

## ***Meandro's* Scottish Cruise and Return to the Hamble**

Simon Butler

2019 was my first full year of retirement and my wife, Catherine, and I wanted to spend some time exploring Scotland which we had never visited. So in the autumn of 2018 we sailed *Meandro*, our elderly 35ft Gib Sea, to Dunstaffnage marina, just north of Oban and left her there for the winter. This year we allowed eleven weeks to sail up to the Orkneys, via the Caledonian Canal, then west to the Outer Hebrides before coming south through the inner islands, down the Irish Sea and finally back up the English Channel to the Hamble. We were lucky to be joined by twelve friends along the route and on the whole were blessed with good weather. We had heard that May and June were the best months to cruise in Scotland so we returned to Dunstaffnage on 1 May to get the boat ready. It was a gorgeous spring, the bluebells, rhododendrons and azaleas were in bloom, the cuckoos were singing and even the hardy local children were swimming.

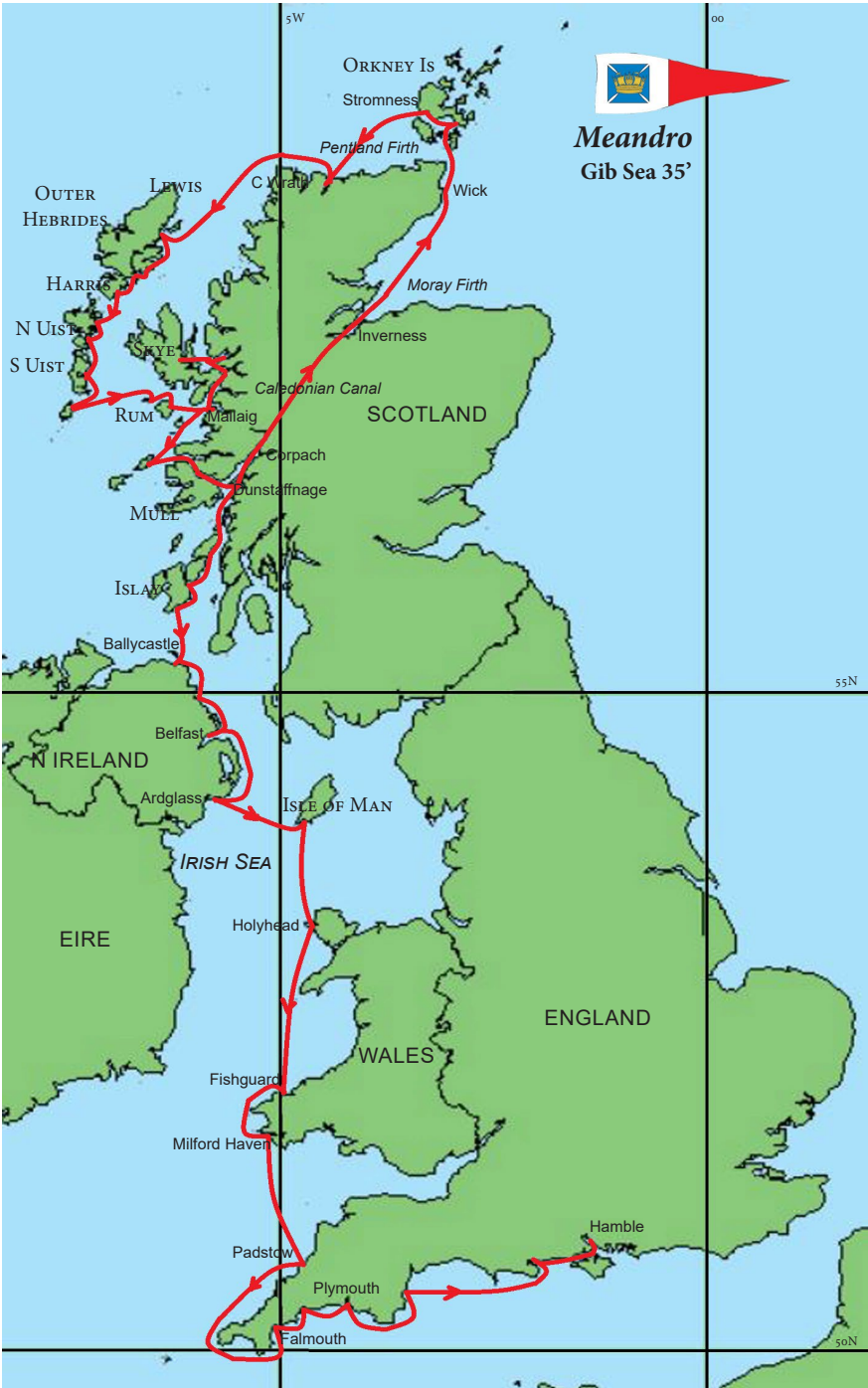
Three days later we departed with Nicholas and Elizabeth Heaven on board in calm, settled weather, but it was cold and we were all very well wrapped up for the next few weeks. Our passage up Loch Linnhe was straight forward and I was pleased that everything on board was working after the long, cold and wet winter. As we approached Fort William there was plenty of snow on Ben Nevis behind the town. By teatime we had locked into the basin at Corpach for the night and were the only yacht heading north-east. The locks



