

Round Ireland with the iron topsail

Ed Wheeler

Awarded the Irish Cruising Club Decanter

It was eleven years since my last circumnavigation of Ireland. In a time of plague and uncertain travel, keeping to our own landmass would ease crew change arrangements. However, crew are often in short supply. Ideally, one recruits a useful boy. As my friend Michael says “Never go to sea without a good boy. Boys are essential on any ship. They can hand, reef, steer and you can throw them over the side to clear a fouled propeller”. Boys can of course be of either gender. Michael had to swallow the anchor when his last ‘boy’ turned eighty.



Ed Wheeler at Sherkin Island

East coast

Both of my putative boys having had to recuse themselves because of sundry age-related medical issues, I set off alone from my home port of Ballydorn in Strangford Lough. Issuing from the lough mouth early on 17 June into a glorious, sunny day with a warm, westerly breeze, I headed south. Setting the mainsail single handed is a bit of a chore, as it is a heavy brute and has to be done from the foot of the mast. The lazy jacks mean that you have to be properly head to wind, so this can entail a fair bit of dashing back and forward. An hour or so after I'd got the sails drawing perfectly, the wind dropped and I had to resort to the iron topsail.

This set the pattern. Crossing Dundalk Bay, I got fed up with the noise and went into Port Oriel, which is rather a gem. It is well situated half way to Dublin, is sheltered from most parts and the natives are friendly, in spite of it being a busy fishing harbour. I asked after the harbour master and was told that there was none but to enquire at the (excellent) fish shop for Gerry, who would tell me where to berth. Gerry turned out to be the Petty Officer of a trawler refitting alongside the wharf. Port Oriel has several distant water trawlers, plus a fleet of local bottom dredgers. Half a dozen of these are shallow draught vessels which range over the shallow flats of Dundalk Bay at mid to high water, dredging for cockles and razor clams. The larger ones plough the bottom farther offshore for scallops and prawns. This has become

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the most widespread type of fishery in the Irish Sea and is laying waste to the ecosystem.

The passage to Howth next day was uneventful and power driven, as the wind was light and dead astern. After spending a couple of hours aground at the fuel berth, I met up with former co-owners Harry Whelehan and Winkie Nixon (RCC). Harry and Liz entertained Winkie, Georgina and me to dinner and a fine evening reminiscing.

I had arranged for my son in Dublin and daughter in Co. Carlow

to visit the boat with their families, initially suggesting Wicklow. When I got to Wicklow, strong northerly winds were forecast and I was told that there would be no room for me in the creek. I didn't fancy getting a bunch of small children up and down a vertical ladder at the pier, with the boat jumping around in a chop, so pressed on to Arklow, where I found a vacant berth in the south basin. The family arrived next day and a jolly time was had by all. The party was further enhanced by some jet-ski riders who thoughtfully gave us a display of high speed manoeuvres round the basin, cooling us with the fish scented waters of the basin. My daughter, Helen was able to join me for two weeks and John Duggan came along for a couple of days. I was glad of the company. A moderate easterly breeze gave us some good sailing but fell light later, so that we had to motor the final couple of hours to Kilmore Quay. We were able to have pints at Kehoe's and a good meal outside the Silver Fox. The staff in both establishments were glad to be back in business.

South coast

We decided to go up to New Ross, a first for me. The railway bridge on the River Barrow at its confluence with the Suir is a pivoting double span. The ten mile passage upstream from there to New Ross is a secluded and beautiful stretch of water. The town had a plenitude of promising looking pubs and restaurants but they were all closed. Helen took the helm on our downstream leg next day, following my instructions to keep the black buoys to port and the red ones to starboard. We bowled

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along on the back of a three knot tide but came to an undignified halt between two black buoys. My fault, as I'd omitted to ask her to keep midstream between the buoys and, not unreasonably, she had, just connected the dots. We got off but not before qualifying for the Wexford ploughing championship.

When going through the swing bridge, we asked the operator when the next train was due. He said in ten



Barrow Swing Bridge

Helen takes some sun



minutes but it seems that the last train was over ten years ago. We wondered why they don't just leave it open.

Dunmore East now has a visitors' pontoon but there is limited room as the local sea angling boats use it. Actually, for sea angling one should substitute whale watching. This more lucrative tourist activity has largely taken over from angling charters. John left from here by bus.

