

A Taste of Retirement

Cruising Western Scotland

James and Jane Eaton

Sailing, with no time constraints or fixed agenda, is not something we are familiar with. But newly retired, having no job demands and endless emails to return to, it was a novelty that my wife Jane and I were looking forward to. She is sensible enough to let others do the hard miles, so having retired in mid-June, and with plans for a summer of carefree sailing, my son Will and I set off from Plymouth for a nonstop delivery trip to Largs in *Wild Goose*, our 1999 built Oyster 485.

Over the winter I had continued to upgrade or add to aspects of her and, with longer distance cruising in mind, had put on a Spectra water maker and a Hydrovane to reduce reliance on electricity. With the boat ready and the dream of a broad reach up the Irish Sea

under asymmetric Will and I set off. The dream was scuppered by northerly winds (which was the case for most of the next couple of months) but, despite beating we had a quick sail (three and half days) to Largs yacht haven. Will immediately left to join the RCC cadet cruise in Norway and then onwards to join Will Whatley (RCC) in Iceland on *Henry*. Meanwhile Jane took the swifter route from Southampton with our daughter, Sophie, leaving in a sunny 24 degrees and landing in a cool, breezy 14 degrees.

With the little or no signal on our phones evaporating as we left the mainland, the world of Westminster politics and the machinations around the prime minister's future were quickly set aside for our own adventures.

The first few days saw us stopping at Lamlash on Arran, then onwards to Tarbert in Loch Fyne. The first day was overcast but pleasant sailing in light winds and flat seas. After picking up a mooring buoy at Lamlash we strolled along the seafront enjoying the simple charms of a Scottish summer holiday town.



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The next day we set off into a grey, calm sea but as we headed NNW towards Lower Loch Fyne, the wind picked up and a varying 15 - 24kts stayed with us for most of the voyage with occasional lulls. The sun put in a brief appearance, warming our backs from on high but around and beyond us increasing murk and drizzle. Opting to go to Tarbert, rather than pushing on in the drizzle, we entered the narrow channel and headed into the marina.

From Tarbert, the plan was to transit the Crinan Canal in one day and, as we had never navigated the canal before, we had secured the services of a pilot. We entered the first sea lock from the transit pontoon with another yacht not much smaller than ours. It was very tight as a result and, although we were on quite friendly terms as we entered the lock, the other skipper was decidedly frosty later as our first attempts at controlling *Wild Goose* in the filling lock involved a lot of surging and some strong bow thruster action. Not our finest moment but in our defence we were novices in going through canal locks. We motored gently along admiring our sunny, green surroundings and met up with our pilot at Craighaan. Having made slow progress due to various delays we decided to stop overnight and spent a leisurely afternoon trying out my new boat accessory, a Brompton bike (a retirement gift), on the canal path.



The next morning we were joined by Jenny, the canal's first lady lock keeper. We set off and made swift progress through the locks. After a good morning's exercise, Jenny left us after lock 13 and we were on our own again for the final few locks down to Crinan. The canal grew narrower and more overgrown as we weaved our way through the last stages, with just a little rumble as we scraped along the canal bottom when passing another yacht. We burst out into the wide calm sea with two other yachts and waved

James & Sophie ease *Wild Goose* through the Crinan Canal

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goodbye to the canal. We headed to Loch Craignish, motoring in the sunshine and dropped anchor at Eilean nan Gabhar (Rabbit Island) to catch our breath and have a snooze in the afternoon sunshine. It had been the hottest day of summer so far in Scotland.

Our next 'excitement' was to navigate the waters out to the north. Being a somewhat nervous sailor with a lively imagination, Jane must have asked me 20 times whether I had checked the forecast, the tide tables, the tidal streams, the charts, as she had read with considerable consternation the perils that awaited us on our likely passage through Dorus Mor and up through the Sound of Luing. Imagining vicious, heart pounding overfalls, she was relieved to sail gently through on a run under the jib with a favourable tide, with only a hint of the boiling mischief that lurked beneath. We made great progress and arrived at Puilladobhrain without drama. We took the footpath to the Tigh An Truish pub with live folk music and admired the Bridge over the Atlantic. From Puilladobhrain, we set sail for Loch Spelve on Mull where we were meeting up for a picnic with friends who were on their annual holiday. We anchored near the Inverlussa mussel farm and procured two very large bags of mussels and, with the ingredients for moules marinière aboard, supper and lunch the next day were sorted.

Our final port for this leg of the cruise was Kerrera Marina where we were leaving *Wild Goose* whilst we briefly returned home for a week, for a family occasion and my retirement party. As anyone who visited Kerrera Marina this summer knows we found a warm welcome and a rather endearing little chihuahua called Chi Chi. We also met up with the Chavasses (RCC), waiting for spares.

A week later, having topped up on sunshine in the heatwave that most of the UK was experiencing, Jane and I returned to Kerrera, to sail for a further three weeks together.

I had long wanted to cruise around western Scotland but holidays whilst working never really allowed for the time needed. At last we were aiming for the Outer Hebrides via the Small Isles. We planned to drop Jane on Barra in mid-August to catch the small plane back to Glasgow from its beach runway. From there I would head back to Plymouth on a solo passage that I was much looking forward to.

