

KINGFISHER GOES HOME

SUMMER IN SCOTLAND 2022



Kingfisher anchored in Craigaig Bay, Ulva

Narrative log of her Summer Cruise, August and September 2022

Introduction

Kingfisher is a 42 ft Silver Leaf motor yacht, designed by John Bain and built at Silvers in the Gareloch in 1935. Apart from a short spell at Rhu in the 1980s she has not revisited her place of origin, or the cruising ground for which she was designed. Since the Western Isles of Scotland have for many years been our favourite cruising ground, and since she does duty as mother-ship to our Fife cutter Mikado, competing in the 2022 Fife Regatta on the Clyde, we thought it was high time for Kingfisher to have a season in Scotland.

So we trucked her up to Largs in May, for a 2 week Whitsun shake-down cruise to Northern Ireland (Cambletown, Belfast and Strangford Lochs, then Glenarm, Rathlin Island and Loch Ranza) before doing her appointed duty at the Fife Regatta in early June. Then she lay at a buoy in the Gareloch off the Royal Northern and Clyde Yacht Club until the end of July, in plain sight of her birthplace across the loch at Rosneath. Silvers is still an active boatyard but ceased building its famous range of wooden motor yachts in 1971.



Doing her mother-ship job at the Fife Regatta

This was our fourth Fife Regatta, at which Fife's yachts gather from around the world for a week's racing in the Clyde (where they were all built). Each time we have left Mikado there at the end of the regatta (or nearby at Crinan or Loch Melfort) for a summer cruise. This time Mikado was sent back for events in the Solent, while Kingfisher remained to give us a more comfortable Western Isles cruise, a more suitable cruiser than Mikado for our advancing years and all the vicissitudes of Scottish weather. This log describes that cruise, which ran for a little over five weeks from the end of July. We hesitate to call it a summer cruise, since many would say that North West Scotland just didn't have a summer in 2022, while the rest of the UK basked (or maybe baked) in the hottest, driest, summer since 1976.

Five weeks is too long to give a strict day by day account of our travels. So this log is arranged by reference to where we went and/or stayed. One of the blessings of having more than a month to cruise is the choice it gives you between moving on and staying put to enjoy a particular place or area in more depth. And you can wait for adverse weather to pass before you move on. In the event we had no full gales to ride out, although the weather was, to say the least, mixed. There were few days without some rain or fog (or that unique mixture of the two which the Scots call 'smurrin'). And there was a very large range of wind, from force 6-7 to flat calm, all of which Kingfisher took in her stride. Very little of it was on the nose, and there were few occasions when we couldn't find a sheltering windward shore when necessary to make a planned passage more comfortable. With her enclosed wheelhouse and central heating Kingfisher made sure we never got wet or cold. And with her excellent sea-keeping and steadying sail we never got sea-sick either, or even queasy, and none of her crockery got smashed. We met a number of friends, and made

several new ones on the way. But the permanent crew was just the writer (Michael) and my wife and co-owner Beverly. We have come to a comfortable arrangement under which I am the captain (running the ship) but Beverly is the admiral (who tells the captain where to go, and makes all the critical restaurant bookings). We share the watchkeeping, cooking, provisioning and everything else on board. No individual passage took longer than about five hours, so watch-keeping wasn't really a requirement.



The Admiral and the Captain

Gareloch to Crinan

Trains from London to Glasgow and then Helensburgh, and a short taxi ride after provisioning got us to the Royal Northern by early afternoon on 30 July, to be taken out to the mooring by Douglas the club boatman. Apart from bird droppings Kingfisher looked OK after her six week stay. In fact Douglas and Reay Mackay the club's moorings officer had kept a careful eye on her during that time, for which we were very grateful. There was a slight moustache of weed on the boot topping, but nothing which couldn't be cleaned off with a scrubbing brush from the dinghy.

A peaceful late-afternoon passage round to the Kyles of Bute via Hunter's Quay (where Mikado had been moored from 1904 to 07) revealed however that she was achieving at least a knot less than her expected speed for given cruising revs of 2,200, little more than 6.5 kts rather than the usual 8 kts. But it wasn't till an exploratory look from the dinghy in the beautiful little Caladh harbour (just west of the Kyle narrows) that badly barnacled screws emerged as a likely culprit. Poking at them with an oar blade scarcely scratched the surface of the problem.



Caladh Harbour

Some say that a foul bottom or screws isn't a problem to worry about on a motor yacht. You just pile on a few more revs to make up for it. But the thought of burning unnecessary fuel offends my abhorrence of global warming or just plain parsimonious instincts, so something had to be done about it.

But first we wanted to get North into our real cruising ground, and that meant traversing the lovely Crinan Canal. We had an uneventful, mainly sunny passage the next morning against a light to moderate headwind, arriving at the Ardrishaig sea-lock by 1115, and reaching the half-way point in the canal at Cairnbaan by 1500. There, coming the other way, we met Kenny and Sonia Smyth in

their pretty 1962 Holman 31 footer Casino. Kenny runs a boatyard in Strangford Loch (NI) where he also races a River class wooden dayboat. He remembered Mikado being based there in the 1970s. We had a convivial supper with them at the Cairnbaan Hotel, watching the Lionesses beat Germany in the football final, to everyone's great joy.



The Admiral with Kenny and Sonia

Ardfern

We had planned to meet our great friend Sally Bergius at some convenient place *en route*. She and her husband Frank have a farm on the banks of Loch Awe, so Ardfern seemed an ideal meeting point. 1st August started sunny, as we climbed the stair of locks above Cairnbaan, arriving in Crinan Basin just in time for a delicious lunch of local halibut , and to watch the famous puffer Vic 32 getting up steam.



Vic 32 raising steam at Crinan Basin

The descent from the top reach, with increasing amounts of Loch Crinan in sight, always raises the spirits as it reduces our altitude, and this time was no exception. We locked out at 1410, in a rising wind, with black clouds forming to windward. It's only a few miles to Ardfern, but the rain had started in earnest by the time we arrived at 1530, initially having to moor outside the breakwater because all the visitor berths were full. Luckily an available space later saved us a lot of wet dinghy-work in the rain, and Sally was able to come to supper on board dry-shod. This was the first of 3 days at Ardfern.

On the following day (2nd August) we took another friend Louise Robertson for a day trip. She had come all the way from Perth to see us. It was windy (from the South West) and initially wet as well, but we had a cracking passage over to Jura via the Dorus Mor, to Port an Tiobart, a tiny bay just south-east from the infamous Gulf of Corryvreckan, where we anchored very close in to escape the roaring tide and most of the swell. We returned to Ardfern via the Ruadh Sgeir ledges, a supposedly calmer route than the Dorus Mor, but the angry wind-over-tide sea didn't seem much less forbidding. A tea-break inside Eilan Nan Gabhar on the way back was interrupted by the surprise arrival a flotilla of school training yachts.



Overfalls and gulls at the Ruadh Sgeir ledges

By this time we had booked a haul-out on 3rd August to deal with the foul bottom and/or screws, which Ardfern duly did in under 2 hours using their amazing completely submersible boat-lift. When in operation all you can see is the radio ariel, air intake and exhaust pipe. All the rest is under water, and the whole contraption is radio controlled. The screws and shafts proved to be completely covered with a crust of large barnacles, worse than I have ever seen, whereas the hull itself was almost clean. Barnacle removal completely restored Kingfisher's performance, as was demonstrated by our passage to Loch Aline (off the Sound of Mull) between 1130 and 1615, mainly against the tide. Rounding Duart Point revealed the famous Duart Castle disappointingly disfigured by scaffolding.



Duart Castle, Sound of Mull

Loch Aline, Loch Sunart and Tobermory

Loch Aline is a favourite of ours mainly because of the White House restaurant, only recently re-opened under new ownership after the pandemic, and serving lovely dinners in a tiny space from mainly local produce, including venison from the Aline Estate. This was after we met (for tea with us and drinks with them) John and Catherine, the owners of Fortuna II, a Fred Parker wooden motor yacht built in 1959, slightly longer and much more beamy than Kingfisher, with a beautifully finished, open plan and quite modern layout down below.

We had originally planned to miss out Tobermory, but to use Kingfisher's engines to explore much further up lochs than we have done before. We have found that few lochs have reliable wind in their upper reaches, which was always a disincentive to exploring far up them when cruising under sail. Loch Sunart seemed a good one to start with, and we motored in sunshine and showers most of the way up the loch, past Salen, to an anchorage behind Garbh Eilan on the North shore, where we rowed ashore for rock scrambling along the beach in a rather fruitless search for the promised wildlife. Sunart is one of the loveliest Scottish lochs, with very little habitation apart from Salen, mountain streams gushing down on either side, and a wonderful combination of peace and beauty.



