

Lucy and Mark Johnston

A map of Mull and surrounding areas in Scotland, showing a red line route for the Sparkler Rustler 31. The route starts at Tobermory, goes to Gometra, Benderan, Tinker's Hole, Pulladobhrain, Loch Melfort, Pig Bay, Queen's Bay, and ends at Colonsay. The map also shows Mull, Jura, and the Sound of Mull. A red flag with a blue cross and white saltire is in the top right corner.

Of course, the first thing we did on securing some additional leave this summer was to race out, ambitiously, and buy the Clyde Cruising Club *Outer Hebrides and Ardnamurchan to Cape Wrath* guides, it was perhaps inevitable that our trusty *Mull of Kintyre to Ardnamurchan* would turn out, again, to be absolutely adequate for our needs.

We bought *Sparkler*, a 1966 Rustler 31, in 2018; since when our plans for a longer voyage have been frustrated, first by

a new baby and then Covid. This year we resolved to do better. Things started to fall into place: Mark's work was very understanding, then we managed to get *Sparkler* north of the Mull of Kintyre in early June, glad of the added impetus of the Platinum Jubilee Mini Meet on Jura. This left us in a fine position on a mooring in Loch Melfort, generously loaned by David Wilkie (RCC), ready for the 'Big Cruise'.

Cruising for more than a long weekend as a family was new to all of us and we were very aware that most of the sailing we had done with children was on sail training vessels. We did begin to wonder whether we had overdone the training element when Sophie produced her own set of nautical qualifications for *Sparkler*, including a series of RYA equivalent levels for our three crew, Sophie (12), Pippa (10) and Malcolm (3), ranging from 'Ship's baby' up to '1st Mate', with skills relevant for each level such as 'wearing a lifejacket without a fuss', 'climbing the mast' and 'cooking a meal'. Despite their diligence it was, of course, the grown ups who learned the most.

Kidnapped by Mull

As is no doubt common with many voyages it took a day or two to shake down and regain our confidence. We were a little apprehensive sailing out of Loch Melfort with a W5 on the nose and Cuan Sound ahead, including a wind against the tide exit. We frantically started reading the pilot guide to remind ourselves of the various hazards but by the time we'd decided it should be OK, we were more or less past the point of no return. The overfalls were bigger than we'd seen them before, but *Sparkler* made light of them and we headed for the next obvious stopping place at Loch Spelve under one reef and jib. We hadn't been here since joining Tim and Sophie Trafford on *Calypso* (RCC) for a soggy RCC and CCC joint meet at Inverlussa Mussel Farm in 2015 and, re-familiarising ourselves with the surroundings, we chose an anchorage in the northeast corner.



Lucy with Sophie, rated 1st Mate in the *Sparkler* qualifications, in Loch Spelve

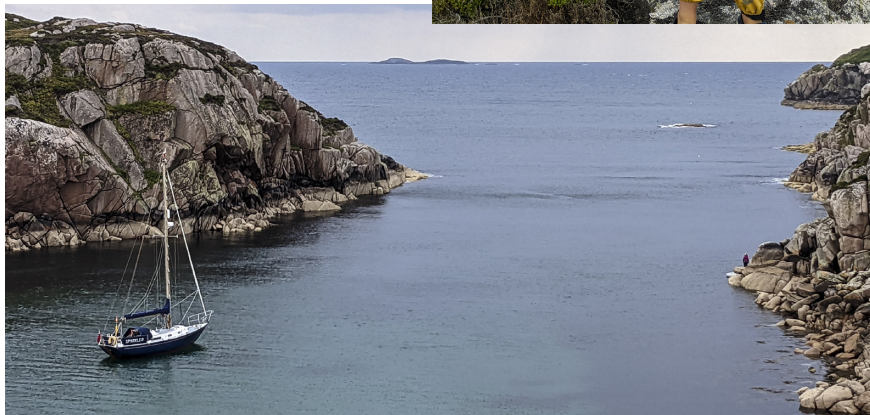
The forecasts over the next few days were surprisingly diverse and that inconsistency turned out to be a harbinger of inaccuracy. As west of Scotland inhabitants we are used to the vagaries of weather forecasting, but this was on another level. Perhaps our family theory that weekend and summer holiday forecasting is done by the interns while everyone else is on holiday has some truth to it. Setting off along the south coast of the Ross of Mull we were a little surprised by a W6 on the nose when it had been forecast to be a F3 astern. It did make for an exhilarating sail though, beating along in sunshine with two reefs in the main and a shortened headsail, and we were able to make good progress despite the swell, with the boys asleep and the girls rocking in the cockpit.