After taking on fuel at Kerrera we set off for Tobermory. Whilst there, we got a message from friends suggesting we meet in Arisaig. As the Small Isles were looking a little uncomfortable for the next few windy days, we decided to join them. An early departure seemed sensible to avoid the rain and strong winds forecast for later. It was a settled broad reach and a flat sea but increasing winds meant that as we rounded Ardnamurchan Point we were in 20-27kt winds requiring a second reef. It was a quick sail and we only anchored for a short while at 'The Waiting Room' waiting for the tide to rise a little further so we could cross the shallow bar into the main Arisaig harbour. The rain lashed down as we picked up a mooring. After a reviving snooze we joined our friends for drinks on their Moody 42.

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We woke to relentless rain but not the strong winds forecast. We went ashore to join the Corfields for coffee and after a quick visit to the little museum set off on a walk on the single track road out of the village along the coast. By the time we returned it was nearly 1500 and the pub seemed a good place to dry off. We were lucky to be in time for the talented local ceilidh group who meet there every Sunday, which proved a very satisfactory way to while away the afternoon. We all went to bed feeling that although it had not been a sailing day it had been one well spent.

The next day dawned and it was clear that we would not be heading out to sea with winds gusting 28kts in the harbour. The Corfields messaged to propose a day trip to the Commando memorial at Spean Bridge, a train ride away, where Lindsay's father's ashes were scattered. We caught the train from Arisaig then made our way up the hill to the memorial. The same route brave recruits had marched, at pace, the eight miles to Achnacarry

to the sound of bagpipes during their commando training. We followed a lovely footpath back down the river to Spean Bridge through the trees where Tim enthusiastically collected a big bag of chanterelles to fry up for supper.

Once the wind had blown through we headed off to the Small Isles managing to catch some very fine mackerel for lunch on the way. The next few days saw us visit Muck, Eigg and Canna. The sun was shining and we spent a couple of peaceful days exploring the islands relishing James' retirement. Canna with its timeless simplicity is a gem not to be missed. It was so beautiful with its cloudless sky and intense colours that we felt it must be one of the most beautiful spots in the world and decided to enjoy its delights for another night. The harbour was full of life: barking seals lounging on the shore right by the boat and, to my amazement, another mysterious large whale like creature that breached five or so times in the middle of the harbour. Black, bigger than a dolphin with a white underbelly - might it have been a juvenile orca?

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Anchored off Canna, 'a gem not to be missed'!

One evening we ate outside at the wonderful Canna Café but wish we had known to call ahead to order the seafood platter. It looked sensational - next time.

As the forecast for the next day predicted strong winds from around lunch time lasting through the night, we set sail early for Loch Dunvegan on Skye which allowed us plenty of fair tide and not too much wind from the south. Our timing was pretty good but the last hour from Neist point into the Loch saw the wind rising quickly to around 25-30kts. Arriving in Dunvegan, just past the pier we found a spare visitor mooring. Ashore were several cafés, shops, an art gallery and a quirky little museum about Giant Angus MacAskill run by an entertaining elderly

Alongside the pontoon at Lochmaddy



eccentric, snuff toting descendant. His son, Danny, is a well-known extreme mountain biker. Crazy must run in the family and meeting him was worth the £2 entry fee alone.

Next morning, after strong gusts of wind all night, our mooring buoy was rather closer to its neighbour and it seemed we had dragged by some 10m during the night. We set off around noon

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for Lochmaddy on North Uist into a certain amount of drizzle, light winds and flat seas and kept ourselves entertained with a bit of puffin spotting on the way. The Calmac ferry loomed large next to the pontoons as it unloaded its passengers demonstrating very skillful pilotage in such a small space. The marina facilities are currently a building site but despite this the unpromising showers in a portacabin proved wonderfully hot and drenching and the laundry facilities were good. Supper in the Lochmaddy Hotel which, rather like the showers was not much of a looker, offered scallop and black pudding pizza. Not surprisingly, it had to be tried, and was delicious.

Loch Finsbay, Loch Stockinish and Scalpay, anchorages for our next few nights, before heading into East Tarbert on South Harris for the night of hotel luxury which I had promised Jane as a mid-holiday treat. Scalpay proved a memorable



Let the feast begin

day not for sailing adventures but for seafood. The one, rather highly rated bistro was fully booked, so we decided to try and get hold of some local seafood. A small fishing boat appeared at the end of the pier and after chatting about the ways of the world with one of the fishermen he spoke in Gaelic with his colleague and hauled up a big plastic bag from the boat. It was full of around 5kg of langoustines they had just picked up. Fresh as fresh can be, given with a smile and any notion of payment refused. We feasted like kings on langoustines for lunch and supper, sharing our good fortune with our pontoon neighbours.

During our night in Scalpay the wind, as forecast, picked up which made getting onto the pontoon in East Tarbert a little challenging. The Harris Hotel is only a five minute walk up the hill out of town and, after packing an overnight bag, we checked in for a hot bath. This was followed by a very decent meal and, of course it would have been remiss not to try a whisky from the extensive selection in the bar before retiring to a very comfortable bed.

