

Britain's Northwest Sentries

A Cruise to Sule Skerry

William Ehrman

This year I went in *Mary Helen* to Sule Skerry. It was the last of 'Britain's Northwest Sentries' which I had not visited. In earlier years I have sailed to the others - St Kilda, North Rona, Sula Sgeir and the Flannan Islands. St Kilda had residents until 1930. Hermits and others had lived in past times on North Rona, the Flannans and even the rock of Sula Sgeir. But nobody, except a reputed silkie, has been able to call Sule Skerry their home. 34 miles northeast of Cape Wrath, it has a lighthouse built by Stevenson which, until 1982 was the most remote manned one in the UK with a spectacular stack five miles southwest of it.

Our son, Tom (RCC) and I set off from Loch Etive on 5 July, not suspecting that it was to be a summer of calms, something northwest Scotland is not noted for. We had wonderful sails at over six knots round Ardnamurchan and later Cape Wrath but precious little wind otherwise during the five days Tom was with me. So we motored a lot. I had hoped at best to reach Loch Eriboll on Scotland's north coast with Tom and then to try for Sule Skerry with James Tew (RCC) who was coming as new crew at the weekend. However, when we got to Lochinver on 8 July the forecast was that the weather might break as James arrived. Tom said he was not going to let me kill myself on my quest with my 'pensioner friend' (an incorrect description, James pointed out indignantly when he joined me).

So we pushed on relentlessly and early on the morning of 9 July Sule Stack hove into view. Covered in nesting gannets and rising 120 feet vertically from the sea, it was a fine black and white sight in the dawn. An hour or so later we reached Sule Skerry.



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Sule Skerry

There were two paths from the lighthouse running down to the shore. The one to the southwest of the island was, like the stack, rocky and covered with gannets. The path to the southeast was gentle and ended in some well cut steps to the sea. Countless puffins covered this area, nesting in the turf. It seemed to offer a good anchorage, protected by a ring of rocks to the east. It is the only place on the Atlantic Outliers chart, which covers all of 'Britain's Northwest Sentries', that shows an anchor.

To our surprise four men emerged from the lighthouse. One came to the shore to look at us; as we saw no other boat, we suspected they must have come by helicopter, possibly from the Northern Lighthouse Board. We never found out as Tom had to be back that night to catch a plane the next day from Inverness. Sadly we turned round after half an hour and headed for Kinlochbervie. Cape Wrath looked fine in the evening sun as we rounded it with full sail on a broad reach and we got in before sunset.

On anchoring at several of the harbours on our way up Tom had jumped overboard with his shampoo. He did the same at the fishing port of Kinlochbervie,

Tom washing in Isleornsay





Evening at Kinlochbervie

unfortunately this time emerging through a thick layer of diesel. ‘Very pleasant’, texted his wife Lucy, with whom he was to share a sleeping bag on a camping holiday in Sussex the following night.

Kinlochbervie was Scotland’s third largest port in the 1970s. Now it, and Lochinver to the south, have long derelict wharves at which no boats arrive or depart, other than the odd Spanish or French trawler. I cleaned the ship after Tom left on a local bus and the next day James arrived. The hotel wasn’t taking guests for dinner and the café was shut so we walked six miles to find somewhere to eat and listened to the European Cup Final on the radio on our return. But the weather was fine and it was nice to have *Mary Helen’s* old owner on board.

Minke whale in The Minch

The sail from Kinlochbervie to Lochinver was good, rounding Stoer Head at 6.3 knots. A minke whale was sighted and the following morning James caught another on camera on our way to Loch Ewe. Bad weather was forecast from that evening so we found a snug spot close in behind the Isle of Ewe in the loch. A greeting (in the ‘wailing’ sense) met us from 20 Atlantic seals as we rowed ashore to climb a hill for a mobile signal. It blew hard



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Puffins in the Shiant Isles

the next day and we walked the island, meeting a shipwright who was repairing an old 38 ft Loch Fyne skiff in a shed. At the end of the island was a lovely group of deserted farm houses and a large collapsed water mill.

Over the following days, with a constant F6-7, we tacked to the head of the loch under foresails, visited Loch Ewe's tropical gardens and eventually managed to scrounge some diesel off a garage which no longer sold it. We got sufficiently bored for me to make a paper chess set and challenge James. He won, though I held out for a while; then he said he'd been the Eton chess champion two years running! I felt morally one up when he declined a rematch!

Finally, the weather eased and we had a good close-hauled sail over the Minch to the Shiant Isles, the extraordinary volcanic island group five miles off Lewis, with basalt cliffs ten times the

height of those on Staffa. We anchored on a tiny ledge off the northeast of the main island and watched as tens of thousands of guillemot, razorbill, shag, puffin and many others flew back and forth, turning the sky speckled. Air traffic control at Heathrow is for complete beginners compared to the Shiant.

We left the next day in thick fog but managed to sail half way to our next destination, South Rona, before meeting a glassy calm. The entrance to this pirates' harbour is intricate, with a

James Tew on South Rona

white arrow on a rock showing the way. James is descended from a pirate, Thomas Tew, and seemed at home there. We visited a chapel in a cave on the far side of the island. I slipped descending to it and broke my wrist, which made things a bit awkward thereafter; but we bandaged it and put in some lollipop sticks for splints. Leaving Rona there was, as



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so often no wind, but James insisted on sailing out so we drifted to the entrance for 45 minutes.

After passing under Skye Bridge, swishing through Kyle Rhea and a night at Isleornsay, we motor-sailed to Canna. The excitement that day was when James sighted a killer whale between Rum and Eigg. Canna was like Brighton beach with 19 yachts in the harbour. We walked the next day to the grave of a King of Norway and looked at some souterrains. Great

skuas, which had attacked on my last visit, stayed clear of us. We had a very good new dish for supper, kelp salad.

The following day, entering the north harbour at Muck, a minke blew close to us. This port also was crowded, with seven yachts there, one of which went on the rocks twice, but in the calm weather to no ill effect. It was so hot that the tarmac on the track across the island melted. After a passage to Tobermory, and setting off down the Sound of Mull the next morning in dense fog, we got back to Loch Etive on 25 July, three weeks after leaving.

Mary Helen was once described to me by Maldwin Drummond (ex-RCC) as the only perfectly designed yacht ever. Penny and I are getting on now and the gear gets no lighter, so she is up for sale. But, for the 12 years she has been with us, I could not but agree with Maldwin.