*Meandro* entering Scapa Flow

are operated by the canal staff so your rate of progress through the 60-mile-long canal is in their hands. For us it started slowly but accelerated as we approached

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Inverness at the far end. In the morning we rose up Neptune's Staircase, a flight of eight locks, the longest flight in Britain, built by Thomas Telford, and were through Lochs Lochy and Oich by late afternoon so that we could spend the night at Fort Augustus, the summit. There was bright sunshine the next morning, so we had porridge for breakfast in the cockpit before descending into Loch Ness when it immediately started snowing. We made fast progress down the bleak, grey loch and the remaining bridges and locks opened for us as we approached. So we were out of the sea lock, into the fast flowing ebb of the Inverness Firth and then round into the marina by 1630. There was a good forecast for the following day and thereafter deteriorating, so we set off early to catch the tide out of the Firth. It was a beautiful, calm, sunny morning and we had the place to ourselves as we went under the Kessock bridge and through the narrows. As the day progressed it remained calm, but got cold and grey again, so we were pleased to approach Wick after 12 hours motoring into a northerly swell.

We had four days in Wick and hired a car to visit the north coast including the charming Castle of Mey and John O'Groat's before our next crew, Anthony and Georgi Wickham, arrived by car. The following day Catherine and Georgi took the car on the ferry across to the Orkneys and Anthony and I had an easy passage too.

The harbour-master in Wick recommended keeping close inshore once past Skirza Head to arrive off Duncansby Head at high water Wick. We followed his advice and had smooth water across the Pentland Firth and into Scapa Flow. We picked up Catherine and Georgi from the pier in St Mary's Bay and spent the night on a visitors' buoy there. From here it was a short trip in the car to visit the Tomb of the Eagles, where you can crawl into a



Georgi, Anthony and Simon

Stone Age tomb where the remains of the dead are believed to have been buried after their bones had been picked clean by eagles. We also admired the charming Italian chapel, created from two Nissen huts by Italian prisoners of war. We sailed across to Stromness in the late afternoon and based ourselves there for a few days exploring the islands' treasures in the car, before Anthony and Georgi left us to go walking in Skye.

