To Orkney and back in *Redwing*

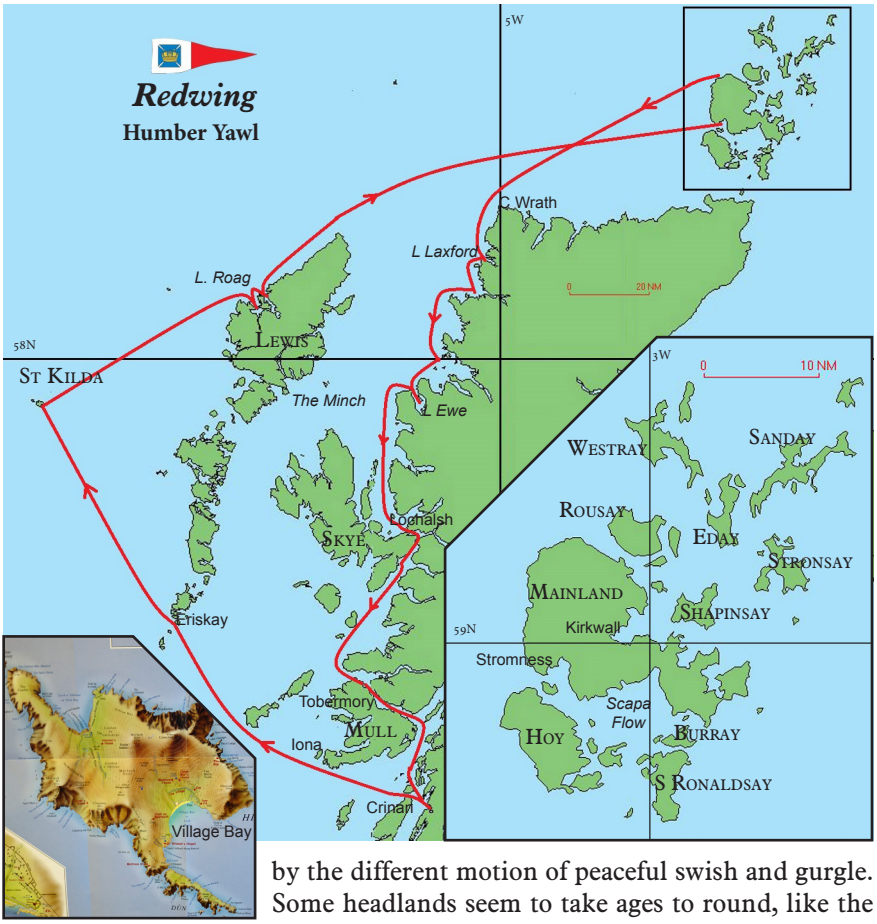
James King

Awarded Juno's Cup

It all began in a New Zealand cellar. Two years ago Henry, now aged 17, and I paid a visit to Russ Rimmington to see *Sheila II* of *Sheila in the Wind* fame at his home south of Hamilton, North Island. He gave us a royal welcome and over a bottle of Pinot Noir shook hands on sailing together in *Redwing* (ex-*Cherub III*), *Sheila II's* diminutive sister ship, to Orkney the following season. Commitments to the America's Cup and a triple heart-bypass operation put paid to that, although by way of apology he did send a copy of his autobiography, *Hand a Man a Spanner,* written in convalescence. The following year a veteran crew member of many an adventure on *Redwing* also committed enthusiastically to the cruise, but had to bail out owing to a family wedding. So father and son found themselves on board with more living space to compensate for more time on watch. It was Henry's last summer holidays at Gordonstoun and, having almost made it to St Kilda two years earlier, we were determined at the very least to get there this time. So far the weather encouraged.

'When the wind blows you have got to go with it!' Scrap Batten's (RCC) words, etched on the author's mind since childhood, took us to sea as soon as we could decently get away from our respective schools to catch the favourable south-westerly blowing throughout June and early July. While North York's Constabulary would not accept the Sirens' cry as excuse for the M1 speeding ticket past Nottingham, the same county did produce three delightful old boys on the other side of the pontoon our first couple of days fitting out at Crinan. Learning they had served together in the Green Howards begged the question if they had come across Miles Smeaton (RCC). One of them remembered asking him at a dinner if he had any advice to pass on. Miles demurred a while and came back with the second piece of RCC wisdom that underwrote our voyage, 'Always make sure your ground tackle is heavier than you need and you will sleep well.'