On 25 June the rain gave way to bright patches and a fresh northerly breeze and we romped westwards. Rather than go into Youghal and lie tide-ride, we sounded our way into Whiting Bay, just to the east of Ballycotton, where we lay comfortably sheltered from the north. You have to go well inshore to find good holding in the sand in 4m. Favourable lights winds the following day gave us a gentle

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Evening at Oysterhaven

Cruising Club's sailing directions for the coasts of Ireland. They were on their way back from Glandore in *Coire Uisce*, their Warrior 40 and we waited for them at a table outside the Pier House pub. I asked the elderly proprietor, who was tidying up, if the bar was open. He said that it was not but we could have a drink while we were waiting. It was with great sadness that I have learned that he has since died. Norman and Geraldine eventually turned up and high wassail was made all round. A Polish sailmaker in Kinsale agreed to repair our genoa and Norman kindly drove the sail to him. The sail subsequently did a substantial cruise by road around Ireland chasing us and we finished our voyage using the number three genoa.

Breakfast was aboard *Coire Uisce* after which the Grand Banks we were moored outside was ready to leave. We let go our bow shore line to let him out, leaving a long stern line to get us back in. The skipper asked if I was ready and I said not yet; he took this as a yes and roared away under full throttle while we were still made fast to him and my wheel still lashed. Some chaos ensued, the customary oaths and

passage to Cork Harbour and we berthed at the Royal Cork Yacht Club pontoons in Crosshaven. Another easy sail brought us into Oysterhaven. I think I have previously underrated this place, for it was uncrowded, sheltered and lovely in the evening sunshine. We dined on mackerel caught drifting around the Sovereigns.

Forswearing the lure of Kinsale's fleshpots, we sailed in a brisk northerly on to Courtmacsherry. On the way, the genoa ripped along the foot. We had arranged to meet Norman Kean (RCC) and Geraldine in Courtmac and we rafted at the pontoon outside a large Grand Banks motor yacht. Norman is the editor of the Irish

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imprecations were deployed and order was eventually restored without damage, although Geraldine, on the pontoon handling the stern line, could easily have been injured. A moderate easterly right astern of us provided a gentle run under main only and bright sunshine smoothed our troubled brows. Heading towards Castlehaven, we potted about High and Low Islands fishing unsuccessfully. Seal Rocks were liberally dotted with their eponymous creatures. I decided to have a look into Blind Harbour, a little bottle shaped inlet. In the present settled conditions, it made an idyllic anchorage. Holding is good but strong winds coming in from the south at night would be dangerous. We went ashore to explore the rock caves on the west side of the inlet and both, separately, managed to fall in. Most undignified but for once there was no audience.

Baltimore the next day, 30 June, was busy with sailing school activity. The pontoon was crowded and we were told that a fleet of plastic fantastics on their annual booze cruise had booked all available spaces but the staff were helpful and fitted us in outside a substantial American aluminium cutter, *Helacious*. The owner, Brian Russell, had built her himself in Memphis, Tennessee, the name reflecting that of his wife Helen, who had sailed from the States with him via the Azores. Memphis seemed an unlikely origin point for such a fine seagoing yacht. A discussion followed as to the best way to mix a martini, with numerous practical demonstrations taking place.

My wife Jan arrived the next day and we left immediately and anchored near the pier at Sherkin Island as there is no longer a pontoon at Sherkin. The pub garden was open for pints and has a splendid view over Baltimore Harbour. Conditions next day promised to be lumpy in Gascanane Sound, so I took the north passage between Sherkin and Heir Island. This is very straightforward with Norman's

View from the pub, Sherkin Island



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North Harbour, Cape Clear

excellent directions and we made the sharp turn into the basin at North Harbour, Cape Clear to find room at the pontoon there. Cape Clear was lovely as ever, its unimproved meadows supporting a wonderful variety of flora and bird life. We stayed there for three days, using the boat as a caravan, walking over the island and enjoying it despite the rain. Going up to the nearest pub, closed inside of course owing to Covid, we found the tables under the canopies all occupied. One had just one patron, who invited us to join him. He turned out to be the owner of this and the other pub, plus he owns the ferry service there, at Rathlin and at Bantry. You couldn't pick three places in Ireland farther apart to run a business.

West coast

Jan and Helen left for Baltimore on 5 July and I tore myself away from North Harbour, heading for Mizen Head in rather lowering conditions, a falling glass indicating the depression in Biscay moving north and a bit of a swell building. There wasn't very much wind and it was against me, so the Yanmar continued its good work. I carried the tide round Mizen Head and decided reluctantly against going into Dunmanus Bay. I was very much aware of the hazard from the numerous creel markers off every headland. They often have two buoys connected by a floating line. Going between them under power is certain to cause a propeller wrap and this makes life difficult for the single hander. I started to think of the pot boats as mine layers.