Peaceful anchorage in Loch Sunart

But all this was rudely interrupted when Beverly suffered a nasty fall when the cockpit to galley steps gave way. We put her to bed to see how she would feel in the morning, and the answer was that she needed to be checked out by a doctor. So it was off to Tobermory after all on 5th August, just in time for a miraculously vacant 0930 appointment with the local GP. The diagnosis mercifully revealed nothing which needed treatment beyond careful nursing on board, but lots of bruising and possibly a couple of cracked ribs. She was just able bravely to hobble around very slowly, on board and ashore, and managed to enjoy Tobermory in some rare sunshine, including an early supper at the famous Café Fish on the ferry pier.



Ardnamurchan Point Lighthouse

Round Ardnamurchan to Arisaig, Loch Nevis and Loch Hourn

Having a badly bruised patient on board meant avoiding too much motion at sea, and rolling in particular. 6th August started drizzly again, but with only 10-15 kts from the South West. Hugging the Mull shore after an 0630 departure before bearing away for Ardnamurchan Point minimised any rolling, and the rest of the passage to Arisaig was almost a run, with the kindest of motion in the SW swell. Arisaig is one of Beverly's favourites, particularly the outer reefs where at low tide you can anchor just inside the beautiful rocks and tiny sandy beaches. We arrived when the tide was half-way up at 1000, just as the sun came out. Later we anchored in Stewart's Bay, out of the wind and swell.

But going ashore was out of the question, so after lunch we pushed on past Mallaig into Loch Nevis (meaning heaven) to pursue again our ambition to go all the way to the top. We were through the narrows by 1700 and anchored at the very head of the loch half an hour later. The passage up the loch towards huge hills with their tops shrouded in cloud was spectacular, but the anchorage at the head was a disappointment. The wind was howling up the upper loch, so we were anchored on a dead lee shore. There was one gloomy empty house to look at, and nothing to assuage the gnawing fear of dragging onto the strand.

So at 1830 we weighed and thrust our way back up to the narrows, then turning to port into the delightful little Tarbet Bay, nicely out of the wind for the night.

Next morning (7th August) revealed the beautiful Danish working gaff cutter Eda Frandsen anchored nearby, with her charter crew enjoying an early swim. To my surprise we were greeted by a stentorian “Michael Briggs” by her skipper, who turned out to be none other than Mungo Watson, who we had introduced to serious sailing as a teenager at the 2003 Fife Regatta in when he literally strode along the pontoon and demanded to go sailing in a Fife. He graduated from Mikado (by then doing Med classic regattas) straight into Adix, and his professional career has gone from strength to strength. He and his partner Stella now own Eda Frandsen and offer charters in the Western Isles and in Cornwall.

As if that wasn't enough, on the way back down the loch we came across the lovely Fife gaff ketch Kentra, which had been part of the Fife Regatta fleet in June, and turned out to be the only RYS yacht we encountered on the whole cruise. Sadly Ernst and Doris Klaus, her long term owners, weren't on board, and she was headed South.



The lovely Kentra in Loch Nevis

All that was early in the morning. By 1030 we were entering Loch Hourn (meaning hell) after a short roly reach from Loch Nevis, passing Doune where Eda Frandsen had been restored.

To get to the top of Loch Hourn you have to pass through no less than four sets of narrows, each narrower and more difficult than the last, with the top set impassable below half tide. But by contrast with the previous day it was well worth it. Having sunshine for most of the morning certainly helped, and we had a peaceful lunch in light wind at the very head of the loch, surrounded by uninhabited, roadless, mountainous wilds. But then the rain set in, with mist and fog threatening to follow, so it was back down the loch and a quick passage over to the Isle Ornsay anchorage on the Skye side of the Sound of Sleat, arriving at 1530 with the viz down to 1/3 mile. Now there are some very good restaurants thereabouts, but Beverly was still too sore for dinghy work, so we just

anchored out of the SW swell, to await our tide through Kyle Rhea the next morning, while the writer tried to put together some reasonable substitute for the missed cordon bleu dinner which we might have got ashore.



Upper Loch Hourn: the tiny sail gives the awesome scale

The Kyles and the Inner Sound

The weather was no better the following morning, (8th August) with the wind still South, 12kts rising to 20-25 kts during the day, with mist, drizzle and very poor viz, apart from a short burst of sunshine at midday. But the tide was fair, so off we went downwind through Kyle Rhea (hardly seeing either side in the murk) and then Kyle of Loch Alsh under the Skye Bridge, with a plan to revictual at Portree. Oh what a difference GPS makes in such conditions! By 1230 we were passing between Scalpay and Raasay and we made the occasional stop in the calm waters between Raasay and Skye.

But Portree is not a comfortable place in a strong Southerly. The wind whistles down the shallow upper loch, setting up a short, sharp sea. There is precious little shelter in the anchorage by the village. So we holed up in Camas Ban at 1700, two miles short of Portree, still in mist and rain, but cheered a bit by the sight of lots of terns hunting for food for their chicks.

The following day (9th August) was still very windy and grey, but at least the rain had stopped. We managed to get a slight lee from the waves on the new pontoon at Portree, where there is really only space in those conditions for one boat. That meant we could avoid bouncy and wet dinghy work, and at least give Beverly a run ashore, her first since leaving Tobermory.



On the pontoon at Portree, Skye

Portree is the capital of Skye, but it struggles to rival Tobermory for yachtsmen. Maybe it was the grey and windy weather. But there was a good coffee venue in a former church, and all the supplies we needed were readily available. We didn't waste time though, and were on the way North by 1100, still pursued by the relentless South wind, to what was meant to be a sheltered bay called Caol Fladda at the North end of Raasay, for lunch. Well it was sheltered from the swell, but not from the wind, which was howling through the gap between Raasay and Rona. The sun had at last returned, but the only way we could enjoy it out of the wind was by sitting on the floor of the cockpit, while it whistled past just above head level.

Rona (or South Rona to distinguish it from the bigger Rona far to the North) has always been one of our special favourites. It has a sad history, in particular of struggling to accommodate most of the population of larger Raasay when they were forcibly evicted during the clearances in the mid 19th Century. T.M. Devine's book on the Highland Clearances provides an excellent, balanced account of the clearances which sets what happened on Raasay and Rona in its historical context. For many years it has just had a little cottage with facilities for visiting yachtsmen, courtesy of the kind owner. But there are now signs of growth. The long-term manager Bill and his wife (notified to visitors by a 'Beware of the Bill' sign) have been joined by a young couple to help run holiday cottages and the farm. There is a wind turbine and solar panels for power, visitors' moorings and even a small pontoon to land in your dinghy. You can buy local fish and venison.



Bill at Rona

But the crowning glory of Rona is Arcasaid Mhor, the almost completely landlocked natural harbour hidden in the middle of the island. Once you have wriggled your way in, there is shelter from any conceivable weather and wind direction, and good holding even if the visitors' buoys are taken. We spent the next day and a half there waiting for the Southerly blow to abate from the gale then forecast. But initially it was too windy to get ashore by dinghy, even if Beverly had been up to it. So we just hunkered down to enjoy the view.



The Pontoon at Arcasaid Mhor, Rona

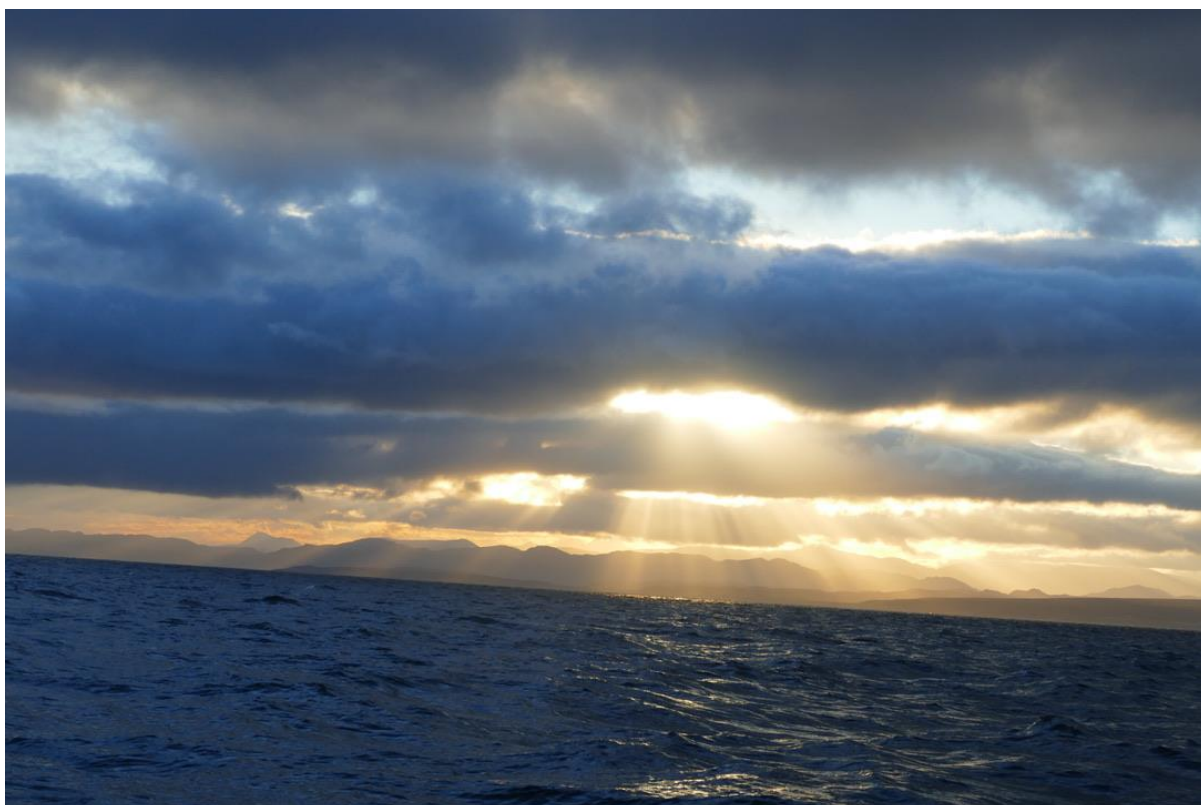
But we got ashore for a good if slow walk the next day (10th August) and to meet Nick and Alison Bonsall (RNSA) in their 35ft Southerly Whimbrel, in which they had been living and cruising for the whole summer, having sailed her up from Lymington. It was still windy, but sunny and not so cold.