The route out of Hoy Mouth, despite its reputation for being uncomfortable, was surprisingly calm at slack water. We were surrounded by puffins, guillemots and razorbills and as the Old Man of Hoy came into view, a following wind picked up for a glorious sail to Kyle of Tongue. We anchored as close in as possible to the local

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moorings at Talmine as a little swell was coming in, but by the time we went ashore to explore, the wind had died. About half an hour's walk away we were delighted to find the Craggan House Hotel in Melness for a welcome supper in this beautiful and remote area. Malcolm, the harbour-master in Wick had recommended the



Cape Wrath

Kyle of Tongue rather than Loch Eriboll as it gives reasonable shelter without having to divert too far down the loch. As his advice had proved right so far we took his final piece of advice which was to keep close inshore rounding Cape Wrath leaving the Duslic Rock

to starboard. As we made our way west we were surprised to see a Dutch yacht come out of Loch Eriboll. We were expecting to have this far corner of Scotland to ourselves; in fact it was the first time we had sailed in company with another vessel this season. We followed Malcolm's instructions cutting close inshore and had an impressive view of the rock formations at the cape and its lighthouse as well as a calm sea. The Dutch yacht took the more cautious route offshore, but still beat us into Stornoway on Lewis following another easy, downwind sail as the wind sprang up as we entered the North Minch. Although it was now the middle of May, it was still cold with overcast grey skies and occasional rain, but we had got used to this and it wasn't as bad as we had expected. Shortly after our arrival in Stornoway the Severn Class lifeboat was called out on a shout, and returned an hour later with a local yacht that had caught an enormous net round its rudder and propeller.

Arriving in the Outer Hebrides was special and we had had a very easy journey so had time in hand to explore. We spent three days in Stornoway and started to understand how special these islands are as we went on trips on the local buses to the well-preserved Iron Age Carloway Broch, the late Neolithic Callanish Stones and the Gairrannan Blackhouse village where we saw Harris tweed being woven on a traditional loom. Everyone we met on the islands was so kind and we were made to feel very welcome. We headed south with light northerly winds via Lemreway and arrived in East Loch Tarbert on Harris on Thurs 23 May, by which time the wind had gone into the west and was screaming at 33kts, as we turned west under the Scalpay bridge and up the loch to the small marina at the end. Anthony and Georgi returned on the ferry that evening and we had a good look round the small town in the morning before a close-hauled sail to Loch Maddy on North Uist. Here we were joined by David and Lynn Wilkie (RCC) on *Moonlight of Argyll* a little



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later. The wind had now gone into the south and we tried to leave the following day, but after an hour of slamming into a lumpy sea we re-traced our steps to Loch Maddy and were grateful to be tied up in the gathering wet and windy conditions for the next two days.

This was good fortune as it gave us a chance to get to know David and Lynn who, with all their local knowledge, gave us lots of excellent advice and a list of places to visit on our journey south. Also on Sunday we asked Aldas, the 86-year-old, local taxi driver, to take us on a trip to Berneray beach on the west side of the island. The sea was crashing ashore along this beautiful white sandy beach and we walked for about two hours to Aldas' grandmother's blackhouse, now a youth hostel chalet where he was waiting for us. He suggested instead of taking us straight back we should go on a tour of the island and this turned out to be a highlight as he had lived on the island all his life. Aldas' family were merchants and carriers, and one of his first jobs was running a mobile shop, so it was no surprise that he knew everybody and every corner of the island. By Monday the wind had died and we motored

to Wizard Pool in Loch Skipport on South Uist for lunch in warm sunshine and saw sea eagles circling the hills. After lunch there was enough wind to take us gently to the marina in Loch Boisdale, where we said goodbye to Anthony and Georgi. They and Nicholas and Elizabeth, our crew for the first week, had been great company and had put up with some



Simon in Eriskay

seriously cold weather that caused a lot of condensation below.

