

Nancy Blacketting to Norway

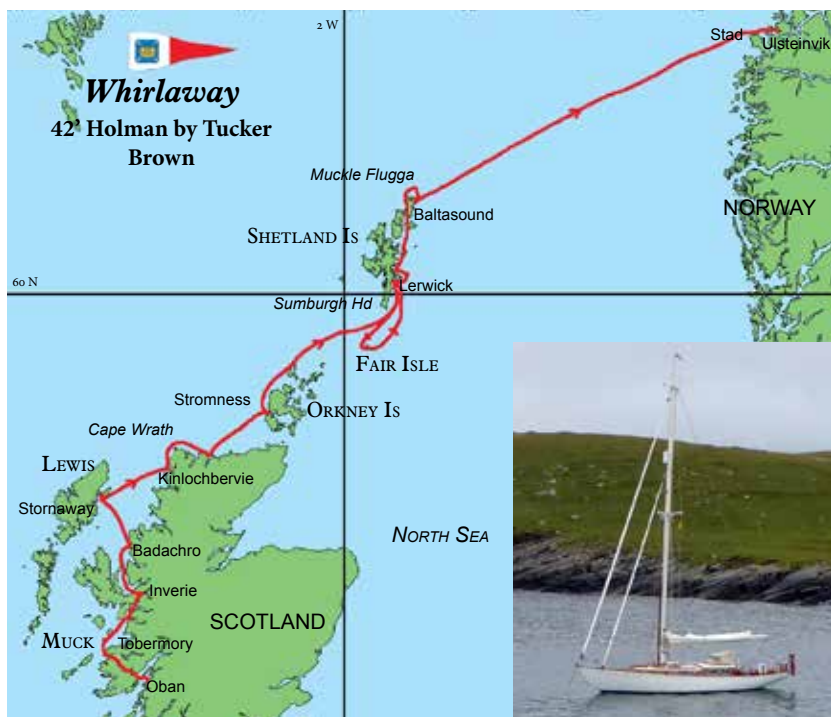
Oban to Ulsteinvik

Jonno Barrett

Awarded the Claymore Cup

Nancy Blackett (RCC once removed) said it all about exploring. ‘Exploring is only going next door, it’s just keeping on going next door.’

So it was in the spirit of the great Nancy that we set off from Oban, with an objective of day-sailing to Norway. Last year we’d made it to Kilmelford on one night-sail, so it seemed a worthwhile theme.



After a winter in Kilmelford and a quick shake-down at Crinan and Ardfern, with expert briefing from Christopher and Valentine Thornhill (RCC) on matters Shetlandish, we picked up our essential companion, John Ungley, at Oban. We felt he’d missed out a bit in Ireland last year, having to go home from the first stop, and he may have thought we’d dropped him in it again when he arrived in a proper downpour that night,

and in Tobermory a day or two later; however, a dram is a wonderful waterproof. It cleared by lunch-time and we headed out to the Small Isles, making Bagh a Ghallanaich on Muck after an enjoyable reach, enjoying the first of a few special sunsets, this time over Rhum.

Next day dawned fair but flat. More importantly, it was the day of the Brexit referendum, so hiding seemed appropriate. To that end we donked, then sailed on a gentle breeze to Inverie on Loch Nevis. Claiming the remotest pub in the UK (we had a bit of trouble with ultimate pubs later on), it seemed a good bet for avoiding it all. Sadly, the pub was shut and we were welcomed by presumably the remotest polling station in the UK. After a sarnie at the cafe, we headed up the Sound to the Kyle, shooting through to find a little breeze to take us to Plockton, as scenic as you'd expect and as busy.

It was so far so good on the days, and, while ready for a bit more breeze, it was a welcome contrast



John and another good Eigg

to last summer's freezing blows. The great thing about a good companion, especially a West Coast neophyte, is the sheer enthusiasm that fresh eyes bring. Being sort of on passage, except for stopping every night, we tended to be a bit on the beaten track, but why be a tourist if you can't visit tourist spots? In honour of Nancy we sought out some grog at Badachro, but drew the line at pemmican after another mainly motoring day. The Brexit result had arrived, so we indulged in a morale-boosting meal which preceded another spectacular sunset, drying our tears.

Still warm and now with a tad of breeze, we set off to the Summer Isles, or maybe Kylescu further up the coast, or, as it turned out, Stornoway. A gentle north-easter and the chance of a sail took us out and on to Stornoway, passing the Shiants and so missing a meeting with David and Lynn Wilkie (RCC) who were lunching there. It was a lovely sail on a blue-sea, blue-sky Minch. We had a little job to do in Stornoway.