Arcasaid Mhor, Rona from the top of the hill

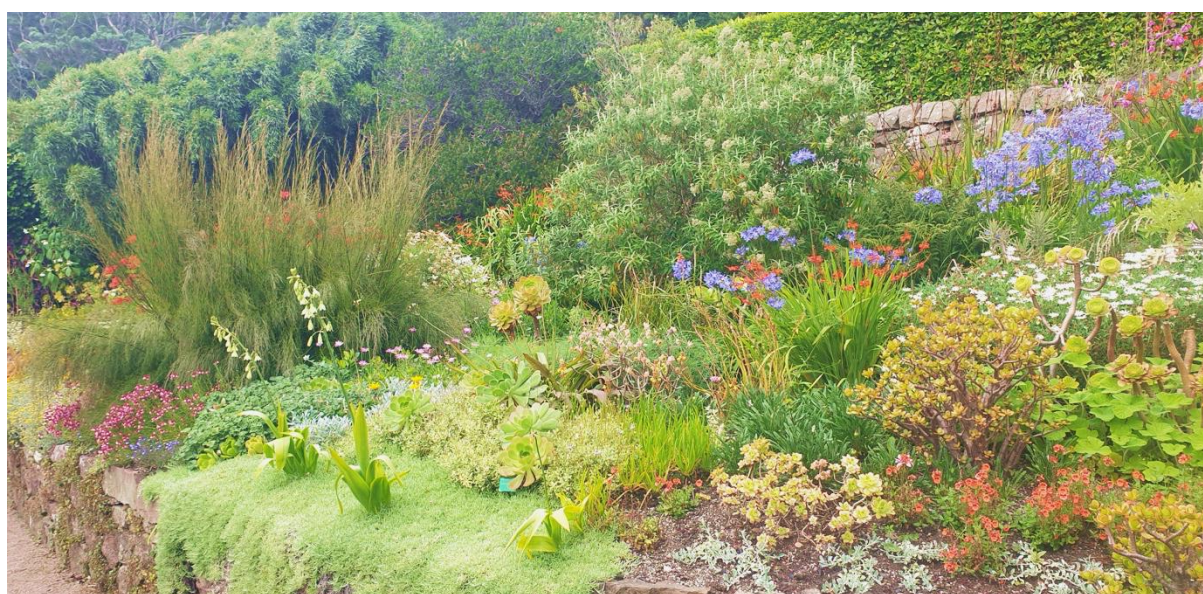
Loch Ewe, Loch Broom and the Summer isles

Thus far we hadn't got further north than on previous cruises, but a main ambition was to explore the Summer Isles, just north of Ullapool. With a continuing southerly but abating wind, the time had arrived to get there, so off we went at 0525 to catch the fair tide, in a beautiful early morning of sun and cloud and a moderate following sea. Loch Ewe, the main Home Fleet base in WW2 while Scapa Flow was vulnerable to U Boats, was our planned destination for the day, mainly because of the fabled gardens at Inverewe House, now run by the National Trust for Scotland. In retrospect it would have been good to have visited Loch Gairloch as well, but the early morning sun lit up its surrounding mountains to give us a grandstand view as we steamed past.



Sunrise over Loch Gairloch

Inverewe did not disappoint, once we found a tiny sheltered cove beside the gardens with a very convenient jetty for rowing ashore. Once landed, right in the midst of the gardens, but not having bought tickets, we found ourselves in the odd position of having to ask visitors to point us toward the entrance. There are wonderful woodland walks, a big walled garden full of herbaceous borders, a secluded lily-pond and a lovely Art Deco mansion house. We even saw a sea eagle. Enormous damage had been done to mature trees by a vicious north-east storm earlier in the year, but repair and restoration was well under way.



Walled garden at Inverewe

A veer in the wind coupled with the return of the drizzle led us to leave our now not so sheltered cove for the perfect shelter of Ob Na Ba Ruadhe at the top of Loch Thurnaig, which leads off Loch Ewe. This was a complete contrast to Inverewe: no people, no roads or buildings, not much vegetation. Even the other yacht in the anchorage soon moved away, leaving only three rather suspicious seals to keep us company while the wind slowly abated. To our delight the reported wreckage of a disused fish farm had been completely removed, leaving the place pristine and unspoiled.

12th August dawned calm, at last, but still grey, misty and drizzly. Another early start saw us crossing Gruinard Bay by 0830, passing between Priest Island to port and the infamous Gruinard Island to starboard. Gruinard was where, in WW2, chemical warfare experts thought it would be a good idea to test anthrax on unsuspecting sheep. They all died of course (the sheep not the experts), but the polluted island then became out of bounds to humans and animals for the next 50 years until, so it is said, finally cleansed. Although it is one of the Summer Isles, we weren't going there to find out. 0900 saw us entering Loch Broom in improving viz, and we were secured to the new short-stay pontoon in Ullapool Harbour by 1030 for fuelling, water and laundry.



On the pontoon at Ullapool

Pontoons

It's time to say something about pontoons. They are a new-ish feature in the Western Isles. When I started cruising there in the 1970s there were very few yachts (visiting or resident). Getting ashore was all about anchoring, or using the very occasional Highlands and Islands moorings, and then rowing ashore in the dinghy, usually to a weedy beach. Showers, laundry facilities and even toilets for yachties were simply unheard of.

Then the big increase in resident yachts led to prime anchorage space becoming less freely available due to moorings, although good visitors' moorings followed not long afterwards in many places. But getting ashore was still all about dinghy work, unless your yacht had tough enough rubbing strakes to lie alongside a commercial pier or jetty, which few of us did. Marinas were still very few and far between, even if you wanted to use them.

