

# Jim, Richard and Simon

A Celebration of Friends – Jura April 2016

Christopher Elliott

## *Awarded the Dulcibella Prize*

Every cruise should have a purpose. As I set out alone from Ardfern on *Otter* in early April, on a perfectly calm, clear, chilly evening to cruise down the Sound of Jura, my resolve was to recall three warm friends who had departed to the great sailing and fishing grounds in the heavens the previous year. Richard Clifford (RCC), Jim Pitts (RCC) and Simon Fogden, in all my three most consistent correspondents of recent years. I missed them. I would climb the Paps of Jura in their company.

Jim has written at length in this Journal about the pleasures of sailing in early springtime in Scotland, the principal one being the absence of noisome people to disturb his reverie! And so it was – Jim and I had the wide, turbulent Sound, stretching 20 miles ahead to the south, completely



to ourselves. There was nobody about. Three hours later as dusk approached, *Otter* turned easily into the shallow waters at the northern end of Loch na Mile, Jura, anchoring well offshore in clear water and white sand. Richard popped up, speaking earnestly to his favourite subject; he required me to lay a second anchor and cable, in tandem, because I would be leaving *Otter* unattended in an open anchorage for many hours the next

day.

Long ago I had been an enthusiastic and possibly competent climber but now, approaching seventy, I had fallen under the spell of vertigo. Before leaving home, I suffered a detailed inquisition from Herself about the wisdom of the proposed venture and I gave promises about taking a mobile phone (no service) and telling the coastguards (too embarrassed to) but, following Richard's advice, the spirit of the undertaking would be met by leaving a note under a stone. It was to be twelve miles in all over saturated bog and steep scree, with a total ascent of about 3,000 feet. I chose the easiest Pap, the middle one, the tallest, for if I had done either of the smaller ones I knew that John MacInness (RCC) would have told me to go back and start again. I spent the evening calmly at anchor in meticulous preparation for the next day, under the shadow of the three enormous Paps, rearing up as hard shapes against the night sky. I needed a clear day (no point in going up if you could not see anything), a moderate wind and one that was from the north or west. As I settled into the cockpit for a final dram, we seemed to have all three.

I rose early and went through everything very thoroughly, as Richard demanded. Go\No Go was at eight o'clock, but I hesitated. Immediately there was a great roar of encouragement from Jim, 'Thurr is absolutely no bloody point in coming all this way if you are not going to get on with it!'

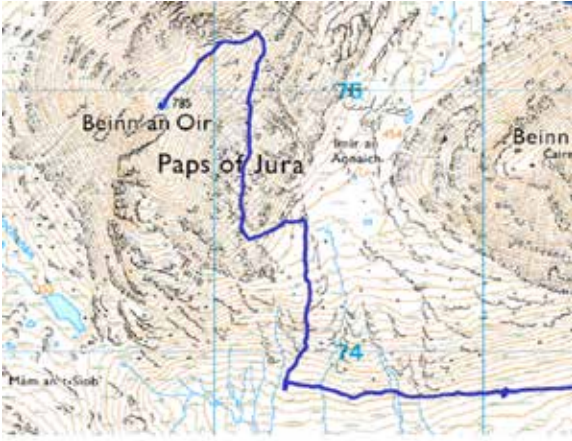
Into the dinghy, one last glance back towards *Otter* and then a quarter-mile row ashore. We grounded some way out in the shallows, forcing me to dance towards the dry land in long, tippy-toe strides: big mistake, one walking boot filled with sea water and Simon split his sides laughing. Then, as considerate as ever, he helped me to wring out the sock and empty the boot. As I was to find out later, it hardly mattered, because I was going to be wet to above my knees.

I set off. It was a mile to the deer fence that bordered the only road on Jura, then over a rickety high stile and we were onto the open moor. Track marks splayed out into many mini-diversions, all for a reason. The whole moor was completely saturated and had become a peaty bog-field. At first it did not seem to matter, but after a time it was thoroughly irritating as I floundered into yet another swamp up to my knees. At one stage Jim goaded me forward with, 'Well, Corporal (his term of affection...I think), a fine mess the Army have got themselves into this time!'

By ten o'clock we had reached the bottom of an exquisitely beautiful lake, nestling in the circle of the three Paps towering above us. Simon, the relentless all-day fisherman, rubbed his hands at the prospect and settled down to fish Loch an t-Siob. I remembered a similar day we spent together on the River Spey when, despite his ever-patient tutoring, Simon had had to recover my flies endlessly from the bushes behind – but then who got the only fish that day?

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A rough path traced itself along the northern side of the lake, so I followed it. First rule of walking in Scotland – if there is a path, there has to be a reason. This one took me beguiling westwards for more than a mile



until I was well past the easy way up onto the *bealach* (coll), separating the two Eastern Paps and my chosen route. Richard gave me a funny look and I cursed a bit, before he set off purposefully up the directissima to recover our line and I followed. After scrambling up seven hundred feet of very

steep fell-side, I emerged triumphant onto the wide grassy platform between the Paps. Ever the agriculturalist, Jim looked up at the centre Pap, my target, and muttered, 'If the sheep can get up thurr, so can you.' Thus I followed a steep sheep-trail, rather hesitatingly, I have to say. But Jim was (unknowingly) right, for a marvel revealed itself - completely unseen from below. A hidden terrace slashed upwards from left to right at a gentle angle across the whole front of the centre Pap and led easily onto the summit ridge. There was a narrow bit where the scree swept magnificently away into nothingness a thousand feet below and I hesitated again, but Richard yanked the anti-vertigo lever and we were through.

Forty minutes later I was sitting on the summit, staring out in wonderment at the most magnificent panorama in all directions. The long Sound of Jura with Arran beyond framed the eastern sky; the Sound of Islay lay to the West. Further out was the low outline of Colonsay, with the great dark brooding bulk of the Ross of Mull defiantly closing off the northern horizon. Ireland, maybe even to the Bloody Foreland, lay beyond the mountains of Islay to the south, *Otter* a tiny speck in a white-sanded bay five miles away.

The summit was made of attractive, white-grey, shattered quartzite. I picked up three handsome stones, wrote my companions' names on them and popped them into my day sack.

Here the silliness stopped because, of course, Jim, Richard and Simon had not been with me – only my memories of them and their impact on our lives. The descent without them was long, boring, extremely tiring and, towards the end, very tedious as I re-crossed the miles of bog-field. A

wind came up from the north which I tried to ignore, but soon the hairs on my neck were sounding their alert. By the time *Otter* hove into view eight hours after leaving her, the wind had risen to 25 knots (although luckily still off the shore), and *Otter* was riding and surging on her double anchors in the waves far out in the bay.

I rushed on and scrambled down to the beach, took off my pack and prepared the dinghy. Boots off, I pushed the dinghy through the shallows and jumped in. At one moment I thought that I might have been swept in the strong wind on past *Otter* and out into the Sound, but soon recovered on board safely, had a cup of tea and then repaired to a secure buoy two miles to the south. I was utterly exhausted, but what a triumph.

It was then, only then, that I found that I had left my three stones behind on the shore line - which was probably as it had to be.



*Otter*, an Odin 28, riding to anchor off Eilean nan Gabhar, The Small Isles, next morning.