Did you know that Stornoway Black Pudding comes in four distinct varieties? We had heard rumours, so our mission was to try them all during a timely bit of mucky weather. This also provided the chance to explore Lewis by car and get a decent leg-stretch, finally making it to Butt of Lewis and the wonderful Uig sands. How often in Plymouth have I woken to hear the words, 'Butt of Lewis,' on the radio, realising that I'd dozed off around 'Wight' yet again? We'd thought to leave John there, but he was enjoying it all so much, and so enhancing our fun, that he readily agreed to hang on till we got to Orkney, or Shetland. When you're Nancy Blacketting, it doesn't do to be too precise about these things.

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We were starting to get excitingly more remote. In the West Country rounding the Lizard takes you a bit ‘off piste’, as I believe the ski-meet gang terms it. For us, Cape Wrath had the same appeal, and we left Stornoway with a brisk reach to Kinlochbervie, there to time the tide for the next day. Sailing is such fun when the smiles are wide. Kinlochbervie did feel that bit beyond and that bit hidden - another tick for the plotter. A handful of mostly Scandinavian yachts were moored by big sheds left empty as the pelagic fleet had moved on. A small shop and cafe was all we needed though, and we set off promptly to Cape Wrath and on.

A nice breeze bustled us on with that growing feeling of anticipating new grounds round the corner. In fact, round the rather impressive corner was a stomping reach in flat water along the coast, with gusts coming down the glens and a goodly tide taking us past Loch Eriboll. It looked a bit like hard work to beat into that anchorage, so we carried on to the handy passage anchorage of Talmine at Kyle of Tongue. Being a bit north, and in June at that, the evenings were long. That was a good thing as with so many pot and mooring buoys, a night arrival may have been a bit crochet-ish.

Oh for another life with time and to spare, to go back to places we’ve moved on past. Everywhere we went this Summer, we decided we’d be back. But will we?

On we sailed again, approaching mythic names for us southerners, across the Pentland Firth, or at least the entrance, past Hoy and through Hoy Sound into Stromness in Orkney. As in virtually all the towns of Scotland



Hoy Coast and Old Man

these days, at least the coastal ones, it offered an alongside berth in the new marina. Just as we started to feel Nancy might have approved of our adventure, a bit of perspective arrived in the

form of an interesting and admirable team of amputee ex-servicemen on their way round Britain. We were brought back to suitable modesty with a bump.

I try not to spend winters poring over charts, preferring to have a bit of discovery ahead. So I was delighted and a bit surprised by Orkney’s gentle rolling flatness. Rather cunningly, Hoy is very high, which makes the

revelation the better. With rich arable land, it felt more like Leicestershire than the distant North, though the absence of Quorn or Pitchley added to the charm. We took a bus to Kirkwall, but confused in the bus station, we missed the commuter jobby and fell back on an open top tour.

John rousinglly recited a poem inspired by war-time tedium of Scapa; ‘Bloody Orkney’ it started and it’s a mark of Orcadian hospitality that we weren’t thrown off the bus. It was sunny that day, but not that warm; our embarrassment eased the chill. We had no regrets though, as we stopped for an hour at the wonderful Scara Brae site where ancient dwellings face down the westerly blows. Why not pick the east side and a bit of shelter? Odd, it’s the same at wonderful Jarlshof on Shetland Mainland. I’m all for fresh air, but why?



Puffins at Sumburgh Head

Odder still was the sight of a trailer load of yelling young girls zooming round Kirkwall at the feet of a queen smeared in molasses. It’s what you do when you’re getting married the next weekend apparently. It’s good we don’t all like the same things.

With wind over tide through Hoy Sound, John was reminded of his home job with Coastwatch at Portland Race, but there he’s just looking. We skirted the edge, but it’s not one to take lightly, as we moved into



Mousa Broch

goodly tides and offshore ‘roosts’, tide-races, passing west of the Islands to Pierrowall on Westray. It was a friendly harbour, with the particularly friendly donation of a side of possibly illicit, or semi-illicit, salmon - ‘delicious’! If you’re ever there, be a bit careful round the back of the pontoons as it gets a bit shallow. No, we didn’t, but we might have.

John had an appointment with Portland Bill, so we went on past Fair Isle, the natural Nancy Blackett stop, for a longer day straight to Shetland, punching a bit of tide ‘til it turned by Sumburgh Head to take us past Mousa and on to Lerwick, where we fetched up happily in the small boat harbour. The time had come for a bit of a deep breath and pause. We used Lerwick as a base to

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catch up on some work, to explore Mainland and for a couple of forays out. Don't miss Sumburgh Head in June/July if you like a puffin, and we can all identify those.

The first foray out was back to Fair Isle, which, though a bit motory, was a delight. We stopped at Mousa to explore the impressive Broch. Rosie and I were sad that John had missed it and indeed Fair Isle itself, so don't



Noss with Seabirds nesting

you if you have the chance.

We arrived in thickish mist and evening drizzle, which set up the next day's dawning, bright and sunny, as a revelation. In the little North Haven were enough seabirds to last the Ancient Mariner a lifetime and across the neck spectacular Sheep Rock showing why it's a mark for coming in. I fitted in a nice walk to the

South Light and back before an iffy forecast chased us back to Lerwick, very pleased indeed we'd made the loop down.

