

The Scillies Can Wait ...

Lorne Byatt

Awarded the Claymore Cup

The Big Plan was to meet my son, Douglas, and his girlfriend, Rhiannon, on their Contessa 26, *Blue Fox*, in the Scillies in early June 2017. *Samba* prep included fitting of new Raymarine instruments and a newer GPS: not a chart-plotter, as I still use paper charts. The GPS arrived from eBay with waypoints still in memory from far-flung places. Its larger screen was useful for those like me with less than good eye-sight, and it connected to the VHF. I bought the RCCPF pilot for the Scillies and a new Irish Cruising Club (ICC) pilot for the East and North Coasts of Ireland; I borrowed charts and other pilots from Charles Warlow (RCC). I didn't plan for a visit to Wales: *mea culpa*, lesson learned.

The other major work was fitting new rudder bearings. My friend, Mark Johnston, helped set up the rig and we motor-sailed from Sandpoint to Port Bannatyne, Bute. This trip provides a good shakedown, but Mark drew the 'little wind' card, as he had in the Outer Hebrides in 2016. Clyde Estuary Control had told us there would be an RN submarine on surface going to Faslane, but we saw no sub.

Skipper and crew, friends Charles Morton and Fred Gibson, arrived at Port Bannatyne on



Saturday 27 May having shopped in Rothesay. We stowed kit and food with a keen sense of the adventure to come.

Sunday saw us away at 0730 with a fresh NW4, to Loch Ryan. It was a lovely bright morning, not hugely warm. We anchored at 2000 in what is known as The Wig (why, I wot not) on the west side of Loch Ryan, in about 4m. Achieving 56nm for our first day felt good. The Larne ferries come into their piers at Cairnryan on the east side of Loch Ryan at speed and with much VHF declaration of intentions: one officer of the watch was notable for his speed of delivery and accent, rendering the VHF transmission pointless as a warning.

We headed out by 0715 to cross the North Channel to Ardglass, using the south-going flood as long as possible. We experienced a range of conditions, but mostly NW4-5, winding up with poor visibility if not actual fog, so that we could not see the entrance to Ardglass until less than 0.5nm away. During the afternoon we suddenly saw water sloshing over the cabin floor. Quick, the taste test! It was fresh, confirming that our flexible, 150 litre water tank had somehow failed. This was no great problem then and there, because we also carry water in 5 litre containers, but it meant that finding a replacement took most of the next day. The tank had lasted three seasons; perhaps it would be more reliable and better value to have a fixed water tank. Amazingly, Down Marine in Belfast had a replacement. I travelled there by bus, and when the last bus back stopped in Killyleagh, I hitched the last 15 miles back. Thanks again to Bill, who thought he should give this ancient mariner the benefit of the doubt; hitching is clearly not common in N Ireland. Fred and Charles had a nice day resting in the sun. I fitted the new tank super-carefully; it was a delight to have a water system again. In Ardglass we briefly met Mike Redfern (RCC), heading north the next day on *Dafony*. It would have been good to have invited him on board *Samba*, but the tank replacement meant we were in a 'State o' Chassis'. All in all we lost a day because of the water tank.

We thought we had done well achieving 112nm of 430nm to New Grimsby, the Scillies, but of course the wind went forward of the beam, forecast S/SE4-6, and we went slower. *Samba's* average on passage is usually a little better than 5kts, not bad for her waterline of less than 23ft (6.9m). We had hoped for a night at anchor at Lambay Island, on advice from David Whitehead (RCC), but with time and weather against us, we diverted to The Skerries, anchoring at 1915 in 4.6m just west of the sailing club's moorings. The mist which had reduced visibility as we approached cleared to glorious sunshine by 2000. A skipper-special supper involving tuna and rice was very welcome.

The next day dawned overcast, but dry. We planned to make Howth that evening. S4-5 as we left The Skerries turned into S/SW6, with occasionally heavy rain, and we experienced quite rough conditions rounding Lambay

Island on the east side in order to get south. I decided against the narrow and shallow west-side channel because we would be beating with not much sea-room. With two reefs in the main and several rolls in the genoa, Fred and Charles had a rather salty, wet time on deck. We were glad to reach Howth at 1710. An early priority was a fresh-water shower and then some Guinness at the Howth Yacht Club bar.

