With strong tidal flows of four knots or more in this area, one must get the timing right but why does catching the tide always seem to require a predawn

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departure in a rain squall? The squall passed, and the dawn light accentuated the towering basalt pillars of the cliffs of the Irish coast. The tide helped the light northerly winds push us down the east coast and as the tide started to turn against us, we pulled into Red Bay to anchor and catch up on breakfast and sleep.

As we motored into the gently shallowing bay, with the engine on tick over and prepared to drop anchor, the Teleflex gear lever failed. We were stuck in forward gear and low revs. We spent an hour going round in circles at tick over speed.

Frank did a degree in chemical engineering, so he is the nearest thing we have to a mechanic. Using my leadership skills, I asked Frank to strip down and repair the mechanism. So, as we slowly pirouetted in Red Bay for an hour Frank and Alisdair fixed the fault and we were able to drop the hook and finally take a rest. Thank goodness it did not happen in a busy marina in a predawn rain squall.

Pastime in Rathlin Harbour



When the tide turned once again in our favour, we upped anchor and continued south in the F3-4 northerly to our anchorage at Copeland Island, just outside Belfast Lough.

Chapel Bay was well sheltered from the northerly winds, but we suffered from a southerly swell that must have been generated much further south. It was not pleasant, but with no better option we had to put up with it and personally, I did not struggle to sleep.

Tuesday, predawn - and facing another vicious rain squall - we headed south again needing to reach Strangford Lough by noon to enter with the flood tide.

The entrance to the Lough is 5nm long and at its narrowest a third of a nm wide. It's a thrilling ride as the tide rushes you up the channel into the Lough. Its surging water pushes you this way and that but then you are through and into the peace of Strangford Lough.

The pilot says the Lough is a flooded glacial moraine and is full of islets and rocks both above and below water. However, with care, navigation is not difficult.

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The islands and surrounding countryside's low hills are a soft green and the Mountains of Mourne can be seen to the South. We spent two restful days exploring the Lough dawdling along usually under jib alone, sunbathing and enjoying the view

A sign on the pontoon near Killyleagh says the pontoon is for sailing club members only but the members there helped us moor up and unlocked the access gate for us so we could get necessary supplies in the small town. 'No trouble at all' was the byword.

That evening we picked up a visitor mooring at the Strangford Lough Yacht Club. Sadly, it was too late to dinghy to the yacht club for refreshments but we did enjoy a striking sunset back-lighting the moored yachts.



Alasdair always brings his fishing rod and tackle on our trips, but I tease him that he never catches anything. He insists it is because we never sail where the fish are. So, we challenged him to take us where the fish would be and see if he could catch anything. So on his instructions we drifted over rocks where the tidal currents flow fast by the lough entrance and sure enough, he caught two mackerel, a pollock and a codling. We enjoyed a brilliant fish curry at anchor in a bay out of the tide at the lough entrance.

The Pilot warns of rough waters over the bar at the entrance to the lough; it is dangerous to try to leave during strong onshore winds. We were forecast light offshore winds and, as suggested, we took the last hour of the ebb which, naturally meant leaving in the predawn darkness.

Trying to follow the channel marker lights whilst being sluiced out of the lough at 5 knots was interesting and took total concentration from all the crew. The boat's heading and bearing were rarely remotely similar.

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We were washed out to the bar and my goodness the waves were huge. In the darkness and turbulent water, it was hard to see from where the next wave was coming from. *Pastime* is such a good sea boat I never had any doubt about our safety, at least that is what I told the crew who were tucked under the spray hood with only the white of their eyes showing. The bar was dramatic enough in these benign conditions. In a strong onshore wind it would be truly horrendous.

After 20 minutes we were relieved to be in calm waters and light westerly breezes as we headed east to Peel on the Isle of Man. Peel harbour has access four hours either side of HW so we had to maintain a steady 5 knots under motor to cover the 34nm in reasonable time. But when a breeze picked up, we sailed for some time at 3 knots just to enjoy the peace.

It was while under sail midway between Ireland and Peel that we had a most extraordinary marine encounter.

Frank was on the helm when there was a sudden huge splash from the stern. I thought something had fallen overboard but another splash had all the crew looking over the transom only to find we were being followed by two massive fish. We debated what they could be at over six feet long, not a dolphin, not a shark. They were interested in nibbling our rudder, slowly approaching, then suddenly veering off at an angle. Then we could see from their profile that they were tuna.

There was some debate as to whether tuna could be found in the Irish Sea, but I remember that when I was much younger I knew a lady who during the late 1920s had gone sport fishing for tuna out of Scarborough. She even had a photograph of her standing next to her catch which towered over her.

We later identified them as Atlantic blue fin tuna and reported the sighting to a unit at Exeter University who are monitoring the tuna numbers in British and Atlantic waters. A magnificent sight, they followed us for at least half an hour.

Peel, Isle of Man



We reached the Isle of Man that afternoon. Chris who is a great crew member, has only recently returned to mainland life after spending years working at Douglas Hospital so he was able to show us around the town and surrounding hills. I liked Peel very much; the harbour has a healthy small boat fishing fleet as well as a yachts' marina and the

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two seem to coexist happily. It feels like an old Cornish fishing village that has not been over developed.

The Peel Fisherman's Association chandlery was an Aladdin's cave of serious shackles, ropes, Guy Cotton yellow oilskins and not a piece of Musto, Barton or Helly Hansen kit in sight. Two old salts with mugs of tea were sitting chatting by the counter, ready to take your sale and write out your receipt in long hand.

After the sea lock opened at 1100 we sailed around the southern tip of the island which became quite exciting as we surfed through the gap between the Isle of Man and the Calf of Man. To our surprise an onlooker had at once posted on Facebook a picture of us coming through the tidal race.

Large dolphins were hunting in the tidal streams here. No playing on the bow wave today, they were doing some serious fishing.

We intended to spend the next night at Douglas, but it was a long sail around the island from Peel and in the light offshore NW winds, ideal for anchoring, we settled for Laxey Bay 5nm north of Douglas. We were the only boat there, with clear water over a sandy bottom we used plenty of chain and settled down for a peaceful evening looking at an incredible palette of blues in the sky and on the sea.



The next day I gave the crew a break and made it just a dawn start with 35nm to make Whitehaven, another tidal entrance, albeit a generous four hours either side of HW.

During the morning an intermittent electrical fault which had been affecting the services' 12 volt circuit became a permanent fault. Sadly, it could not be resolved by a chemical engineer, so no GPS, speed or depth. Heavens above, we had to use paper charts at the end of one of the most satisfying and enjoyable cruises I have had. Great company, new destinations and fair weather, with challenges overcome and a unique tuna encounter.

Atlantic blue fin tuna

