

From the New World to the Old

Jim Lott with Karin Lott

A strange thing happened on the way back to our yacht *Victoria* following our summer holiday in New Zealand in 2014.

We called in to see some good sailing friends in Seattle on the way to Chesapeake Bay where *Victoria* had been stored. Our friends Mike and Jean Cummings, with whom we sailed in company on their honeymoon in 1993, suggested that rather than flying, we drove to the Chesapeake in their motorhome. Strangers to camping, we were soon all at sea on land.

After our three-week 'dry cruise' over snowy mountains and through desert canyons, we parked alongside *Victoria* resting at Deltaville. A week later we were ready to sail, our next destination, the Azores. But the New World would not allow us to escape without a final message.

The day before our departure we heard a radio warning about destructive winds arriving at Deltaville within a few minutes. By the time we rigged a second painter to secure the dinghy close astern the wind arrived with a roar. As our anchor dragged through the soft mud, we started the motor. A glance at the wind-speed showed 65kts (F12) as we came around and managed to weigh anchor with full power on the engine. We headed into deeper water where we knew the mud was firmer; then the wind picked up and it began to blow really hard. The dinghy flipped and at the same moment, the engine overheated with a wailing alarm. *Victoria's* gunwale was under as we skated sideways across the bay with no engine. We let the anchor and chain run to the bitter end. Our 35kg Manson bit hard, the 13mm chain snapped taut, almost throwing me overboard as we stopped dead in a second. Calm returned within an hour and soon the replacement V-belt was fitted and the dinghy and outboard all sorted.



Chesapeake Bay lighthouse

It took half an hour to wash the Chesapeake mud from the chain and

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anchor, which had buried three metres. We headed away from land on our third Atlantic crossing leaving the distinctive, Chesapeake, wooden lighthouses astern. The F4 breeze soon gave way to head-winds and sloppy seas as the Gulf Stream carried us forward, so we slowed to about 4kts for a modicum of comfort. Day three was Karin's birthday and, having spent the previous one bouncing in the Gulf Stream off Cape Hatteras, she was building up huge credits.

The GRIB weather maps showed a depression developing in our path so we followed the isobars and after few days were back on an easterly heading. The wind settled to SW5 giving us several days of reaching and



running all the way to the Azores, a much easier trip than our first trans-Atlantic 20 years ago.

The harbour at Horta is a key focal point for yachts crossing west to east in the Atlantic. The authorities encourage each yacht to paint their name and date on the marina walls and

walkways and there are thousands of boat-names just in the last few years.

Our sail to Ireland started out fast, fresh and bumpy, easing as we arrived in Dingle. We drove round the treeless landscape looking at ruins going back 3,000 years, but we needed to get on as quickly as possible towards Norway. The long days with only a few hours of darkness helped as we visited remote islands and anchorages in sunny weather with no swell. The locals said it was 'never like this' and the radio warned of a heat-wave.

It was time to cross to Scotland and we anchored a mile from the Laphroaig distillery on the island of Islay. It's a pity Karin does not like single malt, and walking there on my own in the pouring rain just did not have sufficient appeal. Fog accompanied us to Ardfarn, but as the weather cleared it was a pleasure to see trees in the sheltered anchorages after the barren slopes of Ireland.

As a favourable tide carried us at 10kts through Kyle Rhea into Loch Alsh and under Skye Bridge, we couldn't help thinking about Bonnie Prince Charlie and his voyage in a small boat nearly 300 years ago, but it was hard to imagine the wind and waves immortalised in the well-known lyrics.

Fellow RCC members advised us not to miss Rona, where we threaded through rocks to a wonderful, sheltered anchorage. On the long walk to the other side of the island we marvelled at the deprivations that past

inhabitants endured. A whole village population left to settle in Australia and New Zealand, the crumbling stone houses their only legacy. After buying lobsters and venison from the farmer, we headed for Cape Wrath whose very name made our hearts skip a beat.

We rounded Cape Wrath in a flat calm with daytime visibility in the twilight at midnight. The breeze soon picked up to W4 as we reached along in comfort appreciating our good fortune with the weather. Lerwick



in the Shetland Islands was our last stop on the way to Norway. We could recall little about this remote archipelago in the North Sea, aside from shaggy Shetland ponies. Our education started just as we were tying up at the city dock with a friendly visit from Leslie Irvine (RCC), a local businessman whose wife is a Kiwi. He later took us on a tour of the island, gave us lots of advice about local sailing conditions and had us to dinner.

The sunny, mild weather gave no hint of what it would be like in winter, but the few trees all stunted and bent told another story. Hundreds of yachts visit every year, including many Norwegians who stock up their yachts with duty-free whisky and wine delivered by the truckload.