Sunshine the next morning was a great help in drying out kit, damp from the previous day. *Samba* on deck resembled a large clothes-horse, and we attracted comment accordingly from pontoon passers-by, who stopped for some *craic*. The Met Eireann forecast was for a gentle S/SW2-4 which we felt would be a nice change. Howth Yacht Club was a hive of activity



Drying out in Howth

with the next week-end's racing in prospect. We spotted *Pemandia* on another pontoon and Peter Fabricius (RCC) came on board *Samba* for a chat. Leaving Howth at 1240, which we knew was low water, we had 0.2m under the keel in the narrow, buoyed, entrance channel. Outside, beating gently south under full sail at about 5kts SOG in proper sunshine, it really felt like summer. We began to factor in the first of the offshore banks (Bennet and then Kish) before reaching Greystones Marina after a very pleasant 25nm. Kids jumping off the harbour wall into suitably deep water were having a great time.

We wanted to use Wednesday 3 June for our next big push south, carrying the tide as far as we could, either anchoring at Rosslare or carrying on to Kilmore Quay if possible. Away at 0710, we had S4 on the nose again, and by late morning it was clear that though we were making better than 6kts SOG for a while, our progress was not enough to see us into Rosslare that evening. When the wind disappeared just north of Arklow, and the tide was due to turn against us in an hour, the only thing to do was to head in to Arklow. We had been strongly warned in Howth not to use the small marina on the north bank of the River Avoca, where the water was said to be particularly grubby. We found a berth on the long pontoon in the river, where water quality was not much better. A number of other yachts came in, because of the lack of wind and a poor forecast for the following day.

That evening it started to blow, Met Eireann forecast N/NW5-8 for

the next 48 hours: very much the ‘strong northerly’ conditions in which the ICC pilot warns against an approach to Kilmore Quay, and Rosslare is declared unsuitable as an anchorage in northerlies. Given the lack of suitable bolt-holes south of Arklow, it was best to stay put. We watched the barometer dropping and made friends with Swedish people on a big boat just ahead of us, who introduced us to the rather disconcerting weather app www.windy.com. Graphics of wind strength and direction for the next 2-3 days were rather depressing.

Listening to the wind in a marina can sometimes make the conditions at sea seem worse than they are. At least we were safely alongside in Arklow, but the extent of significant surge coming up the entrance channel from the sea was surprising, and in fact rather uncomfortable with our mooring lines snatching badly. Life could have been worse - there was a big new Aldi shop an easy walk up-river from us on the same bank, so we did not lack food and drink; Cork Gin took the edge off some of our impatience. For the following three days we were waiting-on-weather. The wind whistled overhead, though there was blue sky and sun on one day. Another day it rained hard and we visited the Arklow Maritime Museum, learning much about local history. Mr Jim Rees, the custodian, was a mine of information about the exhibits, including the Arklow Gansey (a fisherman’s jersey with special stitches, which could help identify men drowned at sea),

and the history of Tyrells of Arklow, builders of fine vessels including *Gypsy Moth III*. Well worth a visit.

On Tuesday 6 June, it was still blowing hard, but the forecast for the next day was S/SW5-6. An Irish yacht came into the river from Kilmore Quay saying that their trip had felt a bit like being inside a washing machine.



A source of consolation in Arklow

They thought our decision to stay put had been very sensible. Meantime I had heard from my son, Douglas. He and Rhiannon had reached the Scillies, from the river Exe, and had two lovely days anchored between St Agnes and Gugh. Then, given the forecast, they headed away downwind to Newlyn, snuggled up *Blue Fox* there, and caught the bus to Land’s End to watch W9 battering the headland. We came to the sad realisation that our objective, the Scillies, would need to wait for another year. Even if we got there, the forecast was still poor and all advice confirmed that there is no real all-weather anchorage in the Scillies. Sam Llewellyn (RCC), a Scillonian true, had mentioned St Helen’s Pool to me

as perhaps the best available anchorage, but even then with caveats; it would have been interesting to see this anchorage during the bad weather.

So, before travel arrangements for Fred and Charles to leave from the Scillies were cancelled, passage planning included the possibility of aiming a long way to windward for either Padstow, Cornwall, or Dale (near Milford Haven) in order to preserve a chance of reaching the Scillies, although we knew now that we would not meet up with *Blue Fox*. We eventually decided to abandon the Scillies entirely and head more-or-less due east to Pwllheli, north Wales, where Fred and Charles



Samba in Arklow

could catch trains home, and where Patrick Temple (RCC) and Jenny McIntosh, my new crew, could join me.

Wednesday 7 June dawned quiet and clear. Hurrah - it felt really good to be on the move again. With full sail, a course of 150° took us south of the Arklow Bank and its seven wind turbines which provide a nice position-line in transit. With 70nm to Pwllheli, it was going to be a long day, but the first several hours were pleasant enough, with S3-4 allowing the cruising chute up for an hour or so and SOG at 5.5kts or better.