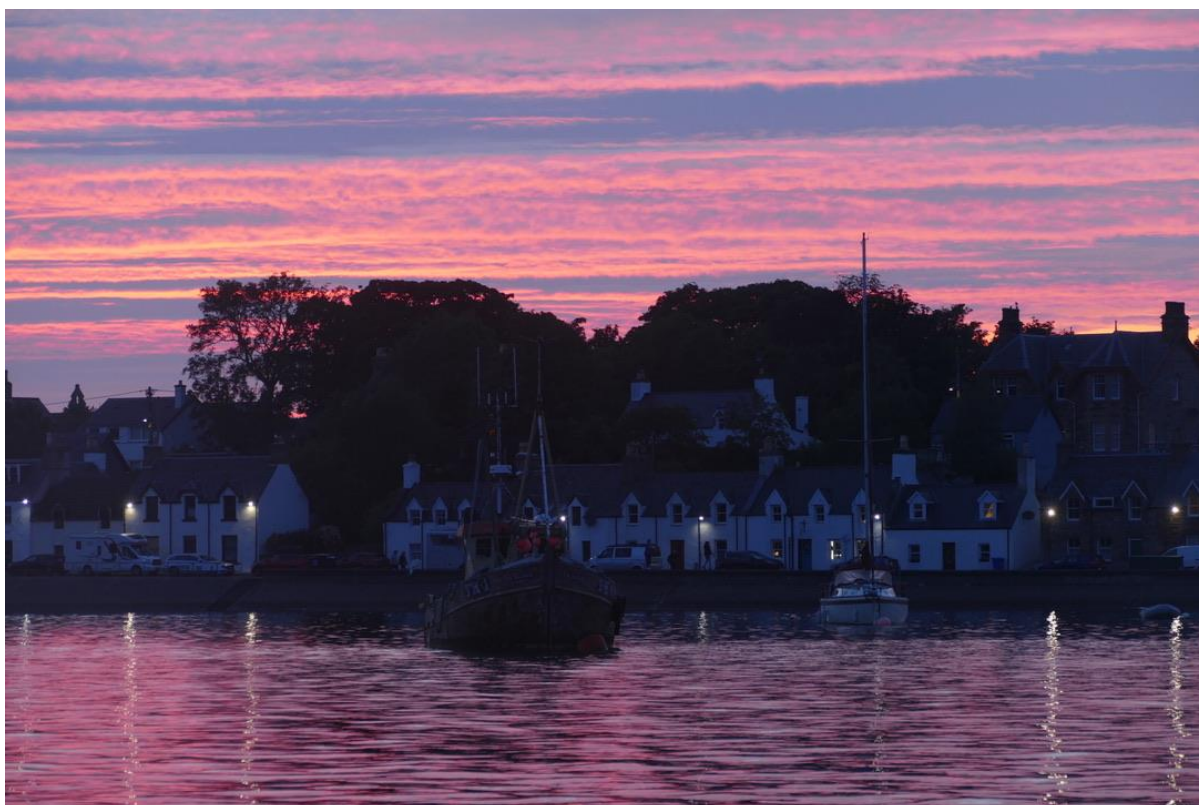
But now a yacht pontoon with adjacent toilet, shower and laundry facilities is becoming all the rage at even small destinations with an eye to the trade of visiting yachtsmen. They are rather like a sort of mini 'pop-up' marina. The typical pattern is a minimalist pontoon for (say) a dozen yachts in a quiet corner of a fishing or ferry harbour, with basic loos, showers and laundry facilities, sometimes in a purpose-built shack the size of a shipping container, with minimal staffing and the liberal use of the internet and honesty box to collect payment. There is generally a fresh-water hose, sometimes shore power, but hardly ever fuel, otherwise than by walking with cans to the nearest garage (not a practical task for a thirsty motor yacht, or even an economical one like Kingfisher).

Depending upon your age, fitness and tolerance for dinghy work, these pontoons have transformed cruising in the Western Isles. They are of course no substitute for the lonely and peaceful anchorage in a deserted beauty spot, but when it comes to provisioning, getting ashore to visit islands in depth by bus or hired car, and general R&R, they are hard to beat. We never found a lack of space, although we were cruising at the end of the Scottish season. The general state of maintenance was quite good, although it remains to be seen for how long these mainly new facilities will continue to shine. And the charges were uniformly reasonable.

Ullapool

We had rather expected that Ullapool would be a hard-bitten, strictly commercial, fishing and ferry port, with little of a welcome for yachts or flesh-pots ashore worth visiting. We really went there to re-fuel, provision and to collect my old university friend John Young for our visit to the nearby Summer Isles. How wrong we were! Ullapool is a real delight in every way. First, although the pontoon is small, and not really for yachts, we were made very welcome to use it, not only for refuelling, but also for most of the daytime when we were there, with plenty of available visitors' buoys for overnight. Secondly, the little town itself is a delight. Originally laid out in the late 18th Century as a sort of model settlement for the then thriving herring industry, the streets are on a generous grid pattern, with broad tree-lined avenues (apparently a joy when in blossom in Spring). There are two good bookshops, a comprehensive hardware store, an excellent deli, a good off-licence, a busy out-door fish shack doing a roaring trade in locally caught fish (especially langoustines and scallops) and several other good eateries and pubs. There is a very friendly little sailing club with its own generous all-tide slipway and fleet of Flying Fifteens. The supermarket has everything you could possibly want, and there is a serviced laundrette next door which does all the hard work for you overnight, even on a weekend. The place seems to be a Mecca for walkers and camper-vanners touring the far north-west, and of course it's a main jumping-off point for the Outer Hebrides, with several fast Calmac car ferry sailings to Stornoway.

We spent our first day fuelling, watering, provisioning and sightseeing, and picked up John from the pontoon at 0915 the following morning (13th August).



Ullapool at sunset

The Summer Isles

Although the name conjures up a place of endless summer and blue sky, the reason for it is more prosaic. They are called the Summer Isles simply because they were places where the local farmers sent their livestock for grazing in the summer. Being quite exposed to the westerly Atlantic swell swinging around the top of the Outer Hebrides, they are not in normal conditions replete with safe anchorages, but there are a few, and they are spectacular, with the sandy pool largely surrounded by the islets making up Tanera Beg and Eilean Fada Mor being the undisputed jewel in the crown. It is a tiny, almost completely sheltered anchorage, being partly open only to the south, but even from that direction being protected by a very shallow sand bar. The routes into the pool from the west and the north are distinctly hairy, where GPS superimposed on Navionics electric charts is almost indispensable. Had we known it, the new Antares chart system would have made it even easier, but more of that anon.

Nor was ours a day of endless sunshine. In fact we had alternating hot sun and thick fog all day, a most unusual and almost surreal experience. At some moments we were in a lagoon of hot sun and blue sky, with fog banks 360 degrees all round. At other times we could see both over and under fog banks, but not through them. Early on it was just fog, with the incoming Calmac ferry showing up clearly on AIS, but never seen. I have taken to dealing with collision risk by talking to the oncoming ship on VHF. On this occasion we easily discussed and chose opposite sides of the entrance of Loch Broom to give each other a safely wide berth.



Blue sky, mountains and fog in Loch Broom

We were lucky to have a swell-free and almost windless day (at last!) so were able to poke our noses into quite a few tempting anchorages for short stops before reaching Tanera Beg at 1330, undisturbed apart from a couple of intrepid sea-kayakers. We also had our first meeting with the large local dolphin community, whose energy and sheer uninhibited *joie de vivre* was almost tangible. Whether they were corralling fish or just having fun we could never tell. Probably a bit of both. This first time we saw about 25 of them around us at the same time.



Frolicking dolphin

Sadly John could only be with us for the day, so we steamed back through the fog to put him ashore at Ullapool, not before getting the benefit of his encyclopaedic knowledge of the mountains and geology of this extraordinary part of Scotland. But we were by no means satiated with the Summer Isles, so after putting him ashore we steamed straight back down Loch Broom, with a plan to stop at the little 4 boat pontoon at the sheltered anchorage behind Isle Martin for the night.



The Admiral with John Young

On arrival, still in darkening fog, we found the pontoon full of a weekend party of yachts from Ullapool Sailing Club, but they all seemed to be departing, and in some haste. This initially seemed too good to be true, and we nosed in toward the emptying pontoon to take their place for a peaceful night. But luckily we overheard one of the last of them saying they were leaving to escape the midges, so it was slow astern both engines and back to an anchor a cable offshore. With one exception (at Muck) we have found that Scottish midges don't usually venture as far as a cable offshore, and those at Isle Martin were no exception, leaving us with a peaceful midge-bite-free night without having to batten down the hatches and suffocate.

Isle Martin

First thing on the following morning (14th August) we went alongside the pontoon. Despite the lack of wind (or rain) the midges appeared to be having a lie-in, so the writer went ashore for an explore. Isle Martin is something of a bird reserve, with just one very simple old holiday cottage on it, without electricity or any other services. Really basic island living, for Will and his young family, who gave me a welcome coffee in the cottage. He is an estate manager from Puttenham in Surrey. Apart from the midges, the island makes an idyllic sort of Swiss Family Robinson holiday home, free from cars, TV, news, wi-fi and all modern intrusions, but with a ferry boat to bring them in and out, with all necessary provisions.



The Cottage at Isle Martin

Then at 0915 we set off again for Tanera Beg, passing through a school of at least 50 frolicking dolphins on the way, and arriving at 1230 for a second peaceful day in this idyllic anchorage, doing a bit of rowing, bird watching and gazing at starfish on the sandy shelf just below the water at low tide. And all alone until joined by one other yacht at 1830. Shortly afterwards the dolphins made a bravura entrance to the pool, charging around at high speed, jumping and generally letting off steam until, as if on instructions, they all took off together five minutes later, to be no more seen.



Magical anchorage at Tanera Beg, Summer Isles

The Outer Hebrides

Our flexible grand plan was to see all the sights going up the mainland coast, and then cross the Minch and start to make our way south along the (usually) sheltered eastern shores of the Outer Hebrides, finishing at or near Barra, before crossing back to the Inner Hebrides, specifically the back of Mull and places south. Thus far the winds had obliged, with strong southerlies pushing us north in mainly sheltered waters, followed by two days' calm for us to explore the Summer Isles.

Forecasts were now predicting northerlies to push us back south, so 15th August seemed a good day to get across the Minch, one of the few relatively open-sea passages we needed to undertake. We could have gone on north to Handa, Kinlochbervie and Edrachillis Bay, not to mention Cape Wrath, but they are all very exposed to westerly swell, and it was too late in the season to witness the ornithological wonders of Handa, the breeding season being largely finished.