It was forecast to blow hard the next day, so I bore off for Sheep's Head and Bantry Bay. I was followed by a large pod of common dolphins and also saw a couple of minke whales. Lonehort harbour on the southeast coast of Bere Island seemed a likely refuge. It has a tricky entrance but again the ICC SDs give excellent

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guidance and I had no problem getting in and finding a deserted and totally enclosed harbour. It blew and rained and I spent two nights there. I couldn't phone because there was no coverage. Formerly, one was not expected to make contact with home while cruising. Instead, the little woman sat in the window listening to Kathleen Ferrier singing 'Blow Ye Winds Southerly' and praying for the loved one's safe return (or not). It is different now, so I composed a text message and hoisted my phone on a flag halliard. Sure enough, it went.

It was only a few miles up Bantry Bay to Adrigole, a place I'd never been into. I anchored off the pier and went ashore to explore. It is very pretty and there is plenty of room to anchor, unlike many other places I visited. The couple who run the sailing school told me that there is a mega salmon farm planned there. Also a project to harvest kelp from Bantry Bay is proposed. The idea of strip mining the sea bed in a place like that is appalling.

I had some good news, my friend Geordie Lynas would be able to join me in Dingle, but had limited time available. In calm conditions on 8 July, I got my anchor and headed out of Bantry Bay. More dolphins followed me and I saw more minke whales and a fin whale. I went through Dursey Sound and, resisting the temptation to go into the Kenmare River, made for Derrynane. All the visitors' moorings were occupied by what looked to be long stay users but the main problem was the number of RIBs, which have proliferated in the last ten years. Moorings for these are laid all over the place. I had to anchor too close to Lamb's Island and was up several times during the night to make sure I hadn't swung in a wind shift. What is the collective noun for RIBs? Perhaps a Rack of RIBs?

Drizzle and murk the next day gradually gave way to fair weather and I got to Dingle in good time, to be directed to raft alongside a truly vast catamaran. Semi-mountaineering skills were needed to climb the sides of this beast, which had steps cut into the hull. I did the usual housekeeping tasks and got stores aboard by bringing the supermarket trolley back from the Supervalu at the far end of the town. Even farther away is the garage, the only source of modest quantities of fuel, so I went back with the marina barrow and trundled 60 litres or so of diesel through the crowded streets.

Because of Geordie's time constraints, there wasn't going to be much time to hang around, so we made for Smerwick Harbour, a convenient departure point for the leg across the Shannon mouth to the Aran Islands. Smerwick was uncomfortable, predictably so, given the swell we encountered on the way in. We rolled about and this made rising early a pleasure, so we were under way at 0600. However, the conditions outside were not conducive to a good passage. There was a swell with a horrid cross sea and a NNW4 or so, not a fetch and we made little progress. It took a long time to put the Three Sisters behind us but the cliffs and hills rising towards Brandon Mountain were very impressive among the low cloud ceiling. After a couple of hours of this I realised that carrying on to Kilronan was a fool's errand and we bore away for Fenit, running comfortably through Magharee

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Visitors' mooring and summer fog, Kilronan

Sound, where we left the swell behind us. There isn't much in Fenit but what there is is good. We dined well in the West End Bar, or rather, outside it.

There is not much to be said about our long boring passage under engine to Gregory Sound. The wind didn't fill in and free us until we were within five or six miles and we could stop the motor and revel in the silence. Kilronan has good visitors' moorings and we found a vacant one in sufficient water. It should be noted that the ring in the top of the mooring buoy was very small and difficult to get a line through. We treated ourselves to a day doing tourist things on Inis Mor. Setting out for the rather long dinghy ride back, the outboard refused to start, so we had to row. One or three up in the little 6' rubber duck works for rowing, but two does not, so it was a tedious job to get back. Alongside, I decided to have one last mighty heave

at the outboard. It didn't start but I smashed the back of my wrist into the corner of *Witchcraft's* transom. I thought at first I'd done serious damage, for I couldn't move it and it kept me awake. However, it gradually recovered over the next couple of days.

All this time, inland Ireland was experiencing high pressure summer weather, hot and sunny. Unfortunately, these conditions brought northerly winds and fog to the west coast. Leaving Kilronan on 15 July, the fog thickened until visibility was less than a mile. In these conditions, I felt it wise to take the outside passage and not attempt Joyce's Pass. We motor sailed and reached Inishbofin with enough visibility to make our way into the harbour easily enough.