By 1300 we had made nearly 30nm but then the forecast was for more wind, S/SW6. The afternoon became progressively more breezy, requiring reduced sail. It was fast and exciting reaching at 7.5kts, but as daylight waned into evening we began to get gusts of F7, and we were being headed, the wind tending to back SSE. I had set a waypoint in clear water south of Bardsey Island and its associated shallow banks, and knew that we needed to leave that well to leeward. Charles and I were clipped on in the cockpit, it was raining hard, and Fred was navigating down below, communicating through the closed-up main hatch washboards. Charles made occasional reference to his MemoryMap tablet with electronic larger-scale charts for which I had no paper equivalent - I had not planned to visit Wales. The MemoryMap provided some reassurance as we sped past Abersoch towards Tremadoc Bay, a lee shore now in poor visibility.

A visiting Welsh yacht at Arklow had told us that with 1.5m draft we had a window of about two hours either side of HW to get into Pwllheli. HW was about 2000, and I knew we needed to maintain speed to reach

Pwllheli Marina entrance in time, but as the sea-bed shelved, so the sea-state rose and it was better to reduce sail and slow down. With the mainsail off and only a scrap of genoa drawing we were still making 4.5kts. The entrance to Pwllheli at night, in poor conditions, right on the two-hour mark after HW, was one of the more worrying situations I have been in. The entrance channel is really narrow and shallow. There was a significant outflow from the Marina, not just tide, but also a river pouring into the basin; this meant that control in the narrow entrance was a little easier than if we had been carried towards obstacles, such as a breakwater, by a flood tide. At one moment we had 0.2m below the keel and no fall-back plan if we went aground on a falling tide. The very good and clear Irish Sea



Cruising chute heading E from Arklow

Pilot, by David Rainsbury, states that access in the entrance channel at Pwllheli is 24hrs at neaps and HW \pm 5 hours at springs. I suggest from my recent experience that this Pilot is probably wrong on this point and that the Pwllheli Marina operators need to do some dredging work.

When we found a suitable pontoon, bows into the wind, and made fast alongside at about 2215, there was huge relief all round. Fred, who had done a great job at the chart-table, staying dry compared to Charles and I, produced a superb tuna and pasta supper, which we wolfed down. There was 76nm on the log and it had been quite a day. Oh, and the brand-new water tank failed two-thirds of the way across the Irish Sea; I could scarcely believe it when again I saw water over the cabin floor.

Fred and Charles left by train on Friday 9 June and my new crew, Patrick and Jenny, arrived on Saturday, having had to change their travel arrangements and missing the chance to see something of the Scillies. Before they left, Fred and Charles helped me with various jobs, including replacing the water tank - again - this time with a 100 litres. Maybe a smaller tank could be more durable. The wind literally howled through the rigging of the boats in the marina for another 48 hours. The 2017 Jester Challenge, due to start from Pwllheli on Friday 9 June, was postponed

by 24 hours. More waiting-on-weather looked likely. It was a long walk to find any shop. We had a good dinner onshore at Plas Heli, the Welsh National Sailing Academy.

Patrick, Jenny and I had hoped to get under way from Pwllheli on Sunday, but the forecast and reality of SW8 strongly suggested staying put, so we had a quiet day. Patrick went for a run and a swim in the wild sea, and then addressed himself to some business matters. Jenny and I did some provisioning at Asda.

Monday 11 June was a much better morning. We left more or less at HW. We did not want to go too early against a lot of flood or later in case the ebb carried us onto any entrance obstacles. We made sail, well-reefed; beating into a SW5 gusting 6, it took us seven hours to get out to windward of Bardsey Island and then turn north up the Irish Sea, destination Carlingford Lough. It was not the time to try going through Bardsey Sound, with its fearsome reputation in wind-against-tide conditions. Patrick and Jenny, not having met before, were working well together on board *Samba*. Patrick was briefly sea-sick (he had told me this could happen), but he managed the situation very well, and soon recovered to have some of the excellent mince and pasta prepared by Jenny.

Compared to what we had expected and the previous day's weather, it was a quiet passage up the Irish Sea overnight under full sail, with Patrick and Jenny on their watch keeping well clear of ferries from Dublin, and one 'eejit' who steamed round and then straight for us in what Patrick thought to be a yacht under power. VHF got no response, but a big torch on our mainsail scared him away. By dawn we had about 40nm to go to the entrance to Carlingford. None of us had been there before. Patrick, who lives in Donegal, was keen to visit. Care is needed with the entrance, but it is well-buoyed and was no problem with the last of the flood under us. Haulbowline Lighthouse is a fine sight but sadly now disused.

Alongside in the rather strange Carlingford Marina, which Patrick thought a hangover from the 'Celtic Tiger' era, we reflected on the troubled history there. The € is the currency on the south shore of the Lough, but the £ is used on the north shore. What will happen here post-Brexit? It seemed the sort of place where flying the Irish courtesy flag, as we had been doing, could be misunderstood, so we discreetly removed it before entering the Lough.

