

An interrupted circuit of NW Scotland

David Vass



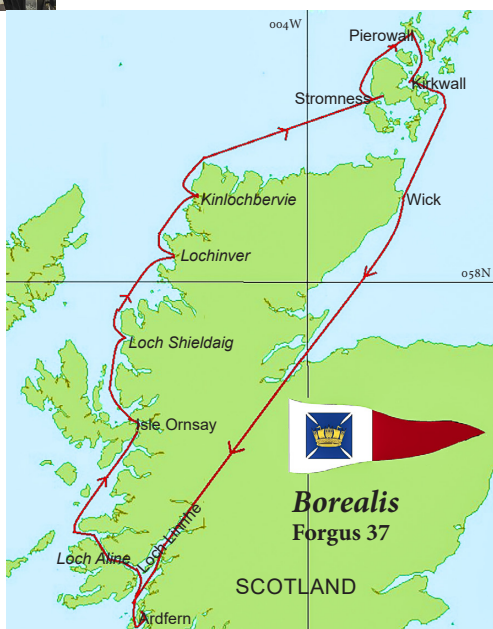
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younger daughter, Catriona, was keen to sail with me, in between her other commitments.

We sailed from Ardfern on 26 June into a fickle NW breeze, very fresh out of Corryvreckan but then becoming weaker and weaker till we were motoring north of Insh but then managed a mini sail to the foot of the Sound of Mull where all pretence of wind disappeared. Lochaline was handily placed for the night and we felt it had not been such a bad day given the fickle wind.

Next morning by 0800 we were motoring up a very calm Sound of Mull. Off Tobermory at

The skipper had given an undertaking to his daughters that he would not 'do' open water passages alone. This did not seem unreasonable nor a great constraint as hitherto crew have not been a difficulty and the original plan was to sail to Orkney and Shetland starting at the end of June. However one ever reliable crew acquired a new hip in May and, despite noble endeavours with exercise and physiotherapy, was certainly not going to be available while another was simply unable to free up enough time. All was not quite lost as my



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Borealis a Forpus 37

1030 a veritable torrent of yachts was emerging so our timing seemed good and we stood on for Ardnamurchan reaching the lighthouse around 1215, catching the tide nicely and disturbing an enormous number of shearwaters.

We also encountered a solo fisherman in an open boat which says it all about the conditions. We stood north while the Tobermory 'fleet' all headed for Canna. A lovely breeze developed off Arisaig but it was not sustained and we struggled to enjoy the frustration of sail/motor as we reached up the Sound of Sleat and finally anchored at Isle

Ornsay at about 1830. A long somewhat frustrating day but we had made good northing. The crew swam, the skipper did not.

Catriona and I were under way early next morning to catch the tide up Kylerhea and cleared the Skye Bridge by 0930. The wind was NW-NNW so we made for Raasay to give us a good chance of sailing up to Gairloch. Just north of Crowlin we were called by the MoD Range Control and advised (i.e. instructed) to stay within 1nm of the east shore. A reasonably friendly patrol ship reinforced the message. The wind freshened and tacking up the east side of Inner Sound was quite hard work. However, by 1330 we had escaped from MoD territory and could sail reasonably freely. By mid-afternoon we had reached Red Point at the entrance to Torridon, felt enough was enough and motor sailed to Loch Shieldaig in Gairloch where we anchored around 1700. Despite the northerly wind we had a lovely evening and Shieldaig was as attractive as ever.

We left Shieldaig at 0900 on 30 June and took the passage inside Longa to reach the outside world. The wind was northerly and gentle. We stood out to sea to make a sensible offing in the hope of clearing Ru Reidh without tacking. By 1030 we felt able to sail and stop the engine, by 1230 we had Ru Reidh under our lee and

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felt suitably gratified. Though Greenstone Point lay in our track, the breeze was freshening and a succession of tacks took us steadily northward though ever a little eastward. However, by 1500 we had cleared the Summer Isles and, in an even fresher wind, we decided to motor sail to clear Ru Coigach which we did around 1630, then sailed again and reached Lochinver at 1830. Lochinver felt almost semi tropical and we were soon joined by *Atherina* (RCC). The pontoons were busy not just with visitors but also with friendly and helpful locals. Inspection of the engine space next morning showed that a nagging difficulty with the salt water circulation pump had reached a critical stage and could no longer be disregarded. A replacement was the only sensible solution. Attractive though Lochinver is, it is not blessed with many facilities nor very good communications. This exercise was not going to be quick. Catriona used the inevitable delay to go home and would return when all was ready. Also, the forecast was N-NE4-5 though that did not come to pass.

Ardfern did not have a pump and had doubts about the Glasgow engine agent but Caley Marine in Inverness eventually sourced one. I then found that Inverness is the end of the delivery world for the usual masters of that art. Getting spares delivered is easy in the Northern Isles but NW Scotland is seriously isolated. Becoming frustrated, I even considered going to Inverness to collect it, but soon Caley had it in the hands of Royal Mail and all was well. Meantime I had had plenty of time to establish good relations with several locals including my neighbour, a crab fisherman.

A week had slipped by while the saga unfolded. There are many worse places to be stuck than Lochinver in exquisite weather. Fabulous walks, similar scenery, the improbably good pie shop, a really helpful harbourmaster and local residents.

Repair was complete on 7 July. Diesel was topped up and Catriona returned with the evening bus that day. Our neighbour presented us with two big crabs (they were the wrong colour for restaurants) and that took care of the evening meal. Sensational. We sailed next morning for Kinlochbervie. Outside the harbour we found a light NW wind and a rather lumpy sea as we motored to Stoer. Clearing the Stoer peninsula at about 1000, we sailed hard on the wind towards Handa which we reached around noon, finding fewer birds than we expected but the breeding season was almost past. Off Whale Islet we chose to motor and reached Kinlochbervie (KLB) at 1400, finding friends from Ardforn who were pleased to let us berth on them. KLB felt distinctly overcrowded and we were grateful for the berthing offer.