So off we went, starting early as usual, at 0545, on an apparently calm, dry day, for the 32 mile passage across to the nearest convenient anchorage on Harris / Lewis. We made the mistake of avoiding Stornoway, wrongly thinking it would be too large, busy and commercial. This was wrong, for two reasons. First, although quite large and busy, we later discovered that Stornoway is rather nice. The new-ish yacht marina is sandwiched between the town and the lovely castle gardens. Secondly, as we would have realised if we had pre-read the Clyde Cruising Club Sailing Directions properly, Stornoway is the only place in the whole of the Outer Hebrides where you can get diesel on the dock, without producing the infamous 'key-fob'. This is an automated system, mainly used by fishing boats, by which, if you have the key-fob, you can get diesel (and red diesel at that on 60/40 terms) from pumps on almost every dock, pier, quay and slip in the Outer Hebrides. But it takes a postal application before you get there, and up to a 6 week wait before the key-fob arrives.

The passage over was initially rather spoilt by a northerly swell on the beam, with not enough wind for our steadying sail to keep us from rolling. But enough wind (15kts relative) arrived by 0730, although it remained grey and misty for most of the morning. No yachts to keep us company, just a few trawlers and the occasional ferry.

Harris / Lewis

My main ambition in going to Harris / Lewis was to explore right up Loch Seaforth, a forbidding loch surrounded by desolate mountains, reputed for fierce squalls. But the forecast of strong north-easterly winds made that look a bit unwise, so we went for the more welcoming Loch Leurbost, a few miles to the north, to re-group, reaching an anchor at the village of Crobost on its north side by 1015, in time for a brunch of scrambled eggs, bacon, tomatoes and toast to celebrate our arrival in the Outer Hebrides. After a short trip up the rather uninspiring loch, we returned to Crobost for a run ashore in the dinghy. The village is dominated by a rather dour Free church (locked of course), beside which there is a well-tended, quite large cemetery, with a beautifully maintained war memorial, including tribute to about 30 of those lost in the infamous Iolaire disaster.



The Iolaire Memorial at Crobst, Loch Leurbost, Lewis.

Iolaire was a steam yacht, requisitioned by the Navy during the First World War, which was carrying over 300 servicemen (mainly naval ratings) home for leave with their families on New Year's Eve 1918, prior to demobilisation. By a shocking piece of negligent navigation and poor lookout-keeping she was run at full speed onto rocks just outside Stornoway Harbour at 0130 on New Year's Day and quickly sank, taking more than two thirds of her passengers and all her officers down with her, while the remainder managed to swim ashore. Nearly every local village on Lewis, and some on Harris, was literally decimated, losing many of their young men. These were all men who had survived the horrors of the war, only to drown in peacetime, almost in sight of home and their welcoming, but by then grieving, families.

We managed later to pick up 'When I Heard the Bell', the book on the disaster by John Macleod, which made harrowing reading for us during the next few days.

The afternoon left plenty of time for more loch exploration, so first we tried Loch Erisort, in particular Keose, from a distance an attractive-looking little bay sheltered from the North, on the North side of the loch about 2 miles up. This proved to be a big disappointment, because it had been turned into a very modern, very ugly, fish farm depot. Definitely not for yachts.



Squeezing into Loch Mariveg

So we headed out again, and succumbed to the temptation of trying somewhere really tricky to get into: Loch Mariveg (or *Mharabhig* in Celtic). This is really three tiny pools, lying on the headland just South of Loch Erisort. The only navigable entrance to the first pool narrows to a mere 115 feet. The passage into the second pool, slightly south of the first, is even narrower, and the route into the third, the inner pool, is no wider. All three pools, especially the inner, are perfectly sheltered,

although the inner pool has some habitation and a little boatyard, while the other two are entirely deserted, apart from the usual small posse of inquisitive seals. We explored all three, and eventually chose the middle pool for the night, anchored under the lee of Eilean Thoraith, as having that perfect combination of seclusion, shelter, good holding and a complete absence of swell or even 'popple'. And not a sign of any other visiting yachts.



Evening anchorage at Loch Mariveg

Choosing your anchorage in a round-bilged classic motor yacht is a bit of an art. Without a deep keel or tall, heavy mast to settle them, these boats are apt to roll in surprisingly little swell or even popple. So if you want a quiet night you need to find that special, smooth spot where there is nothing to set you in motion. Preferably not even the wash of passing traffic. Their advantages however are their shallow draft, manoeuvrability and (if well ballasted) good behaviour at anchor.

The Shiant Islands

Another advantage of Loch Mariveg is that it is the perfect jumping-off point for the Shiant Islands, just 12 miles to the south, and a must-see place on any cruise going significantly north of Skye. Their main claim to fame is the truly amazing bird-life, but the passing of the breeding season meant that this was somewhat muted by the time we got there. Nonetheless there was still an abundance of bird life by any ordinary standards. Having set off at first light (again to catch the tide and avoid a wind- over-tide situation with the by then vigorous northerly) we were anchored in the lee of Eilean Mhuire, after passing through the spectacular channel between it and the main Garbh Eilean, by 0740, to be surrounded by kittiwakes, gannets, black guillemots, shags, terns, razorbills

and black backed gulls. The best of the birdlife was watching young cormorants learning to fly, crash-landing in the sea and then swimming off as if nothing had happened.



Anchored in the Shiantis

The other marvellous feature of the Shiantis is their geology. Everyone knows of the hexagonal basalt columns of the Giant's Causeway and Fingal's Cave. They aren't noted for their height. But imagine the same columnar structure going up hundreds of feet into the sky, right along near vertical cliffs, sometimes with spectacular twists in the strata. That's the Shiantis for you. It really takes your breath away.



Basalt strata at the Shiants

It must have done the same for the famous island-dweller Compton Mackenzie, because he had a cottage just south of the narrow strand joining Garbh Eilean and Eilean Tighe, off which we anchored later in the morning. Yet again we had the whole place to ourselves, the apparently habitable tiny cottage being guarded only by a few sheep, with not a human being in sight.



Compton Mackenzie's cottage at the Shiants

Back to Lewis

From there it was only an hour's easy passage (at the end of the north-going tide) back to Lewis, this time to Loch Bhrollum, about 5 miles east of the entrance to Loch Seaforth, where we went for a very nice lunch of Cullen Skink and Ullapool cheese, as ever watched by a large colony of seals sunbathing on the weedy rocks a few yards to leeward.

From there it was off to Loch Claidh, just north east of Loch Seaforth, which marks part of the boundary between Lewis and Harris. Loch Claidh is really a smaller version of Loch Seaforth, carved mainly by glacial action, with spectacular desolate mountains either side, which serve to channel the wind with great force either up or down its length. The recommended anchorage (if you want protection from the east) is in Rubha Bhalamuis bay just a mile inside the entrance on the north-east side.

But by this time the wind had developed enough of a northerly aspect for the mountains to direct it down, rather than up, the loch, making our supposedly snug anchorage a bit of a lee shore. So we decided to go right up to the head of the loch, where the shallow water was marked by Navionics and Garmin's G Map with just a single laconic 10 metre sounding. Still it was obviously a glacially carved, if not polished, sea bed, so we took the risk of rocks or boulders and anchored as far up as would leave us afloat at low water. Perfectly smooth sea, but what a wind, howling down the glacial valley to the north of us. It was by then a beautiful sunny evening, even if thoroughly wind-chilled. As darkness came on, it became distinctly austere, but well worth the visit.



The head of Loch Claidh

Scalpay and Tarbert

By dawn the following morning the beastly north wind had abated, and we were able to anchor in complete calm in Bhalamuis bay for breakfast, while deciding where to go next. Beverly needed a good internet signal for a Zoom meeting, and we were almost up to the Sound of Scalpay before we got one. By then we'd had a forecast of very strong easterly winds followed by rain, developing in the Minch, which made a trip up Loch Seaforth look a bit foolhardy. So discretion proved the better part of valour, and we passed up under the new Scalpay bridge, coming to an anchor just outside Scalpay's north harbour by 0950, in time for Beverly's meeting. Then it was into the nearby harbour to ride out the coming strong winds and rain, where the sailing directions had (wrongly) advertised a fuel pontoon which didn't need a key fob. There was an excellent pontoon, perfectly sheltered in an easterly, but no fuel. Nor did Scalpay have any shops, pub or even café open. Nothing beyond a warm welcome from the pontoon manager.

Despite a good walk ashore, and a friendly conversation with a new resident making artifacts out of the (incredibly ancient and hard) local Gneiss rock, we felt that Scalpay was a bit lifeless. Maybe the new bridge had sucked the life out of it as a self-sufficient island community. Why patronise a local store if you can jump in your car and visit the nearest supermarket on Harris? And why support a local eatery when the excellent ones at Tarbert (about which more anon) are only 10 minutes drive away?