We were away at 0745. We could have gone earlier, but the wind was S5-6 then and the ICC pilot warns against leaving on the ebb with S/SE F5 or more. At the entrance there were some overfalls which were uncomfortable for a short while. We were aiming for Strangford Lough. I thought it possible we would not be off the entrance to Strangford in time to catch the next flood up, starting about 1430. We used the relative tidal shelter of Dundrum Bay, which stays slack through much of the

tidal cycle, and then stayed close inshore at Ardglass, on advice from James Nixon (RCC) to Patrick. So, we were in position off the Strangford entrance by 1350. Patrick now thinks I'm a whiz at tidal planning. It was exciting at 10.3kts SOG to make the passage in-bound again, my first visit on *Samba* since 2013. We went alongside the pontoon at Killyleagh to provision and then, in the hope of a visit from James Nixon, we went to the Quoyle Yacht Club pontoon, up the estuary in the SW corner of the Lough, for the night. This is a wonderfully friendly, quiet place, but James was not able to come and visit after all. Jenny created, and we all enjoyed, a really good chicken and noodles feast. 0345 was rise-and-shine time, to be sure of avoiding the worst of the overfalls at the entrance on the ebb. Patrick swung us neatly at the pontoon by the transom. 'One of the advantages of smaller boats,' he said, and we were quietly away in the half-light before dawn. Because our timing was good, the overfalls, which can be considerable, were less than at Carlingford.

Heading north through Donaghadee Sound, the tide turned against us and SOG dropped to 2kts, but we were in no hurry. Patrick needed to be away from Bangor the next morning to travel to a cousin's wedding in Devon, so we spent the night alongside in Bangor Marina. After he left, Jenny and I took *Samba* out to the Copeland Islands. The anchorage on the west side of the main island, facing into Donaghadee Sound, is apparently open to the south-west, but well sheltered by the strong tidal streams. Jenny swam round the boat, and the sun shone. This was *Samba's* first night at anchor since The Skerries. It seemed like summer again. On 17 June, Jenny's last full day on board before she too needed to get home, we walked round the island and then sailed back into Belfast Lough to Carrickfergus on the north shore; the entrance is quite shallow, but the reasonably full Marina had a '2-for-1' offer which was attractive.

The next day I travelled with Jenny by train into Belfast. She had a plane to catch and I was keen to see the *Titanic* exhibition:

this is a superb explanation of an immense tragedy and well worth a visit. Patrick and Alyson White, friends from Belfast, came on board *Samba* for tea in the cockpit; it was gloriously warm. Not being boat-people, they



Lorne at Copeland Island

found it hard to imagine some of the conditions we had been through. That evening, Donald Graham, my next crew, arrived from Inverness.

19 June dawned flat calm and stayed that way. 17nm to Glenarm under engine could have been worse. Billy McAuley, the Glenarm Marina manager, gave us a great welcome, then Donald and I enjoyed a walk through Antrim Estates woodland. 20 June was a great sailing day. The forecast was N4, and we made 35nm to Port Ellen, Islay, after a couple of hours under engine and mainsail to make best use of the last of the north-west-going stream in the North Channel. We had a day or so in hand before needing to re-connect with life on land, so decided to visit the Ardmore Islands, on the south-east corner of Islay. Donald had not been there before. *Samba* and I have been, but again we took care with the relatively narrow entrance from the south to an inner pool, Plod Sgeiran, where we anchored. So quiet it was: with lots of seals and non-raucous birdlife. An otter clearly loved listening to Donald playing his mouth organ. Two other yachts arrived to enjoy this peaceful place with us.

We left next morning by the narrow but straightforward north-east entrance. It was the final day of our cruise with a gentle NW3 or so and the flood tide gently helping us north. As we passed the north end of Gigha, the ebb started helping us toward the entrance to West Loch Tarbert, Kintyre. Before we went there, we put *Samba's* nose into Loch Stornoway, for which an older Admiralty Pilot cautions, 'Dangerous - do not enter without local knowledge'; so please consult this author or better still, an Antares chart thanks to Bob Bradfield (RCC).

Picking up our mooring in West Loch Tarbert, Kintyre, I reflected on the superb sailing and excellent company on board which I had enjoyed over the previous three and a half weeks, despite often rather challenging weather. Only four nights at anchor over the cruise, due to the lack of anchorages most of the time, meant that our marina expenses were much higher than if we had spent the summer entirely on west coast Scotland, but I don't at all regret trying to reach the Scillies.

As another RCC member observed later in the summer, 'The Scillies are fabled isles. Many set out for them, but few arrive.'