Thus with the glass still high and faith in the SW2-3 to come, we slipped our moorings and motored though Dorus Mor in oily calm, overcast, still conditions as if all was held in suspense for what lay ahead. We had the world to ourselves as we chugged under *Redwing's* well-muffled engine to catch the spring flood through Corryvreckan that, if timed right, would carry us past Iona and see us well on the way to Gunna Sound. Soon after a hearty breakfast, the wind conveniently appeared and the dull thud of the engine was soothed



by the different motion of peaceful swish and gurgle. Some headlands seem to take ages to round, like the Butt of Lewis that we would be encountering later, but the Ross of Mull with its Toran Rocks, Erraid and Iona whizzed past in the flash of an hour on full springs and, once rounded, gave the sense of being in open sea and into cruising proper much quicker than the alternative Sound of Mull route. With the wind picking up and backing southerly by the time we reached Gunna Sound that evening, it was an easy decision to drop anchor off Tiree in the lee of the waves, but not the wind, which by now had risen to F6 with no signs of abating. So with Smeaton's words in mind the small kedge was shackled on, three fathoms down the chain, for extra holding and all chain run out. 'Snug below for wild goat stew for supper. Not a sound to be heard in spite of quite a lot of rocking. Big blow and much rain in the night.' (*Redwing* Log, 14 July)

The tides and Sabbath rest gave two good excuses for a lazy start the following morning on another good brunch before crossing the lumpy Sea

of the Hebrides to Arcasaid Mhor, Eriskay. The third was a gradual clearing of the weather, settling down to a SW3 following wind. The compass, on the other hand, was not so steady. The 'magnetic anomalies' indicated on the chart were brought home when Henry noted the GPS heading remained 330° True compared to the compass reading of 000°. Touching a rock or two with our iron shoe of keel ballast on cruises as a toddler, while feeling our way into secluded anchorages, left a deep impression on the lad. Henry quickly realised that nothing beats personal scrutiny and double-checking of the chart with all pilotage information at hand: transit bearings, depth soundings, etc. He has proved a good foil to his father's adventurous nature in the last couple of years, and shall be referred to as the Navigator from now on.

Flicking through the Glénans manual on seamanship a couple of days later on the passage to St Kilda, there was a diagram of exactly the ground tackle mentioned above and which for ages I have placed so much store by for extra security to our already heavier-than-needed CQR. In French adding an extra anchor to the same chain is called *empennage*, translating directly as fletching, although it would be good to have the nautical version confirmed. Be that as it may, the gist of the manual's verdict for *empennage* is that this is a cumbersome and useless exercise from a holding point of view, requiring unnecessary extra effort and likely to be more of a hindrance than a help. Sure enough, hauling up the anchor a few days later in Village Bay, St Kilda, was much harder work than usual, requiring all our combined strength. After much straining it emerged that the chain had looped itself on to the flukes of the smaller secondary anchor and trebled the normal weight: manageable in calm conditions, but not good in a blow and never to be used again.

St Kilda lived up to all expectations, but completely caught us out with its feeling of intimacy in Village Bay. Charlie Maclean had prepared us in his book, *The Island on the Edge of the World*, for the instant shelter provided by the Dun from the wind and ocean swell, but I was not prepared for the

Redwing at anchor in Village Bay, St Kilda, with the Dun behind her

strong feeling of homecoming and intimacy in this remotest of Britain's natural harbours akin, for instance, to arriving in St Mawes Bay. 'Without the "picturesque natives" the island will be of small interest to tourists and in a few years may be forgotten by all but trawlermen who shelter in its lee from the North Atlantic gales,' *Observer* , 31 August 1930, covering the evacuation of the island's population could not have been further from the truth. Apart from the lights of half a dozen visiting yachts and a couple of small cruise ships, the foreshore was traced out in orange fairy lights by the MOD's latest construction site, as we nosed our way in at dead of night.