The pontoon at East Tarbert, Harris

We had by then been given the most enthusiastic reports of the new East Tarbert marina, so off we went, securing at the pontoons there by tea time. And we weren't disappointed. We were met by the marina manager Carol Anne with the warmest and most helpful welcome. The 'marina' is a newly installed single pontoon with attached fingers on its north side, laid at considerable expense right at the top of the harbour above the Ro Ro terminal, with space for about a dozen yachts. Although in theory a bit exposed to a 2 mile fetch from the South East, it seemed always to be calm and sheltered from both sea and wind. The little converted shipping container serving as the marina offices had just enough room for loos, laundry and showers. Right next door was the splendid brand-new distillery, architect designed and with a welcoming visitor centre and cosy café, churning out large quantities local gin while its first batches of malt whiskey matured for the market. And the little town of Tarbert, with 2 good hotel-restaurants, general store, butcher and ironmonger was only 5 minutes walk further on.



The new distillery at Tarbert, Harris

But the real jewel in the crown was Carol Anne herself. She was a mine of local information, including bus timetables to every possible destination. Above all was her sheer cheerful helpfulness. When it turned out that the nearby diesel pump was out of action, she was determined to supply cans and drive me (for no charge) to another one 2.5 miles away.

We spent 3 days in Tarbert, the longest I think we have ever spent in one place while cruising, except when truly gale-bound. We managed by the judicious mixture of (expensive) taxis and (cheap) buses to explore almost every part of Harris / Lewis, again something we haven't done before. We saw the amazing (and almost empty) huge sandy beaches on the West side of Harris, largely out of bounds to yachts because of the exposure to the Atlantic swells and general lack of depth.



Sandy beaches on the West side of Harris

We saw the Calanais standing stones, much older than Stonehenge. And we made it to Stornoway after all, delighting in the arts centre by the dockside, where there was live walk-in folk music in the theatre, a good modern art exhibition and the kids art club all learning to draw, squatting on the floor of the exhibition hall.



The Calanais standing stones, Lewis

We also had a quite exceptional 7 course taster dinner at Flavour, the new mini-restaurant in a small industrial estate just outside Tarbert, where the talented owner does most of the cooking right in front of you, with running commentary, and you sit looking out across the bay in the setting sun (if it's shining, which it wasn't). But the view was captivating nonetheless.

Our stay at Tarbert was an introduction to a possible new type of cruising for us. Till now we have tended to make the shortest possible stays in each place, enough for a dash on foot round the harbour and perhaps a walk along the nearest cliffs, before restlessly sailing on to the next destination. The idea of just using the boat as a base for exploration by land transport has never really occurred to us before. Maybe having 5 weeks cruising time has broadened our horizons a bit. I'm sure we will be doing it again. And we did on this cruise, as you will hear.

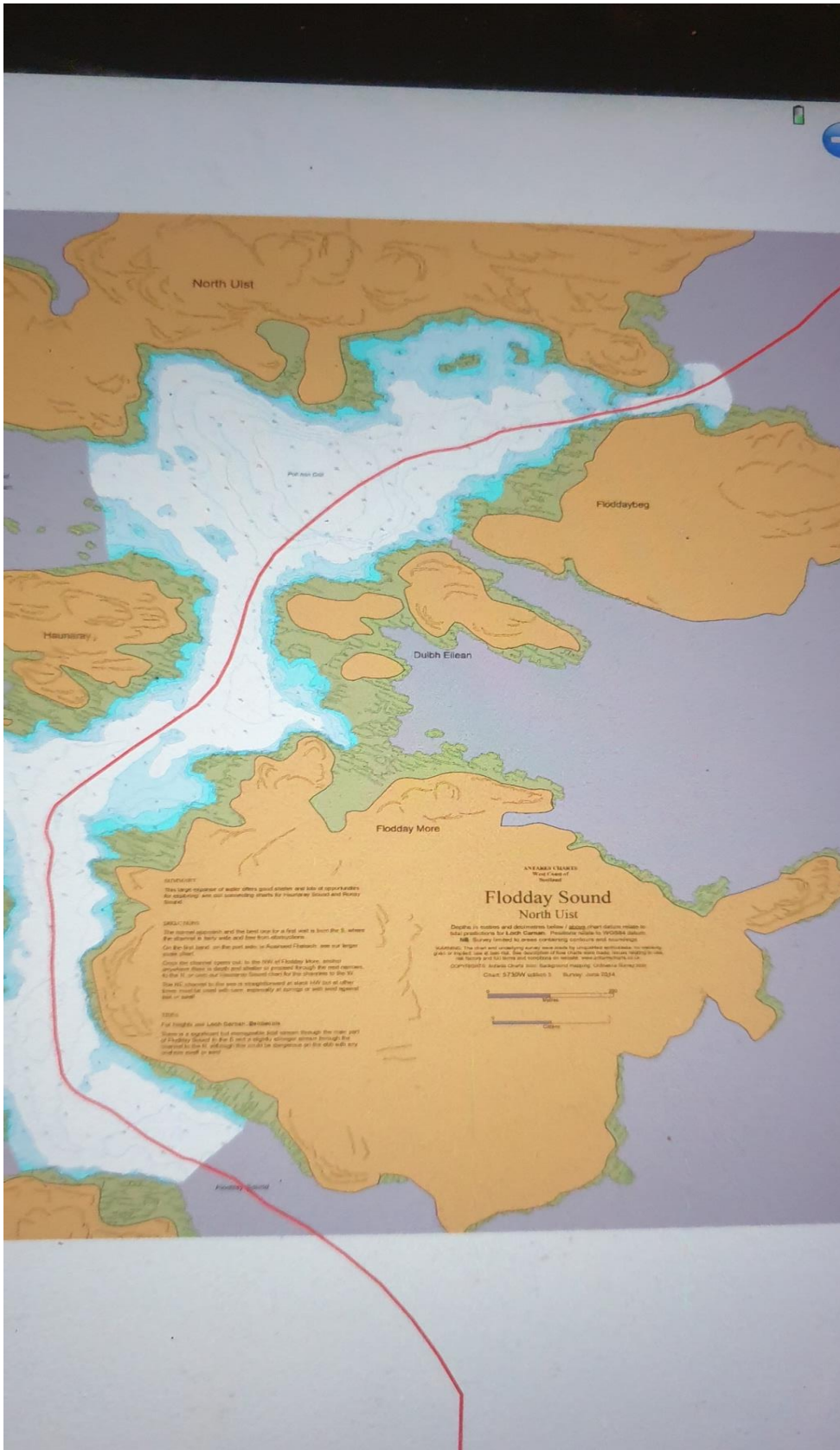
Down the Outer Hebrides to Eriskay, Barra and Vatersay

By the law of meteorological averages our plan to mooch slowly down the east side of the Outer Hebrides, protected from the prevailing westerlies, should have paid off by now, since we had thus far had no westerlies at all and were therefore due a goodly slice of them. But it was not to be. The forecast on 21 August predicted only one day of south-westerlies before it backed to the east again. As we were shortly to discover, that is not a wind direction in which you want to find yourself just east of the Outer Hebrides. It's 63 miles from Tarbert to Castle Bay, where the harbour gives good shelter from the easterly blast, so we thought we would get as near there as we comfortably could in a day, even though it meant missing out lots of interesting little places in the intervening islands. The day started sunny and calm, so we were off at first light, soon accompanied by a couple of escorting dolphins.

Antares

We were determined to give our newly-acquired Antares chart software a proper trial. For those who (like us before this cruise) don't know about it, Antares is a venture by a small group of experienced yachtsmen to provide much better information about attractive yacht anchorages than you can get from Garmin, Navionics or other e-charts, and even from the largest-scale Admiralty paper charts (which are apparently soon to be discontinued altogether). All you do is download Memory-Map operating software onto your tablet or even mobile phone and then, for a very modest fee, the latest Antares mini-charts. Initially they just show up as red blobs on the MM chart. But when you zoom right in, they become real chartlets with a wealth of soundings and other information not available elsewhere, with even some very useful sailing directions in note form. And the MM software provides a precise location of your boat, with a head marker (as per Navionics) to show where you are going as well.

Our first trial site soon manifested itself, in the form of Flodday Beg, Flodday Mor, Haunaray and Ronaybeag, with the tortuous little channel that winds between them, all at the southern end of North Uist. This little bit of ditch-crawling would have been quite impossible for us with Garmin, Navionics or paper charts but, despite at times seeing the weed-clad rocks within feet of either side, Antares took us safely through without incident, and with only the smallest deviation from our southerly passage. Phew!



Kingfisher's track through Flodday Sound, North Uist, by Antares

Then it was back to the main passage, but we couldn't resist stopping for lunch at Wizard Pool in Loch Skipport in South Uist. Loch Skipport is, easily, the finest loch in the Outer Hebrides south of Harris. After the lowly expanse of Benbecula it nestles under the magnificent bulk of Hecla, the second highest mountain on the island, at just under 2,000 ft. The loch is almost uninhabited, and the Wizard Pool, on its south side, presents a perfectly sheltered little anchorage, where we put the anchor down between a tiny island and a stream gushing down from the hills. As so often we had it all to ourselves. The sun came out again and we had a perfect warm spot for a not too leisurely lunch, mindful of the distance still to be covered in the afternoon.