The fog was so thick the following morning that there was no question of leaving. It lifted a little over lunchtime and we departed at 1345. Thick fog came down again and we left Inishturk to port. Clare Island seemed the best bet and the fog cleared as we approached it, leaving a fine evening. During the passage, we saw a sunfish or mola. This can be one of the heaviest, bony fishes in the ocean but ours was a small specimen, not more than fifty pounds. Clare has visitors' moorings and these ones have a strop, which simplifies things. In the evening sunshine, a pod of bottlenose dolphins came into the anchorage.

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Laying 'mines', lobster pots, off Achill Head

The glass next morning was steady at 1030, with fair weather and no fog. There wasn't much wind, either. Our day's passage close round Achill Head and inside the Inishkeas was marvellously scenic. We pressed on for Broadhaven to give us a shorter leg across Donegal Bay next day, as the forecast was for moderate northeast winds. We went into Ballyglass but it was congested with moorings, so we crossed the channel to anchor just south of Inver Point in 3m, which was very comfortable.

On Sunday 18th, the fog had come down again. Nevertheless, we made an early start and felt our way across Broadhaven Bay, just sighting the Stags to starboard. Our original destination of Killybegs was replaced by Arranmore, as the wind fell light and the visibility picked up. We dropped the hook in Rossillion Bay at 1915. Next morning, there was enough rise of tide to take the short cut from Chapel Bay round Aileen Reef and into the South Sound of Aran, thence into the Rutland North Channel and up to Burtonport. The harbour was busy with ferries and a likely berth alongside a disused fishing boat was choked with RIBs. We squeezed in. There was no diesel to be had in the harbour, other than a bowser for large quantities, so we walked to the local garage (claimed to be 5 minutes away but actually about a mile) with two five gallon jerry cans. Luckily, a kind man in a van offered to drop them down to the harbour.

North coast

We were now in something of a hurry to get Geordie home, so an 0500 start allowed us to carry tide through the north sound of Aran and then inside Owey Island to avoid some of the sea coming directly in our teeth from the moderate to fresh north-north easterly wind. As we came abeam of Bloody Foreland, the Bloody Wind veered and freshened, so I put in two reefs to keep the boat more upright and avoid starving the engine of oil. There was enough wind to kick up an

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annoying sea but not enough to beat into with any prospect of making a decent passage that day. We pressed on and the fog came down again, but visibility picked up enough to sight Fanad Head. There was too much east in the wind to anchor comfortably at Portsalon, so we went into Lenan Bay on the east side. This is an attractive and useful anchorage not far into Lough Swilly.

Another 0500 departure got us round Malin Head and through Inishtrahull Sound with the tide but the fog came down again thick as we approached Portrush and the tide turned against us. We went into Portballantrae during a brief break in the fog. The recommended anchoring spot is now choked with moorings, as we'd often found, but there is some room farther out. We pressed on with the turn of the tide and made Ballycastle in time to get diesel, which is available on the fishing boat pier. A further 0500 start gave us the full flood down the North Channel. Flat calm and intermittent fog dictated a passage outside the Maidens and we averaged over 7 kt to Bangor. The last leg of the cruise closed the loop at Strangford Narrows, where finally, and far too late, a favourable breeze filled in. We were back alongside the lightship *Petrel*, HQ of Down Cruising Club at Ballydorn, by 1215 on 23 July, five weeks and two days after setting out. Total distance covered was 896 miles, much of it under power.

Restrospect

Much has changed since I started cruising. More is now expected of the yacht and of the services which support her and less of the men and women who crew her. My first rounding of Ireland was in 1964 in the (accidentally) engineless *Ainmara*, with Winkie Nixon and the late Russell O'Neill. We had chartered her for two weeks and our circumnavigation took thirteen days and eighteen hours. No GPS or other electronic nav aids, no radio or mobile phones, no autopilot. A lead line for soundings, a hand bearing compass, paper charts and a barometer were our tools. No marinas. Inaccurate shipping forecasts, when we could receive them at all. We were fortunate, or unfortunate, in that we had lots of wind and made fast, wet, uncomfortable passages. How would I have got on this year similarly deprived? Of course, I have a faster, more weatherly boat which doesn't leak (much). The main difference, I suppose, is that then we had to take advantage of every favourable wind regardless of inconvenience or strength. Now, we can pick and choose, knowing that our engine can usually get us there, we know exactly where we are and have a fair idea of what the weather is going to do. But do we get an equal sense of achievement?