It was evening by the time we felt our way past the rocks and into Tinker's Hole, a welcome haven from the swell outside. After a good shore side exploration, we opened *Kidnapped* to continue reading it to the girls and, by happy coincidence, the chapter that night was about the shipwreck of David Balfour less than a mile

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away from our anchorage, leading to his subsequent miserable isolation on Erraid. We lingered in the morning to swim in the clear waters and leap from the pink rocks, wondering again how on earth Balfour hadn't realised how easy it would be to free himself from his island prison. We decided he would not have been any more tempted than we were to eat the eel and crabs we caught in our collapsible pot (baited with a fish finger).

Malcolm, graduated to Ship's Boy after passing the 'wearing a lifejacket without a fuss' test



Sparkler in Tinker's Hole

From Tinker's Hole the plan was to go north, spend some time on Iona and press on for Tiree and Coll, but again the vagaries of the weather forecast were at odds with actual conditions, so while lunching uncomfortably in Bull Hole we decided that the north side of the Ross of Mull would give us a less active night. We reached for the pilot book and decided that Bunessan was the place to be, offering shelter from the brisk southerlies. With a choice of comfortable anchorages, we tucked in close to shore adjacent to Bendoran Water Sports club, which offered a clean slip for coming ashore and from there, access to the main road.

The wind continued at strength the following day and so we set off to walk the four or so miles to Fionnphort with a vague plan to take the ferry across to Iona for the day and a bus ride home later that evening. The walk along the road was greatly improved by a smart, off road section from Loch Pottie to Fionnphort, putting us in good spirits for the ferry to Iona. However, on arrival we were almost

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immediately distracted by the Staffa tour boats and were lucky enough to secure some last minute tickets, for which we were soon very grateful. Having only previously experienced Staffa from the relative distance of a sail by in moderate swell, the tour boat option was distinctly appealing in this unsettled weather as it allowed us a relaxed trip ashore which wouldn't have felt sensible if we'd taken *Sparkler* there ourselves in these conditions. We had numerous bottlenose and common dolphins playing with the boat on the outward and return legs, with some porpoise sightings thrown in for good measure. It was fascinating to get ashore on Staffa, clamber up and over the headland and then descend to Fingal's Cave, a more spectacular basalt formation than the famous Giant's Causeway some 80 miles to the south, something that Mark, with his heritage, only acknowledged reluctantly. We decided that the marketing team for the Giant's Causeway could perhaps teach a thing or two to their Staffa counterparts.

Our plans for a northerly escape from Bunessan the following day were thrown off by a flat battery. Despite the success of the emergency starter pack, combined with the loan of a battery from the local garage, which did get the engine started, it was the prospect of some more remote anchorages in the coming days that convinced us to call up the Harbour Garage in Tobermory. We asked them to send us two new 100Ah truck batteries. These installed and feeling confident, we departed accompanied by more dolphins for a late evening sail to Acairseid Mhor on the northern side of Gometra. Antares Charts greatly assisted finding the entrance to this fantastically sheltered narrow inlet.

Next morning we were threatened with mutiny by the girls who had consulted the cruising guide and informed themselves that there were only two shower blocks within striking distance. Choice of destination was therefore restricted to either Coll or Tobermory, we had a decision to make: believe the hitherto inaccurate forecasts and make a weather based decision to turn into the Sound of Mull with the promise of sunshine, or sail to Coll and thence Tiree with its promise of cowries galore, but risking overcast skies and stronger winds. In the end, the desire to see the sun on a summer holiday won out, and much to the delight of Sophie and Pippa (and their parents) an overnight in Tobermory would allow that much needed shower and supper ashore.

It's always a treat to spend time in Tobermory and this occasion didn't disappoint, although we were glad to arrive in early afternoon as it is popular and berths are limited. We saw latecomers arrive and then depart in quick succession in search of an anchorage nearby. By this time, the ship's boy had been deprived of swings and a play park for almost a week, so Lucy and Malcolm made the uphill trek to Memorial Park whilst the others visited the shops and well equipped chandlery in search of souvenirs and brass hinges for the deck lockers.