For once the tide north was at quite a civilised hour. We sailed about 0700 reaching East nan Ron around 0745 and turned north. A healthy tide was under us but with a singular lack of wind, a breath, no more, from the NE. Cape Wrath was abeam at 0915 and the North Atlantic was quite unbelievably calm. Barely detectable ground swell, no ripples whatsoever, a rare scene indeed. A short discussion between us resulted in course being set for Stromness some 60 miles distant as the tide into

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Hoy Sound should serve (not much point in continuing if not) and we pressed on. It was not an inspiring passage motoring in these remarkable conditions but, by about 1900, we were abeam Bragga Rocks and into the flood in Hoy Sound. We berthed at the pontoons in Stromness around 1945 and the log read 'berthed 1945, time till Dad met someone he knew 60 secs. *Borealis* and Dad delivered home to Stromness. Job done C'.



A calm Stromness

The skipper was intent on Yesnaby next day to do the walk back to Stromness, a regular pilgrimage if he is in Orkney and the plan was for both of us to do this. Early drizzle led Catriona to leave on the first ferry, a little early, but walk the skipper did. Willie Tulloch, old friend, delivered him to Yesnaby and the walk was enjoyed in glorious weather. Four more days were enjoyed in pleasant temperatures and little wind visiting Ness of Brodgar and other familiar places while being entertained by and entertaining old friends before Willie and I set off for Westray on the 19th.

Seeing no point in using two boats when one would do, we sailed together in *Borealis* at 1000 and took the last of the ebb in Hoy Sound out to Bragga where we could stop the engine, turn north with the young flood and sail for a bit in a light SW breeze till thwarted off Skail, where we motored again for a little then made steady progress under genoa alone to Weatherness Sound, where we motored to Pierowall, arriving at 1800.

Next morning we had hardly stepped ashore when we met Tommy Rendall, long the harbourmaster in Pierowall, who enjoined us to go to the Bistro, newly opened, 'a step beyond the hotel' for a good breakfast. The concept of a Bistro in Pierowall did not come easily, but we went to Saint Tear, a big step beyond the hotel, but well worth it. Along the way we had somehow acquired Tommy's car keys. Lovely gesture but of limited use on Westray. After a good day and an excellent meal in

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the hotel we went again to Saint Tear for breakfast next morning and were about to leave Pierowall when TR appeared with a paper bag claiming the blue contents had turned inexplicably red overnight and could not be stored. We left at 1300 for Kirkwall with the two wee lobsters for company.

It was again almost windless and by the time we reached Fersness and entered Westray Firth at about 1530 we realised we were a little early in the tide but pressed on. Reaching Egilsay Graand by 1600 the flood had established itself and we continued by Vasa Sound reaching Kirkwall at 1730.

The skipper had now two days to use in Kirkwall and East Mainland before Willie would return as he had insisted on crewing me to Wick but was not free till the 24th at the earliest. This was not painful. A visit to Hamish (who has a Rustler 36)



Willie Tulloch



Hamish Bayne's workshop

and Freda Baynes' workshop took care of one day easily with his one-man sailing craft to see, both finished and under construction and Freda's weaving wonders. The other included a visit to my erstwhile next door neighbour Len, maker of boats in bottles and a few other things.

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Willie returned on the evening of the 24th and we sailed at dawn next day. The tide dictates all for a crossing of the Pentland Firth, the wind was E and light, but the Orkney Harbours forecast had been encouraging and spoke of a freshening breeze. By 0600 we were off Mull Head and turned south against a weakening adverse tide. Once we were well down the coast of South Ronaldsay the easterly breeze did indeed begin to freshen. We could sail or rather set the main and stop the engine as we had had the genoa set from Copinsay. Crossing Sandy Riddle was quite jumpy, as ever, but by 1100 we were well inside Duncansby Head and could correct our course for Wick. We moored in Wick Marina at 1230 having had an excellent passage. A neighbouring yacht had come from St Margaret's Hope that morning and spoke of touching 14kn in the Firth. It was a Sunday and no buses to Gills Bay so Willie left by taxi having been really excellent company throughout.

Wick was cleared by 0715 next morning with hopes of the easterly breeze continuing. A quite forlorn hope. There were alarming similarities with the crossing to Orkney. Glassy calm, such that even with the engine stopped, the genoa simply 'hung'. It saw no further service that day. Shipping was conspicuously absent, even inshore vessels scarce as the proverbial hen's teeth. It was not a stimulating passage until off Cromarty with the tide turning and the possibility of an overnight anchorage. A brief discussion with myself said 'get the pain over' and we motored on. Reaching the banks in the approaches to Chanonry, the tide was stronger than expected and slowed us significantly but Chanonry was passed easily though the resident dolphins were resting. Inverness Marina was gained at 1900.

Knowing I was to be joined by Lorne Byatt (RCC) for the Caledonian Canal transit necessitated a move to the Canal Basin next morning and Lorne joined on the 28th. Apart from a shunt from another yacht in the first lock at Muirtown, we had a comfortable transit of the Canal in company with a certain Katie McCabe and her father who were engaged in the solo circumnavigation of the UK. One each in two wooden boats. We emerged at Corpach on the 30th and motored almost all the way to Puillodobhrainn where we anchored having missed the tide at Luig. We were back in Ardfern on the 31st by 1130.

The skipper feels he has had more stimulating sailing as the weather was shockingly calm from early July onwards. Nonetheless, any visit to the Northern Isles is worthwhile and this was no exception, just different.