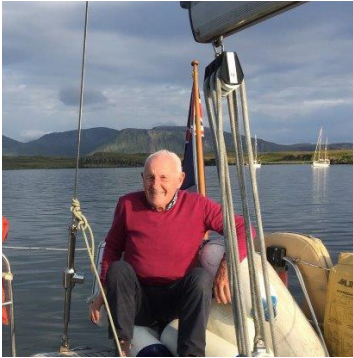


Battered in Barra

David Vass



David

Kirsty (my younger granddaughter) and I arrived at Ardfern on 14 August via Edinburgh to collect her as trains and floods are not very compatible. We were early for the Scottish Meet but had yet to acquire our third crew member, Lorne Byatt (RCC), who had travelled independently to Crinan and was now on *Mikara* RCC with Hugh and Wendy. We eschewed a crew transfer at sea agreeing to rendezvous next day in the Eilean Buidhe anchorage, Carsaig, for lunch and a dry transfer, despite glorious weather.

On the appointed day we left Ardfern for Carsaig in very gentle conditions and cruised down the Sound of Jura to E Buidhe where we anchored at 1300. *Mikara* arrived soon after and a very pleasant (socially distanced) lunch was enjoyed while we were rafted. Lorne transferred himself and kit dry shod. We returned to Ardfern to effect final preparations and to head for Bagh Gleann nam Muc (Pig Bay) in Corryvreckan on the afternoon tide next day. The skipper saw no merit in leaving on the early tide other than it was early.

After a useful morning at Ardfern ship cleaning after Covid stasis, but including visitors for coffee, we left at 1330 for Corryvreckan in unadventurous conditions viz. no wind, no cloud, very warm. Reaching CV at slack water, as planned we entered Bagh Gleann nam Muc by the east side of the big skerry. Though not difficult, the approach does demand attention but once through the narrows the whole bay



lay before us. We anchored between *Moonlight* (RCC) and *Sirius* (RCC). It was very busy for, besides the RCC fleet of some 14 yachts plus canoes and dinghies, we had the doubtful pleasure of jet

Battered in Barra

skiers crossing wakes with a couple of ribs. However, they were soon gone and we found ourselves boarded by at least four swimmers from the RCC fleet. Note this is western Scotland and the water temperature is hardly tropical in normal times. Tea was dispensed to all, Kirsty dived overboard for a swim and pronounced it 'not bad', others exercised discretion!

By late afternoon all were ashore for socially distanced barbeques. Serious challenge tasks involving sand had been set for the young and not



Borealis in 'Pig Bay'

so young. All went very well till the sun fell below Scarba and the light breeze dropped. Public enemy no 1, the Jura midge, sensed an opportunity and put an end to the social distancing ashore but it continued afloat and was followed by a very quiet night. Tim Trafford's choice of this weekend for the Scottish RCC Meet turned out to be inspired with impeccable organisation. Para Handy would have said 'chust sublime'.

Next day Kirsty had a train to catch from Oban (holiday jobs beat cruising), we left at 0700 to catch the last of the ebb into the Sound of Jura and the early flood north. Aspirations to sail were sorely disappointed with a gentle S breeze behind us as we made for Oban. We dropped Kirsty in good time for her train and left immediately for the Sound of Mull. The wind was fickle in the extreme and always light never exceeding F2. There were episodes of sailing but the iron sail was imperative for the bulk of our trip. Deciding to make for the Hebrides we elected to get as far beyond Tobermory as practicable and reached L Cumhainn at 1715. We were not alone as there were already two motor yachts and a real one at anchor. Later a sailing school yacht made an exquisite approach under sail to anchor close to us. It was a beautiful evening with the very fine sunset to the NW.

The morning brought a light NE breeze. We left around 0900. The conditions could be accurately described as fickle again. No breeze was sustained, no direction constant. Despite a degree of frustration, we persevered with sailing until just N of Cairns of Coll at around 1230 when we motored. No alleviation in the shape of a breeze appeared and we continued in a glassy calm reaching Canna around 1600. Only one other mooring was taken but by 1730 it was full house and latecomers were anchoring. Ashore the café was closed to non-bookings but we engaged in conversation and found common acquaintances—as one does in such places.

The 18th dawned as before. Lots of sun after a misty start and the suggestion of an N/NE breeze. Just what was needed for a sail to Eriskay although not for further north as had been intended. Slipping at 0900 we were soon N of Canna under sail.

After 2½ hours we had covered five miles and Canna seemed hardly to have

David Vass

moved. The iron sail was resorted to; it became truly very warm and we reached Eriskay around 1600 still in a surreal calm. As we approached the entrance channel, we were entertained by dolphins, porpoises and gannets in abundance. Are they always there and we only really notice them when it is calm? We picked up one of the two visitor moorings at 1600, the dinghy was inflated and Lorne departed for the shop which is not exactly 'round the corner' on Eriskay but he made it before closing time. The tarmac en route was almost melting, but nothing daunted he returned laden with fruit and we enjoyed another fine evening with much fishing traffic at the pontoon.