Instead of the lie-in we were looking forward to, we were punctually awoken by the noise of a mechanical digger, followed by the washes of four tourist RIBs heading to discharge their full loads on the pier. It was an exceptionally fine day and the ruined Village with its glen up to Conachair was as populated as Pompeii with visitors from America, France, and the Midlands. The sudden drop as you reach the top of the path to stand at the edge of Britain's highest cliff face and look down on the seabirds swirling below was another breath-catcher and too much footage was wasted on mistaking a bonx for a sea eagle. Making our way on up to the summit, the equally unannounced crumpled propeller lying abandoned on the hillside from the crash that claimed several RAF lives, reinforced the untouched bleakness of the place. Their names are honoured in the island's chapel, whose conservation the Air Force have taken under their wing, and sitting in the teacher's desk next to the fireplace in the schoolroom just off it, in this best preserved and most 'alive' of the island's buildings, returns you again to the haunting intimacy of St Kilda.

The author back in the classroom

It certainly provided more warmth and hospitality than the MOD's appropriation of the Puffin Inn for 'authorised personnel only'. Deprived of our much-looked-forward-to jar of Puffin Ale and with a blow forecast the next day, we decided to make the most of the good weather by circumnavigating Hirta as close in as we dared, admiring its caves and marvellous arches. Rounding the Dun at 1800 under motor in no wind, the Bay was awash with puffins, as if it was their time of day to get together on the water. They were so thick one worried lest the bows would run into them, but they always maintained a ten-foot ring of clear water around the boat, diving down and bobbing up further

way. Through the puffins and back at anchor among humans, a tender drew up alongside and a man asked if we were an Albert Strange: so much for being in the middle of nowhere on St Kilda! Tony Walsham was thrilled to come across *Cherub III* as he had just finished reconstructing Strange's previous own boat, *Cherub II*, and Murdoch, his cruise vessel's dour skipper at the helm of the tender, was equally surprised to discover his mother lived next to our next destination's hosts on Lewis.

When planning the detour to St Kilda on the way to Orkney I had underestimated Loch Roag, in spite of the Pilot's one-liner that you could spend a fortnight happily cruising it alone. Leaving Village Bay at 0900 after a day's shelter from the blow, we continued to follow Scrap's advice and go with the favourable NW wind to anchor off Voltos in just under twelve hours. Murdoch's advice to stick to the Pabay side of the channel was a great help in threading our way in through the Kyles of Pabay Mor at low tide to the anchorage. An unexpected benefit of sending a son to Gordonstoun is the way a friend turns up in every nook and cranny of the West Coast, and no sooner had the Navigator announced our arrival on the pipes than Angus replied with a tune on his from the pier, followed by an invitation to join his family for a dram after supper.


Leaving St Kilda with Henry on the helm

Loch Roag itself lived up to expectations with a mystery at every turn, from its gin-clear lagoon on Little Berneray, to the ancient kirk and graveyard spilling its contents into the sea on Temple Beach, or putting up and surprising sea eagles, genuine this time, feeding off the rabbit population they help keep down. A hard beat out into a W6 from West to East Loch Roag was rewarded with a snug anchorage in Dubh Thob, where a black guillemot greeted us in perfect calm while the wind howled overhead for the rest of the day. The most impressive feature of the loch was to sail to the Callanish Stones and fulfil a personal ambition hatched when last there with the late Wallace and Miles Clark (RCC). At the end of the Lord of the Isles Voyage (*Roving Commissions, 1991*) Stornaway Council entertained *Galley Aileach's* crew to lunch followed by a bus ride to the Stones and we all agreed how much better it would be to arrive by boat, preferably a *Birlinn,* traditional Hebridean like *Aileach*.

The visit to Callanish fell on the second of the cruise's five Sundays. Perhaps on account of being a holy day, there were quite a number of people

at the Stones that morning, including a Spanish family who assembled at the north-west end of the corridor of stones and processed as if up the aisle to the largest and most impressive of the central monoliths, linked hands around it and communed. The following Sabbath we were in Kirkwall and so attended St Magnus Cathederal where we worshipped 'all things to all men' and very little to God. The best example of Christian faith, however, was discovered in Kirkwall Marina whose harbour-master, Kenny, is also Moderator for the Council of Churches of Orkney and Shetland and explained the precarious state of affairs with, for instance, only three ministers serving over 30 parishes in Shetland. He is a wonderful character and delightfully soft-spoken with an old-fashioned, considerate turn of phrase. When asked where to find a replacement for the batten we lost while reducing sail in a squall off Sanday, he thought for a while and doubted whether Stromness or Kirkwall might have what we needed. 'But I have a strip of pine in my garage which, with a little planing, will do the job.' He was back within the hour with a beautifully crafted batten that now takes pride of place in the main.