Hecla, from Wizard's Pool, South Uist

Leaving at 1400 through the narrow slightly rocky channel into Little Kettle Pool (thank you again Antares) a three hour run along the shore of South Uist brought us to Arcasaid Mhor on the east side of Eriskay, another perfectly sheltered little harbour mainly given over to fishing boats, but reputed by all the charts and sailing directions to have some good visitors' buoys for yachts. Well they were nowhere to be seen, so we moored on the only vacant buoy at the head of the harbour, which we later discovered was not a mooring at all, but a float for a submerged collection of unused creels. The visitors' buoy chains had, so we were told, rusted away, and no-one seemed to think it worth replacing them. I wanted to visit Arcasaid Mhor to exorcise the ghost of having once run a friend's yacht very gently aground on a rock in the entrance, in the days before GPS charts, and when the excellent leading lights were masked by the setting sun. Well, the ghost was duly laid to rest, but the harbour is a bit of a lonely non-place. The only village on Eriskay is a good 30 minute hike over to the other side of the island, so all there is in the harbour is a jetty for local fishing boats and a few holiday cottages. But we did hear the strange sound at dusk of a couple of seals calling to each other.



Eriskay village

Barra and Vatersay

These most southerly inhabited islands in the Outer Hebrides held many happy memories for us, and we were determined to visit them again. But during the night the forecast easterly wind had arrived, giving us the only really rough passage of the whole cruise. This southerly part of the east side of the Outer Hebrides has an extremely uneven and shallow bottom stretching nearly two miles offshore, onto which an easterly swell breaks with a truly horrible sea of short steep waves lacking in any kind of rhythm. So the ten mile passage along that shore across this confused beam sea proved to be a real stinker, even though, for most of it, we kept to seaward of the uneven shallow bottom, ran at only 6 kts and made full use of the steadying sail to minimise rolling. To be fair to Kingfisher, we had no slamming or pounding, and only one wave green over the bow. But with the glass at 1008mb and falling we could only expect it to get worse, as the drizzle set in and the viz reduced to 1.5 miles.

Eventually we were able to bear away for the entrance to Castle Bay, bringing the sea astern, with no harm done other than a few books thrown out of the bookcase. Then, on arrival we discovered that the wind had retained enough of a southerly element in it to mean that the bay was not really sheltered at all, as it would have been in a true easterly. There is a new pontoon mini-marina at Castle Bay (where on our last visit there were only visitors' buoys) and we were keen to give it a try, even though the sailing directions warned that it would be uncomfortable with much south in the wind (as there was, and lots of it). Well, after several attempts to get alongside with wind doing its best to blow us off, we did tie up alongside the outer floating pontoon, to discover that the sailing directions were wrong. The pontoon was made of a particularly heavy-duty construction so that, even though it was floating and the occasional wave breaking over it, it provided very good shelter indeed from the waves and swell, leaving us as comfortable inside it as we would have been alongside a solid harbour wall. As usual, there were no other visiting yachts at all.



The Castle in the murk, Castle Bay, Barra

But it was a miserable wet day so, with excellent local wi-fi, we just used it to catch up with work. The famous castle on its little island in the harbour was just about visible in the murk, but a walk ashore held no attractions. Meanwhile a much better forecast for the following day kept our spirits up. The wind was due to veer to the south-west, at a gentle F3-4, but only for a day before backing and rising to F5-7 with occasional bursts of F8.

Vatersay used to be an island, with one small community of about 50 people, with splendid sandy beaches on almost all sides. Now it is joined to Barra by the ubiquitous Hebridean causeway but, unlike Scalpay, has preserved its very distinct, quite wild, separate feeling.



Sandy beach at last, Vatersay

23rd August dawned much clearer than its miserable predecessor, and promised to be perfect for a visit to Vatersay Bay, a lovely inlet, sheltered from south-east round through west to north, with a beautiful sandy beach at the top of it, well out of the Atlantic swell. But first we needed to provision, from the truly excellent Co-Op only 3 minutes walk away from the pontoon at Castle Bay. With provisions for 5 days we were off by 0900, and anchored just off the beach at Vatersay Bay by 0945, with the wind obligingly blowing straight offshore, and nothing to disturb a row ashore for a good walk in the sunshine. A two hour walk took us over to the much wilder beach on the west side, for a visit to the Annie Jane memorial, a simple stone obelisk reminding visitors of the wreck of an emigrant ship there in 1853 with the loss of 350 of her passengers and crew. The numbers lost were similar to the death toll on the *lolaire*, and it is hard to say which disaster is the more shocking tragedy. Losses of sailing ships on a lee shore in a gale were of course much more common in the mid 19th Century than the loss of a smart steamer under naval command in 1919, and none of those lost on the *Annie Jane* were from the local island community, as were almost all from the *lolaire*. But it doesn't take much imagination to be bowed down by the thought of whole families drowning on a strange shore, having entrusted themselves to a seagoing ship for the first time, in the hope of a better life in the New World.



The Annie Jane Memorial, Vatersay

Those sombre thoughts were soon blown away on our return (via the little village on Vatersay) to the bay on the east side, to find that Kingfisher had chosen this occasion to go for a little walk of her own, dragging her big 45lb CQR and long heavy chain down the bay, but mercifully not onto (or even toward) any rocks or shallows. She probably hadn't gone more than about 2 or 3 cables, easily reached in the dinghy, but her dragging was a condign warning not just to assume that dropping the anchor and regulation length of chain was enough, without a little tug to make sure it had properly dug itself in, before going ashore and out of sight.

But much wilder weather was still threatened for the following day, so after lunch we decided to head back across the Minch to Canna, there to ride out the next blow. The 35 mile passage, in lovely sunny weather with a light following breeze, took from 1345 until 1845, passing Oigh Sgeir 2 miles to starboard, and squeezing between Humla Rock and Belle Rock 20 minutes later, before rounding Sanday (Canna's little sister island) into a perfect smooth sea before entering harbour.

The harbour at Canna is rightly regarded as much the most secure in the Small Isles, and now boasts a horse-shoe shaped ring of well-maintained visitors buoys, with space to anchor if they are all taken, in complete shelter from all winds except perhaps from the east-south-east.

We arrived to find one free visitors buoy and rounded off a perfect day with a good steak dinner, in a glorious sunset.



Sunset at Canna Harbour, with Rhum in the background

The blustery SSW wind duly arrived during the night, so we spent 24th August exploring ashore, starting at a little beach on Sanday, from where we could expect a nice downwind passage in the dinghy back to Kingfisher if, as duly happened, the wind increased to make rowing upwind from the main slipway too much like hard, wet, work later in the day.