If we thought that Fair Isle knew birds, our next quick outing, round Bressay and past the cliffs of Noss was shattering. A calm day saw us drift by, absolutely awestruck by the wedding cake of guano-layered cliffs. All around were insouciant kittiwakes, gliding elegantly to their young, Stuka Gannets surely knowing that we were looking, Puffins and Razorbills with little wings working till the very moment of landing and the Kray gangsters, the Bonxies or Great Skuas, ranging around looking for weaknesses, as keen to pounce as any protection racketeer. It was like an Avian Brueghel painting and gripped us for hours.



Moonrise over Lerwick

We spent a night in the lovely anchorage of Gunnista, recommended by Leslie Ingram (RCC), local resident and ex-Koi Carp enthusiast (a hard hobby to keep up when otters cross the road and nick your fish), just one of many in Shetland to make us welcome.

We enjoyed Lerwick with the boat harbour in the town, the cruise ships spilling sometimes bedraggled tourists off their launches, and the friendly Norwegians on their yachts popping in for the duty-free, a forgotten aspect

of the sailing life for many of us, at least for now. We'll long remember the otter loping across the pelican crossing heading towards the chippy in the dusk. Surely not? Salt and Vinegar, sir? Then our old mates John and Lainey appeared from the Aberdeen Ferry, along with Nick Walker, who I've been sailing with for very many years, and the spirit of Nancy was upon us again.

John and Lainey have an Ian Oughtred Ness Yoll and an informed interest in the small boats of Shetland, and also had a bit of a mission themselves, to visit the small boat museum in Unst. Luckily this looked like a pretty nifty jumping off point for Norway, so it jelled. Luckily too, we could route it round Muckle Flugga and Out



Roughly Toughy Northern Latitude sailing

Stack which both Nick and I were keen to do. After a lifetime sailing mainly in the Channel, and round about the Lizard, the southern-most UK, furthest north Muckle Flugga offered an exciting symmetry. So far on this odyssey we'd rounded the Lizard, Dingle Peninsula in the West of Ireland, Cape Wrath, now the northern-most bit of the UK loomed.

So off we set, poking our nose into Whalsay to ogle the racing yolls



Duncan Sandison at the Unst Boat Museum

gathering for the regatta, and to admire the huge fishing boats of that tiny island. Then we were on to Mid Yell, a chilly and not so charming place, relieved by the team of proud locals gathered to spring clean the lavatories on the quay. They needed it. Up the hill we found the Hilltop Bar, proudly labelled the Most Northerly Pub in the UK. Bad luck on the residents

of Unst we thought, but checked it out anyway. I can confirm that it was a pub.

I'm not sure I can confirm it was the most northerly one though, for next day, after a splendid closehaul/reach/run up Bluemull Sound and

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past Muckle Flugga and Outstack we arrived a bit thirsty at Baltasound on Unst. Famous for its bus shelter, Baltasound also sports what looked to us rather like a pub. Investigation proved it to be so, and further north than Mid Yell. So that proves something or other.

Better still, Baltasound boasts Duncan Sandison, doyen of Shetland small-boat sailing, and moving spirit of the small-boat museum in the next bay of Haroldswick. John and Lainey were old friends and it was a delight to meet him and his wife Jan and visit the very impressive and fascinating collection. Shetland evidences the lubricant effect of oil money in lots of good ways, but none better than this. I was fascinated to find that the famous fourareens and sixareens evolved from boats originally shipped from Norway as flatpicks, for Shetland has few trees. From such little oaks, did the mighty Ikea grow? Was the first fourareen called Banji or Ulvar I wonder. What has happened to that heritage Allen key?

And so to Norway, leaving two fascinating and contrasting island groups: Orkney, almost tropical with coral strands and green shallow waters lapping on rolling fields of barley; Shetland, a seaman's place, high moor islands, Orca, Otters, Seals and people fighting it out to make it through; a naturalists place, from huge Bonxies and Gannets to tiny Petrels' nightly return to Mousa Broch.



Norway first impressions

So we left, working out how we'd be back, and headed into a dystopic world of great steel structures breathing fire, Mad Max en mer, channelling us to Norway and our landfall at Stad. A bit of a motor, a bit of a sail and suddenly, it's all different again.

This was our permitted overnight passage; after all, we made the rules. As the next morning drew on, high mountains boasting a sketch of snow appeared, then deep passages with so many red crossed rocks on the Navionics that I wondered if someone at the cartographers had spilled a box of them and not bothered to sweep up. We headed east to Ulsteinvik and laying up on the excellent recommendation from Stephan and Madeleine Strobel (RCC). We slowly got orientated to a land of fiords, passages and islands giving us a sort of seductive wink that promised untold delights.

As Nancy and her friends said at the end of that book... Next Year...