The morning forecast suggested change but there was little agreement between XC Weather, BBC and the Coastguard. That the wind would go S and be strong was not in doubt, how strong was much in doubt. The skipper, convinced the wind would not reach CG strength based on honest prejudice and experience, suggested Castlebay as a suitable terminus although he was acutely aware of the shortcomings of their new pontoons. To call it a marina is to overstate somewhat.

We motored around 0900 into a very misty, murky morning. However, the weather steadily improved as we motored south and, by the time we were abeam Curachan, sun could be seen and almost felt. As we turned into the approach channel, we encountered basking sharks grazing peacefully to be replaced by a big pod of dolphins with one particularly big one cavorting under the bows. They followed us into Castlebay only zooming off when we were close to the pontoons. Our big voyage ended at 1145 when we secured on the N side of the outer pontoon with only one other visitor. A visit to the good Community Shop in the sunny afternoon was very profitable. Locals brought us diesel as the pontoons are a long way from the pump in Castlebay itself. The forecast by late afternoon (SE8) was dire. We were where we were.

20 August came to life early. Around 0500, after a steady increase in wind strength and a lot of pitching and rolling, despite doubling up on mooring lines the previous afternoon, there was an enormous bang. We had not slept a great deal up to that point but now it was time for a pyjama party (under oilies and with lifejackets). Arriving on deck, we found our trusty breast line (a roughly three inch circumference three strand rope) had broken. The pontoons were awash with breaking seas and the wind was strengthening quickly (gusting 50 kts plus). We were in no apparent danger on the lee side of the pontoon and soon had four bow and stern lines, more springs and a new lesser breast line. By the time this was completed the sun had emerged, the barometer had fallen



Castlebay before battering

Battered in Barra

16mb in eight hours, the CG forecast was accurate indeed and the *Isle of Lewis* ferry was still on her berth. The day remained fresh with ESE/SE 6-7 but steadily improved and we had regular visits from locals enquiring after our well-being and bemoaning the fact that the original plan for the pontoons had been N of Kisimul Castle, where it was visibly calmer, but local opposition had killed that. Castlebay was explored, more stores acquired from the big Co-op (its location being one of the few advantages for the pontoons) and a much quieter evening ensued.

In the morning of the 21st things were radically different. The sun was visible and we had an almost gentle easterly in the bay. There was a huge discrepancy between our forecasters but all indicated that our plan to return via the Sound of Gunna and thence to west Mull was not going to be practicable. In the event, once outside Castlebay, there was little wind and that from SE. There was also a very lumpy sea though that was much reduced once we reached deep water and the ground swell asserted itself. A reluctant return to Canna seemed the most sensible decision. The wind edged round to E and we tried valiantly to sail several times but as soon as the engine stopped so did we as the swell rolled what little wind there was out of the sails.

The original intention had been to reach Canna by Humla Rock thus changing the scenery for us, but as we approached the SW end of Canna the tide was very strong, so we reverted to the route via the N side of Canna arriving around 1900 to find only two other yachts. It was great to escape from Castlebay and a pleasure to visit Canna twice in a week!

We left Canna at 0900 next day into a brisk W/NW wind. Very promising for a good sail. Motoring to clear Rhum we sailed about 1020 with a few rolls in the genoa, soon reaching 7kts in a big sea with plenty spray and occasional lumps aboard. A little later we took a reef in the main, speed was maintained and there was a lot less water flying about. We discussed heading for west Mull but the prospect of beating into this sea and swell was uninviting. Course was set for L. Drumbuie and we had a very fast and enjoyable passage reaching Drumbuie at 1600. This popular anchorage was quite busy with 10 other yachts including *Otter of Lorn* (RCC) and *Blue Bayou* (RCC). There was also an old and very graceful motor yacht, *Fair Lady*, a name to suit her style.

On the 22nd the forecast was E to N1! Drumbuie was a sheet of glass. While west Mull beckoned, the skipper felt he had insufficient time remaining to add an extra day so we tackled the not quite glassy waters of the Sound of Mull. All was not lost as, once past Eileanan Glasa, a gentle N breeze developed and we were able to glide gently out of the Sound past Duart and lay the passage between Bach Is and Kerrera with ease if not speed though here the wind was S and F3. We were at anchor in Puillodobrainn at 1645. *Otter of Lorn* had beaten us to it. They were aboard later for 'refreshment'.

More very calm weather next day left us no choice but the iron sail and we were at Ardfern by noon. Not the longest cruise but an enjoyable one.