Revived, we wanted to explore a bit of Harris on foot and see the beautiful white beaches on the West coast. With limited options we decided to take the local minibus to Leverburgh. On a sailing holiday exploring more than 200m inshore always feels like an adventure. With the help of the driver we made a plan for the day. We alighted at the Horgabost campsite so that we could walk along the beaches and headland and catch the bus back in the afternoon. We enjoyed the

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spectacular beaches, views across to Tarensay, seeing the Macleod Standing Stone and had a delicious lunch at the café overlooking Nisabost beach in the sunshine.

We planned to meet up with the Corfields the next day at Eilean Thinnigarstaigh in Loch Claidh (Lewis), an anchorage highlighted by Bob Bradfield as one of his favourites. To our great surprise we spotted on AIS that the Wills (Whatley and Eaton) and their friend Mike on *Henry* were also making a beeline for it. A complete coincidence that could not have been better planned if we had tried. What a lovely reunion and a belated birthday celebration for Will. All of us on the wonderful *Henry* for drinks followed by *Wild Goose* with salmon and brownies provided by Lindsay and local smoked salmon and sea bass by us. The boys on *Henry* were very appreciative. It was a lovely mini meet and we were so pleased to catch up with their adventures.

Mini meet in Loch Claidh



Jane beside the Macleod Standing Stone



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Next day, everyone left the anchorage to go their separate ways. We planned a long day's sail to Loch Boisdale as there was more heavy wind expected and we needed to be tucked up for a night or two. We had a good, long sail with the wind from the WSW, and said goodbye to *Henry* on the radio as we turned in towards Loch Boisdale and they carried on to Barra or beyond. We had heard that Boisdale did not have much to recommend it and so were only mildly dismayed to find a very functional marina, surrounded by a tall grey breakwater with the village some distance away. But it was a safe haven with two other RCC yachts already there. Drinks on board Charlie Smallwood's (RCC) boat joined by Lorne Byatt (RCC) on his new boat *Freya* and his three crew, it made a very jolly gathering.

It was looking increasingly unlikely that the weather would be settled enough to explore the islands further south on this trip which was very disappointing. The wind had set in as predicted, and we decided, on the spur of the moment, to hop on the bus to Eriskay and the Am Politician pub - at least we could say we had been there. There really is something quite heartwarming about taking a bus in the Outer Hebrides; once again the friendly bus driver combined the role of tour guide and tourist information and even dropped us back at the marina so we avoided a rather long walk. Drinks with Lorne Byatt and his two new crew mates, son Douglas (RCC) and Fred on board *Wild Goose*.

Finally, abandoning our plan to drop Jane at Barra, we set off for Canna with our new plan to return to Kerrera for the start of Jane's journey home. We had a much better sail than anticipated beating into 15-22 kts from SSW with boat speeds above 7kts with the wind picking up a bit as we rounded the south side. We picked up a visitor mooring, next to the seals who 'wooed' and called to each other in their slightly eerie way as we went ashore for supper at the Canna Cafe.

Leaving Canna we had a long and very unpleasant sail over seven hours - beating into confused seas, mostly 18-22kts, drizzle and a lot of water breaking on the decks. We finally made it into Tobermory, picking up a visitor mooring at around 1645 having left Canna at 0930.

In the morning, refreshed and invigorated and with fair weather in the forecast we went ashore and said hello to Bob Bradfield (RCC) whose boat *Osprey* we had spotted in the marina. So nice to meet him and his family as his charts had been our companion and guide on the whole trip, as well as having friends in common.

Our final night at anchor was on Loch Aline. It was a beautiful, still, glassy evening on the loch with the mountains of Mull reflecting on the water as the sun went down. A perfect evening to end on. On our final morning together we motored back out across the loch with a flock of geese, perfectly reflected, flying low over the water. It was mesmerising. We had a good sail to end our shared holiday beating on a smooth sea with the views up Loch Lorne and lots of boats and ferries out and about in the sunshine. Back in Kerrera, Jane packed up and we went to Oban to buy supplies for my passage back to Plymouth. Although, I planned to do this in day sails there would be little opportunities to shop.

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With a mix of sadness and excitement, I waved Jane off on her return home on 11 August and set off for the return trip. With a combination of light to no wind I half sailed and half motored heading for the Black Isles. It is a tight anchorage and there were two boats already anchored. Fortunately they headed out and I took the prime spot before anyone else arrived. It's a beautiful, secluded spot in settled weather and I climbed the hill to admire the scenery.



Tight anchorage of Black Isles

From there my route was to Ardminish on Gigha, the Copeland Islands just outside Belfast Lough, Port St Mary (Isle of Man), Holyhead, Milford Haven, Helford River and finally Plymouth. This was a mix of short and very long day sails, the longest being 25 hours, and took eight days in weather that varied from glorious to filthy.

Apart from the new water maker which ceased working after the first minute, we had around 1,600 nm of trouble free sailing exploring extraordinarily beautiful places and had the happy carefree days we hoped for. There is so much more to explore, and we will return. With plenty of spare time now, we are already getting ready for further afield in 2023.