The memorial on the waterfront at Scalloway is a poignant reminder of allied bravery. During the war, the Norwegian-Shetland bond was reinforced by the 'Shetland Bus' with Norwegian fishing boats carrying

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patriots escaping from the Nazis to safety and returning with arms, radio operators and infiltrators who were actively resisting the German invaders.

When we left New Zealand in 2011, there were only a few 'must-visit' places in our plans, including the Beagle Canal in Chile and Ålesund on the west coast of Norway where Karin has her family roots. Karin's maternal grandfather, Anton Alvestad, was its mayor for a time, then the city manager for two decades. He also was a member of Norway's parliament for many years. He was committed to the temperance movement, but this did not delay us from toasting him more than once with aquavit.



Ålesund is a pretty town with its art nouveau architecture on many post-cards. It was rebuilt in stone after most of the wooden buildings were lost in a fire in 1904 when Karin's grandfather was training to become a baker. Although we had visited before, being there in *Victoria* provided the opportunity to find out as much as possible about where her family lived and worked. Karin's cousin, Else, and her husband arrived from Oslo to help in our search.



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A reporter arrived to take photos of the family from afar who had come by yacht to look up ancestors in the city archives, and the newspaper published a two-page spread. The corner where Anton had his bakery has



Hjoerundfjorden, Norway

clung to its theme. Bread rolls have been replaced by Thai massages, but there are still tarts for sale. We stood together blocking the raunchy portrait in the window as the reporter took photos.

The 'Shetland Bus' fishing-boat voyages were centred on Ålesund and the nearby islands. It was to here that the Norwegian royal family fled, taking the country's gold reserves with them in the face of invading Nazis who were slowed by defence forces. Later they were evacuated to Britain. Anton was imprisoned by the Nazis for his part in helping them to escape. And so began our travels in Norway seeking family history and visiting the country where Karin's mother grew up. Sadly she died suddenly when Karin was just eight.

Planning a route southward through the thousands of islands took time, but it's possible to travel most of the coastline in sheltered water. In places the fiords cut inland for many miles; in other parts the islands and rocky islets are low with narrow passages between. We visited many towns along the way, with clusters of pretty, maroon houses perched on rocky slopes. In

the south, the grandeur of the fiords diminishes to lower mountains, but the chains of islands and narrow passages multiply and it is easy to get lost. With the help of electronic charts we managed to find our way through the array of channels hardly wider than the boat. Time and again we were told that



Bjoernafjorden, Norway

this much sunshine was most unusual, and the Norwegian meteorological service recorded the sunniest July for 60 years.

We arrived in Bergen the day before the Tall Ships called during their

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race. Over 50 visited and we watched the massive *Kruzenshtern* being assisted into the tiny inner harbour. She is a four-masted barque originally



called *Padua* and is a close sister to the *Peking*, the largest non-engined sailing ship ever built.

Our arrival at Kristiansand at Norway's southern tip coincided with a change from gentle breezes to a gale. Three yachts remained at the dock with multiple head-ropes and stern lines. The arrival of another yacht saw Jim and other crew from the boats on the pontoon to handle lines. It was quite a task with a bollard being torn from the pontoon and the line handlers drenched by waves breaking a metre over the dock in F9 winds.

It was hard to drop the lines and sail away from Norway where we had received the most wonderful hospitality, have so many ties and where we feel so much at home. The summer was kind to us as we cruised southwards along the Swedish coast. We had left it too late in the season to transit the Gota Canal so we headed to Denmark where Copenhagen was a delight.

We have visited many maritime museums, but the one in an attractive ancient town called Roskilde in the centre of Denmark impressed us greatly. Like many maritime museums, Roskilde continues traditional boatbuilding with shipwrights using the tools and materials of the time. In a remarkable indoor display, ships dating back to 950AD caused us to reflect deeply. In order to protect the town, five wooden ships were sunk in the main channel forcing would-be raiders to take a heavily defended route, a naval strategy still employed in the last world war. The remains of these well preserved ships have been raised and are set up on steel cradles.

Denmark has many islands and sheltered anchorages with no shortage of visiting yachts. Even late in the year, boats crowded the waterways, many carrying German flags. A huge volume of shipping uses Kiel Canal,

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which shortens the voyage to the Baltic by a couple of days. We locked through with a group of yachts and soon ships were pounding by, just metres away. The locks at the western end of the canal ejected us into the mighty Elbe River where there are few places to find shelter. Cuxhaven is about 20 miles down-river and the ebb tide carried us at seven knots along the buoyed channel. A F6 wind at odds with the tide created a very bumpy path and we bashed and bounced with spray flying high up the mast - we had forgotten what sailing in fresh conditions was like.

Eventually the wind abated and, with a favourable tide, we departed from the river devoid of redeeming features. After an overnight stop at Helgoland, a barren rock which German sailors proudly describe as their favourite offshore island (there is no other), we tackled the traffic separation zone with many ships heading both ways. It was clear why German yachtsmen prefer Danish waters.