'Never underestimate the strength of Scapa Flow tides' was the third and laconic mantra of the cruise texted by Lionel Hoare (RCC) in answer to a request for cruising tips in Orkney. With this in mind and the following wind dwindling on the passage across the North Minch from the Butt of Lewis, Navigator and skipper had to take stock with a time-speed-distance calculation 15 miles west of Stromness. Pride was swallowed and we succumbed to motor-sailing to try to maintain the necessary 3kts to make Stromness before the turn of the tide and avoid a day's wait at the foot of the Old Man of Hoy. It was a beautiful day, we were tired, had things we needed to do in town and so the race was on, along with the engine. With one and a half miles left to get there, the tide turned in the Sound of Hoy and the infamous standing waves began to build. Soon the engine was at full throttle and not much ground being made with the end tantalisingly in sight across the shallow Skerry of Ness, when the Navigator spotted the Ebbing Eddy Rock buoy. If ever a name could be more useful, it was that one at that moment. The tide was undeniably ebbing and that rock offered an eddy in our favour almost within reach, if we could push ahead for just another cable. With judicious ferry-gliding and the engine at full tilt, we just made it and were helped by the same eddy into Stromness, which could not have been more resplendent that glorious sunny day, living up to its sobriquet of the Venice of the North. We were happy to go along with that suspension of disbelief and enjoyed the best lamb chops ever from the local butcher, followed by the deepest of a good cruising night's sleep.

We caught the flood tide the next day to motor across Scapa Flow in no wind and meet another of the Navigator's school friends who was waitressing in The Sands Hotel on Burray. She kindly gave us a tour of the Italian Chapel the following morning and joined us on an exhilarating broad reach back to

Stromness in a SE5 with white horses and clear skies, as good as it gets. What took five hours under engine the day before swept by in half that time.

Back in Stromness the weather forecast was not looking so good with a gale approaching. This coincided with a fisherman's advice to catch the last of the spring tides to take us north that afternoon to lunch with David Hudson from Stronsay. David retired from teaching at Aldro just before I arrived and settled in Orkney to follow his pursuits as a yachtsman, musician and classicist. He adapted quickly to our lifestyle on board and brought much entertainment to the party with his generosity ashore, local knowledge and ability to tell a good story. Fired up by the exhilaration of the morning's sail across Scapa, we headed back out over-canvassed and it was not long before we had to reef down fully in the lee of Scara Brae. With wind now at F6, we were close-hauled, but comforted at having followed the fisherman's advice to leave Stromness two hours ahead of the ebb to reach the main cruising grounds before the gale. It was nevertheless still not enough to see *Redwing* to Shapinsay in order for David to keep his appointment on the organ at St Magnus the next day. A fine anchorage was found in the white sand of Fersness Bay, Eday, living up to the Clyde Cruising Club's 'well sheltered from all southerly winds.' Stronsay haggis, Italian white and 53nm under our keel that day proved a knock-out cocktail. As a result, the anchor was not up as early as it should have been the next morning. Speed to catch the tide through Calf Sound across to Stronsay was further hampered by a thick mist and it did us the world of good to await the next tide off Carrick House, where John Gow, the pirate, was finally captured. By now the mist had given way to a beautiful day, unveiling a perfect view of the Red and Grey Heads, marking the entrance to the Sound. The badly needed rest was spent reversing the peak halyard ends, swimming, lunching and teaching Canasta to the crew before the tide allowed us to continue on our way. '2200 Drop anchor Whitehall. David walks into the pub and Bob (leaving his unfinished drink on the bar) gives crew 7 mile lift to David's house. Late supper, cards, Bunnahabhain and Canasta til 0300. Getting light. Slept well.' Island life at its best. The weather had other ideas and we made it over to Kirkwall in time for supper at the hotel and be snug in the marina for Saturday night's gale.