We were now on our own and had a few warm days. Our first stop was Acairseid Mhor on the Catholic island, Eriskay where we picked up a visitors' buoy and then walked across the island to Haun and had supper in the Politician Pub named after the ship that was driven ashore in 1941 and made famous in the book and film *Whisky Galore*. From there we had a gentle sail with a light following breeze to Canna. By lunchtime we were almost drifting off the north end of the island when a minke whale surfaced from under the boat no more than 20m to port and we enjoyed 40 minutes watching it circling near us, but never that close again. We were snug in Canna for two days before a rough, wet and misty morning's sail across to Mallaig where Pippa Unwin and her brother Mike were meeting us. The forecast for the beginning of the week was poor, so we opted to stay in the shelter of Skye and on Sunday 2 June sailed up the Sound of Sleat, through Kyle Rhea in a gathering

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William and Catherine

wind which was blowing 30kts by the time we went under Skye bridge. We spent two days in a very windy Plockton before heading north to Portree, where we rented a car and toured some of the island. Skye was surprisingly touristy and I felt it was not quite the Scottish cruising experience that Mike and Pippa were after.

Although the weather remained grey and wet, the wind had moderated, so we turned south and spent a night at Kyleakin before crossing to the anchorage in Loch Scresort on Rum. Kinloch Castle was closed, but we had a good look round this time warp of Edwardian opulence from the outside after visiting the village hall which doubles as a shop and pub. We spent some time in the otter hide here; it was the only time we were seriously bothered by mosquitoes and we didn't see an otter. In the morning we went round to Eigg and anchored in Pollnam Partan for lunch and a walk ashore before hurrying back to Mallaig so Mike and Pippa could drive home.

William Bourne (RCC) joined us for a week and we had ideal sailing conditions. Our first anchorage was Port Mor on Muck and from there another downwind sail to Arinagour on Coll in a freshening breeze. Here we saw our third RNLI rescue of the year, this time a fishing boat with a broken gear box in amongst the rocks at the south end of Coll was brought into Arinagour by the Tobermory Lifeboat. The strengthening wind kept us in Coll for two nights, which was no hardship as we hired bicycles and toured the island. It was still blowing when we left on the afternoon of Thursday 12 June with two reefs in the main for a three-hour reach across to Tobermory on Mull. We now had three easy, summer days visiting Salen in Loch Sunnart, Loch Aline and Puilladobhrain before returning to Dunstaffnage where we left *Meandro* for three weeks to catch up with things at home.

When we returned in the middle of July it really was summer weather and we left Oban on Saturday 13 July with Chris and Jane Mew on board to head south. We had gentle sailing and anchored for lunch in Lussa Bay on Jura, where there were a group of deer sunbathing on the beach. Catherine swam in the peaty water that has made Jura's whiskys so famous. On our first night in the rather scruffy Tradewinds pub in Corpach we had set the challenge of tasting as many local whiskys as possible during our tour round Scotland and it was now sad to be thinking that we would soon be leaving this country. The sailing season was hotting up and there were quite a few yachts in Craighouse on Jura and Port Ellen on Islay.

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We left Islay in mist that turned to fog, but it was short-lived and then Rathlin Island appeared ahead with the hills of Northern Ireland behind and we were ashore in time for a bicycle ride round the island. We had an easy beat across Rathlin Sound to Ballycastle from where we took a bus trip to The Giants Causeway. The Causeway surpassed my expectations, the scale of the 40,000 basalt columns is amazing and it is justifiably a UNESCO

World Heritage Site. The tides round this coast are dramatic and we had their full force taking us round Fair Head and into the North Channel. With the wind slightly free we achieved our record speed over the ground of 13.8kts; it was a great final sail for Chris and Jane who left us at Glenarm. Our passage round to Belfast was in mist and rain and we didn't see the coast until we were well up Belfast Lough and into the Victoria Channel. However, the final stretch past the Harland and Wolff cranes and the new *Titanic* centre is evocative and dramatic. The self-service marina in the Abercorn Basin is not only a bargain but a great base for visiting the city.