An idyllic passage south east down the sound of Mull proved that the weather forecasters were back at their desks and we broke out the sun cream while some of the crew snoozed on deck, destination Puilladobhrain, on Seil. A late arrival at

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this familiar anchorage in fine weather demonstrated how popular it can be and we swithered over where to anchor amid the forest of masts. *Sparkler's* relatively shallow draught, however, provided opportunity where others may have feared to drop. We settled in for a dram on deck with Malcolm sleeping peacefully below and the girls off exploring in the dinghy for an hour or two in the dusk. A note of recommendation here for anyone cruising this area with small children: look up the lovely books by Benedict Blathwayt, particularly *Pip and the Puffer*, a sweet story of a voyage by *Puffer* from Tobermory to Crinan, and back. We all enjoyed spotting the landmarks from *Cockles and Catfish* along the way.

Slightly disappointed to have missed out on Tiree and Coll we thought Colonsay might be a good alternative. After a quick visit to the Bridge Over the Atlantic to satisfy our bridge mad three year old we set out past Insh heading west again in fine conditions with F2 about the maximum for the day. It was a busy day for the donkey which proved very relaxing for the crew and Lucy treasures the memory of a whole undisturbed hour reading her book in front of the mast. We had heard about the new moorings at Queen's Bay and thought we'd give them a try. After two nights there I'm afraid we would hesitate to recommend them, especially if, like us, you have no outboard on your dinghy. This resulted in a low moment having rowed the 500 metres (yes really) from our mooring to barbecue on the beach when we realised we'd forgotten the sausages. The other huge drawback of the moorings is that they have been made up in such a way that the buoy taps on the chain, acting as a bell that sounds as every wavelet passes, even in light conditions.

We loved everything else about Colonsay though. Spoiled by a heat wave during our visit, we walked across the island to the gorgeous bay at Kilchattan for lunch and swimming before walking back in the evening and indulging ourselves in a very relaxed and hearty supper in the midge proof dining room that The Colonsay Queen's Bay on Colonsay looking east to Jura



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Pantry has so wisely erected. We were pleased to find that two thirds of the diners that evening were RCC and we learned that the couple who had earlier whizzed past us on their folding bicycles arousing deep envy in our children were Simon and Karen Ballantine (RCC) on their Swan 44, *Questar*. They wisely moved their boat after supper to anchor off Oronsay but we opted to put up with the noise of the mooring, allowing sleepy people to go to bed and enjoying the spectacular full Sturgeon Super Moon rise over the Paps of Jura.



With one more day of good weather before it was forecast to break, and the clamour for another shower growing, we realised we'd better start heading for home, so set off for Pig Bay, which we'd first visited for the Scottish Platinum Mini Meet in June. With only two other vessels at anchor it felt very empty in comparison to June when over 20 had gathered, but we were pleased this time to be able to make full use of the engine rather than having to trust again in our sailing ability. Slightly

Sophie and Pippa, rated Able Seaman after demonstrating proficient mast climbing



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embarrassingly in June we had arrived in the bay and had to sail through the RCC fleet to find a spot to anchor as our engine wouldn't start, though on the upside the beer was very cold. We were immensely grateful to David Wilkie and others for their assistance in getting us going so we didn't need to sail out again. Unfortunately, we had further electrical problems on our way over to Pig Bay this time, so perhaps we ought to be wary of the area in future. After an hour of hot and sweaty work, scrabbling around in the bilges with the voltmeter, Mark diagnosed it as a loose earth connection

Enjoying Pig Bay



Mark



to the engine block, rectified with a remade connection and a slightly shorter wire. Nevertheless, the winter task list has been augmented with an action to separate the domestics from the engine supply.

Waiting for the tide to turn east through the

Corryvreckan the first rumbles and flashes of a coming thunderstorm made us a little nervous but the spring tide whooshed us east at over 11 knots in a windless downpour, allowing us to finish our voyage back in Loch Melfort, after 11 nights aboard, feeling satisfied and all longing for more.

A few weeks later, having started our season bringing *Sparkler* west through the Crinan Canal during the Platinum Jubilee celebrations, it felt poignant to bring her back home through the canal in September with our ensign at half-mast in mourning for the Queen. We were thankful for the guidance on the correct etiquette via the RCC WhatsApp group to get us through this solemn time without a serious faux pas.