Fully reefed and going well. Handa behind

Kirkwall itself is charming and ancient. Its main hotel has an Edwardian elegance and in a little alley opposite the Cathedral hides Kirness and Gorie, one of the finest wine and cheese merchants to be found in the British Isles. Along with its eclectic range of wines, as carefully chosen as they are made,

the cheeses included a personal favourite, Fougerou, for its ability to go as well with whisky as with wine. It is garnished with a bracken leaf and is hard enough to find in France, let alone the UK. In our enthusiastic exchange of notes the shopkeeper introduced us to his favourite cheese, Westray Wife. Thus the next afternoon, armed with a letter of introduction to the cheese-maker and having said good-bye to David, we jumped on the north-going tide and favourable S5 to be in Pierowall, 25nm away, in four hours. Back in the rhythm of these islands at sea, we opted to complete the circumnavigation of the archipelago with a visit to Sanday before heading back south, laden with half a stone of Westray Wife for ballast. The cheese has only been going for six years; it is the product of the remarkable vision of Jason and Nina Wilson from South Africa, produced on a small enough scale to run it themselves and keep a tight grip on its quality at every stage. It was a huge privilege to be given a personal tour, watch Jason take the curds off that day's batch and learn how it is made. Everyone who received a slice on our return voyage south was highly complimentary.

Rebecca, her kayak, *English Rose* and Henry

First stop after the long passage to Cape Wrath was a visit to Loch a'Chadfi, long overdue ever since having had the fortune to meet Rebecca Ridgeway at a 21st party in the 1980s and be entranced by her description of it. She, in the meantime, has become the first woman to kayak round Cape Horn and accomplish much more at sea besides. The approach up Loch Laxford is as discreet as could be wished for by one of our nation's more reclusive heroes to make his lair. The nearest road is an hour away on foot. But once through the narrow rocky entrance there was no mistaking where you have arrived, with his collection of *English Roses* around the natural harbour's foreshore. As luck would have it, Rebecca and her two cousins appeared soon after we had anchored and, even better, it was at her cousin's 21st we had met. Later the invitation came to join John and Marie Christine Ridgeway for a cup of coffee at ten o'clock sharp the next morning, Sunday. 'And don't be late!' Having watched *The Mercy* with Henry earlier in the year and briefed him on the Golden Globe's original contesters, the Navigator was as excited as me at the thought of meeting one in person.

Two hours flew by as the great man imparted wisdom, including his three life principles:

- Self reliance ('Elbows in, knees flexed. Never get into debt!')
- Positive thinking ('The opportunity of a lifetime lasts only as long as the life of the opportunity.')
- 'Leave people and things better than you find them.'

He showed us a bookshelf containing his twelve favourite books, including Miles Clarke's *High Endeavours* as one of them. Rebecca then showed us the first boat to row across the Atlantic with her yellow kayak alongside it. We were both struck by *English Rose's* primitive thwarts and rowlocks, no different from any other dinghy, and Henry came away buzzing with all he had seen and heard.

The rest of the voyage south was a combination of needing to get back, delicately balanced with wanting to catch up with old friends and places, all juggled with tides and weather. We were spoiled by both. Except for an extra day weather-bound in Loch Ewe by a fierce southerly, the following day could not have been more different, with flat calm and hot weather all the way down the Inner Sound, taking it in turns to sit in the hanging armchair, hoisted instead of a jib, to watch dolphins, read and generally admire the scenery of those great hills looking their best. The Applecross Inn was still serving lunch at three and worth the detour as always. The growing spring tides could not have been more helpful seeing us from Isle Ornsay to Tobermoray and Tobermoray to Fladda on one tide for each hop and a wee Minkie gave us a farewell blow 50yds off the port quarter at Ardnamurchan. The Sound of Luing required help from the engine to reach the favourable eddy along Craignish Point, where it was by then full flood through Dorus Mor. However, the sight of Ross Ryan playing in and out of it in his MFV, the *Scarbh*, full of clients, encouraged us to give it a sporting chance. A perfectly timed following breeze sprang up behind just at the right moment as we entered the main current and, inch by inch, the two very different wooden boats gained ground until the *Scarbh* led the way through to a weaker stream and surged ahead under many more horsepower. Returning to Crinan is always a grand finale, with a sunset over the Western Isles, the camaraderie of the boatyard and the prospect of the world's best fish and chips at the Hotel. This year, with 834nm under the keel and new horizons opened, was no different.

Redwing at anchor off Cove, Loch Ewe