*Meandro with the Paps of Jura behind*

Melinda Manos joined us in Belfast, but the winds had gone southerly; the forecast for the week was disappointing and so it proved. The wind got up during the morning and by the time we reached Ardglass there was quite a sea running off the entrance, so it was a relief to get into this snug harbour. It was even more of a relief to reach Port St Mary at the south end of the Isle of Man two days later. We had set off aiming for Holyhead motor-sailing into a nasty head sea when weed got caught in the cooling water intake. So we bore away for the Isle of Man and had an unpleasant sail in a particularly confused sea, which deteriorated round Chicken Rock Lighthouse despite being 1.5nm offshore. As we approached the coast we hove-to so that I could poke the weed clear with a long wire down the inlet pipe, even so we thought it best to sail in behind the breakwater and just motor the last 100m to a berth right at the inner end. We were grateful to be tucked in, as Port St Mary is not well protected from south-easterly winds and the boats on moorings in the bay looked uncomfortable. We remained here with three other yachts for

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four days which gave us a chance to get to know our neighbours and explore the island which we liked. I was expecting a glitzy version of Jersey and it was the complete opposite, very low key with a rugged coastline and pretty countryside. We spent a day in Douglas and enjoyed the Manx museum very much. We went on the mountain railway to the top of Snaefell from



Lucia, David and Simon

where you are meant to be able to see Ireland, Scotland, England and Wales. All we could see was the sea which looked calm from 2,000 feet, but we knew wasn't.

We had hoped to sail through the Menai Straits with Melinda, but we were so delayed and she needed to get back home so she left us in the Isle of Man and it wasn't until Saturday 27 July that we got away with a north-west wind carrying us south to Holyhead, where the Sailing Club have laid additional moorings for visitors after the marina was destroyed during the previous winter. We needed to keep going so had a long sail across Cardigan Bay the following day. A favourable wind and a succession of dolphins playing round us made the 80nm to Fishguard pass quickly and we were there in 13 hours. We chose to anchor inside the few local boats in the main harbour where there was plenty of room and more protection behind the breakwater than suggested in the pilot book. We went through Ramsey Sound and then deliberately west of Skomer to see the puffin colonies, which we had missed on the way north in 2018 when there was thick fog. It was worth the detour to see so many of these engaging birds. We spent two nights in Milford Haven Marina and were pleased to meet Chris Elliott (RCC) on *Polynya* there. We slipped down to the anchorage at Dale ready to depart early the following morning for the 70nm passage across the Bristol Channel to Padstow. The conditions were calm and we motored all the way to arrive an hour before high water for an easy crossing of the Doom Bar. It remained calm the following day and we crept out of Padstow harbour at 0630 in thick fog which cleared later. We rounded Lands End inside Longships and as we approached The Lizard we heard on the VHF that there was a yacht needing fuel becalmed 10nm south of us. We offered to divert, but it turned out they needed petrol which we didn't have, so the Lizard lifeboat was launched to tow them in. We anchored in St Mawes for the night before picking up our final crew, David and Lucia Homer, in Falmouth.

We then had four days of strengthening south-west winds and made use of them stopping in Fowey and Plymouth where the first Fastnet Race competitors



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were finishing. After a night in Dartmouth we crossed Lyme Bay and anchored in Studland where we witnessed our sixth RNLI rescue of the year, this time a family of four in two inflatable kayaks being blown out to sea. Then we were back into the Solent to watch the amazing speed of the Sail GP foiling catamarans practicing off Cowes, and to see our daughter, Alice, who was there preparing for Cowes Week, before heading back to our mooring on the Hamble.

In the 75 days we were afloat we visited 50 ports and travelled 1,450 miles. I am most grateful to all our crew who made this cruise so special. We had deliberately stopped at villages and towns rather than deserted anchorages as I like to go ashore to get a feel of the community; everyone we met was helpful and charming. The highlight was the Outer Hebrides, which have their own magical qualities and we would very much like to return there. The disappointment was missing the Menai Straits. We had seals and guillemots for company almost daily and frequent visits from dolphins and porpoises. We were fortunate to have so much time to enjoy this feast of coastal cruising and to get to know the coast of Britain a little better.