The Ems River marks the border between Germany and Holland and a route through the Dutch canals to Amsterdam allows yachts to keep their masts up. Our entry to Holland was also the first time we had seen any officials for a couple of months when we were visited by both immigration and customs.

It was back to canal cruising through the city of Groningen and dozens of opening bridges where road and canal traffic is controlled by traffic lights. The Netherlands is a truly maritime nation with boats considered as commonplace as cars. One section of the mast-up route through the canals looked too shallow, so we headed out into the North Sea for another

passage under sail. It also gave us a chance to visit Vlieland, a charming Friesian Island, where a strong gale pinned us to the dock for five days. Each day we had a visit from customs or



Canals at Groningen, Netherlands

immigration police who came to 'check our papers'. They always went away satisfied and we soon realised they just wanted a cup of coffee and a chat.

Autumn in the IJsselmeer was gentle. We were enchanted by the Dutch towns and admired the distinctive sailing vessels. It was not far to Amsterdam and the shorter days and cool winds reminded us of the coming winter. For a few days we sat in a quiet marina in the heart of the

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city. The displays in the windows in the red-light district were rather dull. Next time we will go at 9pm rather than 9am.

A crane lifted *Victoria* out efficiently, hardly noticing *Victoria's* 22 tons since it could handle 700 tons. It took a few days to winterise the systems on board in anticipation of the coming snow, while we flew to New Zealand to enjoy the southern summer.

Come March 2015, we left the Auckland sun and returned to Amsterdam, welcomed by horizontal rain and sleet. After enjoying the previous summer, when we hurried through the Hebrides in sunshine, a leisurely cruise through the Western Isles appealed. April brought some sun and after a reach across the channel in a SE3 breeze, we arrived in Limehouse Basin to plan our voyage north along the east coast. Then a fortnight of strong north-easterlies arrived, so our best laid plans for the getting to Scotland via the North Sea were given the heave-ho. The south coast and Irish Sea had more appeal.

The E6 wind arrived just in time for our dawn departure from the



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Medway on the start of the ebb. Progress was fast as we buried the foredeck deeply in the short seas until the wind freed as we followed the coast. Preferring to anchor rather than sitting in marinas, we welcomed the shelter in Dover harbour. Tom Cunliffe's (RCC) wonderful book on the Channel was entirely correct: the anchorage was most uncomfortable, but a few nights later, Lulworth Cove was even worse. Fresh easterlies and helpful tides made for splendid sailing and a safe haven each night. The breeze filled in from the south-west as we passed inside the Longships, carrying us to anchor at St Ives.

A SW4 breeze hurried us to the lee of Lundy Island, where we anchored as the sun set. We looked forward to going ashore next day, but a late forecast warned of F7 northerlies. We departed at midnight for Milford Haven, where we spent a few days exploring the River Cleddau, well protected from the wind. Easterly and southerly winds were forecast as we headed towards the Irish Sea and Scotland. Within hours, the forecast changed just as headwinds arrived. They added a northerly gale to the forecast with heavy rain and we bounced and bashed our way to Holyhead, where we managed to find a mooring at midnight.

The promise of W4 had us on our way. With a few days before family were to join us in Scotland, we sailed through the night hoping to reach Largs in the Firth of Clyde before the next northerly gale arrived. The rain and N8-9 wind arrived as we passed Arran with about 20 miles to go. With staysail and a tiny jib we crashed and bashed, helped by a favourable tide, tacking again and again, but thankful there was no other traffic to contend with. A call to the marina assured us there was a berth and a yellow-clad figure listing 30° to windward nobly scurried down the



Loch Scaig, Scotland

pontoon to take our lines in any one of the dozens of empty spots we fancied. Our anticipated summer sunshine was proving elusive.

In Helensburgh we caught up with friends and the erudite discussion about great designers such as Fife, Watson and McGruer was enhanced by single malt. Glasgow Council offered a free berth in the marina at the Transport Museum, and we could only imagine the intense shipbuilding scene 50 years ago as we headed up the desolate Clyde River.

Having spent two birthdays at sea, Karin was more than delighted by her

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surprise birthday lunch on board *Britannia* at the waterfront in Edinburgh where we were joined by Karin's Norwegian cousin and her husband. We waited at the berth in Glasgow until the weather improved, which meant the rain turned to mist. It was off down the Clyde to the Crinan Canal, where we spent as long as we could in the enchanting countryside



Victoria at Sandaig Bay, Sound of Sleat

and wandering the villages. The sun made fleeting appearances, the wind was gentle and the rain stayed away for our cruise to Tobermory then back to Oban where our guests departed for Norway still trying to understand the Scottish dialect.

The Atlantic swells were benign as we headed out round Ardnamurchan Point

towards the islands to spend a few weeks. Our hoped-for summer arrived for a week when we were joined by sailing friends from home, so the spinnaker got some use. It is hard to imagine anywhere more pleasant than the Hebrides in fine weather, but our euphoria was fleeting. The gales and rain returned, so it was back to sheltered anchorages and spending afternoons enjoying the tranquillity of the local bars with a fire to sit by, until it was time to head south.

We had read the descriptions and challenges of Menai Strait. Even though we timed the tide, our fast passage weaving between the rocks kept us very focussed. Our mast was a metre from the bridge as we swept under it - not a place for the faint-hearted.

Shorts and t-shirts were broken out for the first time at the Isles of Scilly. Jim's great, great grandfather, also a James Lott, owned and skippered a 40m, topsail schooner, which he built around 1840 from a cargo of timber from a wreck in the Scillies. Jim has a painting of the ship and was keen to find out as much as he could. In those days there were several wrecks each year on the Scillies, but the records were almost non-existent until about 1860.

A leisurely trip along the south coast of England brought sunny days, and rainy ones too. Helford River was not as peaceful as promised by Daphne du Maurier due to the hundreds of boats.

A few days later we viewed the effects of a near gale and strong tide as

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we careered up the Needles Channel into the Solent. In contrast, the quiet of the Beaulieu River with the pub at Bucklers Hard and the oaks that line the path to town kept us enchanted for days.

An early departure saw us riding the tide down the river to the Solent. We were spat out into the Channel and sailed across in time to pick up the 7-knot Alderney tide-race as we headed to Guernsey, where we arrived at sunset after 95 miles.

We had not appreciated the enormous range in the tides along the north Brittany coast, equal to the highest anywhere at 14m. Yet more gales and rain accompanied us into the marina in St Malo where looking down on the boats at low tide brought on a touch of vertigo.

With our son and grandchildren on board we headed inland up the river Rance, through the lock in the barrage on a sunny Sunday. The lock opens every 2 hours and there were several yachts and launches awaiting the 1600 opening. Unlike the local boats, we obeyed the requirement to call on VHF to request transit.

As 1600 approached there were many boats close to the entrance in a water-borne rugby scrum. Only with great reluctance did they part sufficiently for us when the lock-keeper hailed that *Victoria* was to be first in. The throng assembled close to our stern as more pushed in and our bow was hard against the far lock doors. Then the lock-keeper shouted through his megaphone urging everyone forward. Our fenders squealed, the yacht behind tangled his jib in our dinghy on its davits, there was a crunch of splintered fibreglass as the yacht next to us rear-ended the one



ahead, and much Gallic shouting and arm-waving. With all wedged tight, the gates closed to the dismay of about six who had to wait two more hours. We have been through over 300 hundred locks in our travels and this was by far the most entertaining.

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After a return to Guernsey to visit old friends, we continued on our way into the sheltered bight, just south of Ushant. Another south-west gale was promised, so we duly selected a sheltered place to anchor. When the wind arrived at midnight it was from the north-east to provide us with a midnight voyage across the Rade de Brest and its various channels. In all our years we can rarely recall having to move at night due to unexpected weather.

On the south Brittany coast, lesser tides and better shelter with warmth and sunshine made us feel that at long last summer had arrived. It was pleasant motoring along in the sun with little wind when we heard a call directed to us on the VHF radio. An English yacht that we had passed hours earlier was asking for assistance, so we headed back about five miles. Their propeller was totally jammed by heavy netting discarded by fishermen, so we agreed to tow them 20 miles to Benodet, where we were headed. Their 12m yacht towed without fuss and the 10m of chain we insisted they attached to their end of our tow line prevented any jerking in the swells. An afternoon breeze helped, with both yachts setting sails. Fortunately we arrived just at the start of the ebb tide and berthing them under tow at the marina was easy. The skipper kindly shouted us dinner at a classy restaurant with superb food and wonderful wine until the small hours.

The Morbihan has to be one of the finest cruising areas anywhere and, accompanied by our younger son and his wife, we much enjoyed cruising in the sheltered gulf. In calm weather and sunshine we wandered around Ile d'Arz picking blackberries and swimming.

But autumn was upon us. The spring ebb and F5 wind from the north carried us down the gulf as the land flashed past at 14kts. Reefed headsails in the F7 wind were more than enough to carry us to La Coruña in Spain in just two days. To have the notorious Bay of Biscay behind us so quickly caused us to smile.

We walked a few miles to a headland with the Tower of Hercules lighthouse, originally built in the 2nd century by the Romans and still a working lighthouse today. The Romans carried wood to the top and set it alight. We watched the swell crashing on the rocks and thought about the picturesque wooden lighthouses we left behind in Chesapeake Bay and all the other contrasts between the new world and the old.