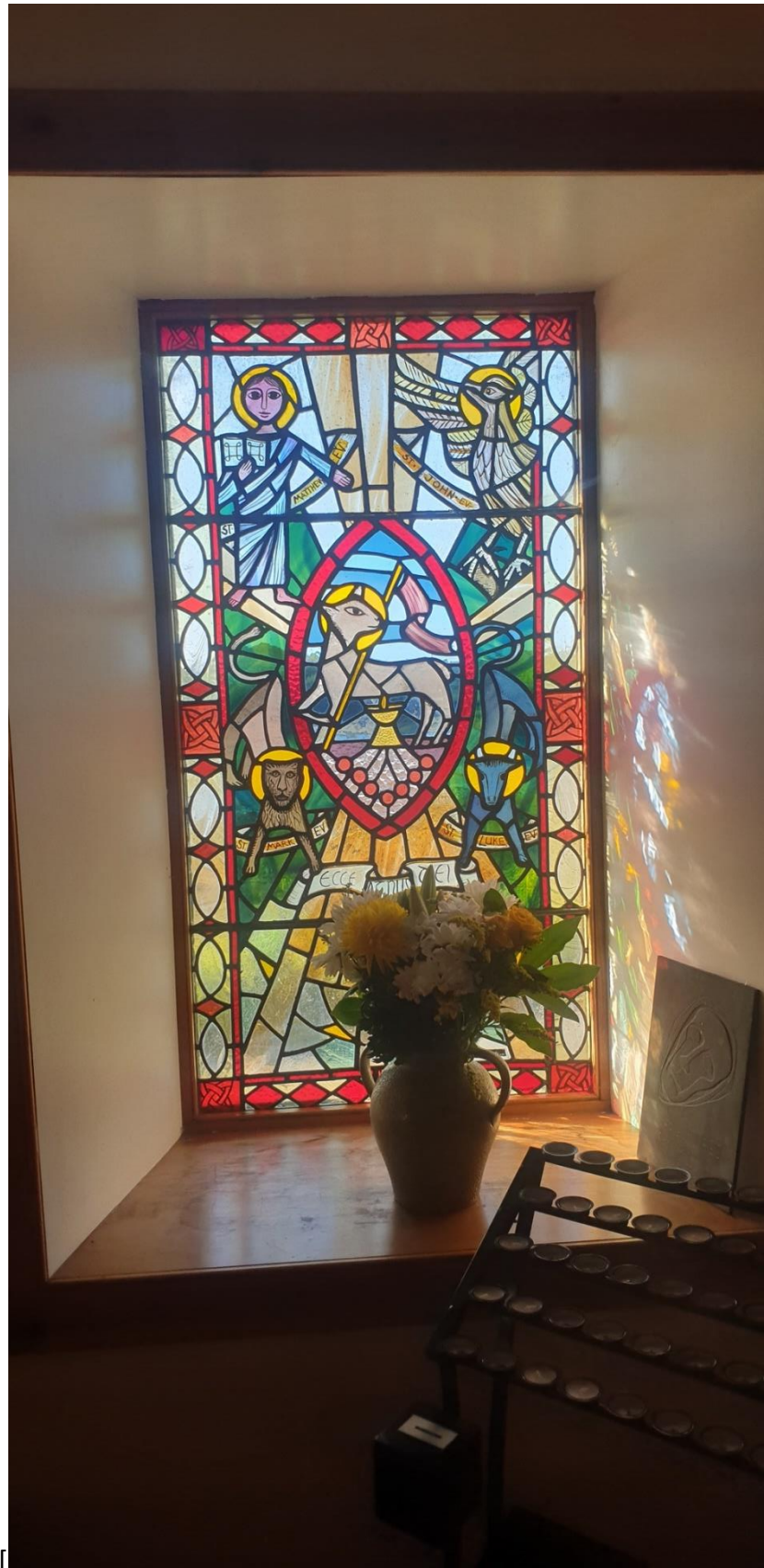
Roman Catholic Church at Sanday

Canna and Sanday are joined by a little bridge over a narrow creek. The two islands have a remarkable concentration of churches. On Sanday there is a large, ornate 19th Century RC church, now disused, locked and reputed to suffer from damp.



Free Church at Canna

Then near the main jetty is an unusually beautiful, much older, Free Church, also disused except for the occasional wedding but at least open to visitors. Meanwhile the Catholics (who are the main denomination among the island's tiny population) have taken over a small outbuilding near the farm and converted it into a beautiful chapel, complete with a carved altar and stained glass windows, much more suited to a small island congregation than its grandiose predecessor.



Stained glass in the new catholic chapel, Canna

As luck would have it, our visit coincided with only the second visit of the year by the Free Church minister, who arrived on the daily ferry with his wife to conduct a service in the catholic chapel, attended by his one parishioner, her carer, me and a few visitors. He sensibly brought with him a little ghetto-blaster to provide the organ accompaniment for the hymns, so we all had a good holy sing-song, listened to a rousing sermon, and went on our way much encouraged to live a better life and to love our neighbours. Meanwhile the wind steadily increased, but apart from a short shower, it remained sunny and exhilarating.

Canna has a beautiful main house, now given over to the storage and display of local archives, but unfortunately closed for renovation. But the beautifully maintained gardens were open, well sheltered from the prevailing winds, and it was only a short woodland walk to another Celtic cross of great antiquity in what is called St Columba's graveyard, a mile or so uphill from the catholic chapel by the farmyard, followed by a light lunch in the tiny café on the path to the jetty.



Canna House

The following day (25th August) was forecast to be a bit less windy, but still a bit fierce for rounding Ardnamurchan Point, so we decided on a day trip all round the Small Isles, leaving Canna at 0900 for the north shore of Rhum, looking briefly into Kilmory bay and then Saman Insir, another little Antares-surveyed inlet out of the swell, in the hope (which duly came to pass) of seeing some of Rhum's famous red deer.



Red deer at Saman Insir, Rhum

We also saw the forbidding sight of a large, modern trawler lying wrecked on her side against the cliffs, a sobering reminder that shipwrecks are not just a thing of the past.



Wrecked trawler off Rhum

By 1150 we were anchored for lunch in Loch Scresort, Rhum's main harbour, where we had the relief of being back in wi-fi contact after several days' isolation. Previous experience of Rhum's midges, the most fierce I have ever encountered, led us to avoid going ashore.



Kinloch Castle, Loch Scresort, Rhum

So after lunch it was off to Eigg, another spectacular mountainous island equally poorly provided with safe anchorage. But there was enough west in the wind to give some shelter on the south-east side, between Eilean Chathastail and the expensive new ferry jetty, where we anchored in the quite strong tide. The writer went ashore for a little explore, but the main settlement on Eigg is several miles over the hills to the north west, and I wasn't in the mood to leave Kingfisher unattended again, so soon after her 'walk' at Vatersay. So a proper exploration of Eigg will have to await another time, in more settled weather.



Anchorage at Eigg

Thus far we had used both Rhum and Eigg as protection against the continuing south-west wind and swell, but it couldn't be avoided for the last 5 miles to our planned overnight anchorage in Gallanaich Bay on the north coast of Muck, a mere 8 miles from Ardnamurchan Point.

We had used this anchorage before and liked it much more than the little anchorage at Port Mor on the south side, where the ferry goes in and (uniquely) the midges fly out to greet you. Gallanaich Bay has a picturesque farm at its head and a nasty reef in the entrance traditionally avoided by a transit between a dry-stone wall and the edge of a barn (but now by the use of Antares). It now has a brand-new lodge with a highly regarded restaurant, but alas that was fully booked.

Nonetheless it promised a quiet secure night while the wind dropped away, and certainly delivered the most spectacular sunset display I have ever seen, anywhere. The clouds rolling off nearby Rhum and Eigg were lit up bright red, making them look almost like fiery emissions from a volcano.



Sunset over Eigg, from Gallanaich Bay, Muck

But for some reason the night was spoilt by a persistent swell working up the bay, right on Kingfisher's beam, leaving us rolling away, with nothing we could do to stop it, short of clearing out to sea, which we were too tired to attempt. It was one of those occasions when a good seamanlike crew, unspoilt by marinas and visitors' buoys, would have laid out two anchors, to hold us head-on or stern-on to the swell, pitching gently, but roll-free. We certainly had the two anchors (her original big fisherman lying unused on the foredeck). We could probably have mustered up the seamanship, but lying to multiple anchors is a dying art and we just couldn't, or wouldn't, summon up the necessary energy. So we rolled, and rolled, and rolled ourselves to sleep.

Tobermory and the back of Mull

26th August marked (at last!) the beginning of the first and only period of sustained, settled, calm weather on the whole cruise. It lasted for a whole seven days, and may have been the only week this year which would fairly be described as summer in the Western Isles. It was a pity that it came too late to enable us to visit St Kilda, since by then we had returned too far south to make it feasible. And of course it came too late altogether for local sailors, since in Scotland the summer holidays were over and the kids back to school. But for us it opened up some nice opportunities to explore parts of the area we hadn't visited before, including the back of Mull, the west side of Jura, Islay and Gigha.

First however, anticipating a lack of good food shops and fuel docks in that area, we needed to call into Tobermory to refuel and provision, arriving there at 0900 after an 0630 departure from Muck and a rounding of Ardnamurchan Point in an uncharacteristic flat calm by 0800. We moored on the fuel pontoon just ahead of Boreas, a magnificent big modern American displacement motor yacht

which had crossed the Atlantic under her own power without refuelling after Bermuda, at her stately cruising speed of 8 kts. Apart from our identical cruising speeds the two boats could not have been more different. The crews of each were lost in admiration for the other, but not enough of course to want to swap!

We were also joined by Flying Dutchman, originally a Baltic trading ketch but re-rigged as a topsail schooner and operating as a charter base for cyclists exploring the highlands and islands. We made a trio of extraordinarily different boats, each viable in their separate ways, each operated by a husband and wife team, but otherwise as dissimilar as chalk and cheese.



Kingfisher, Boreas and Flying Dutchman, meeting at Tobermory

Provisioning complete (especially from the home-made chocolate shop) we were off by 1430 into a sunny and warm afternoon, freshened by a gentle 10kt sea breeze, for the passage round the north end of Mull, sheltered from the swell by Coll and Tiree to the west, to reach Gometra harbour by 1800 via the distinctly hairy Maisgeir Channel (thank you again Antares) where, wiser after Vatersay, we got the anchor to bed firmly into the mud on the second attempt.

Connected to its bigger sister Ulva by a little bridge over a drying creek, Gometra is almost uninhabited, and its harbour to the south of the creek is another perfect natural haven, giving peace and shelter from all wind directions, which we shared for the night with only one other visiting yacht.



Peace at Gometra Harbour

The following morning dawned sunny and calm, allowing a leisurely explore along the South side of Ulva, into the beautiful and almost deserted Craigaig Bay, where the writer rowed ashore to see whether there was a reasonable path over the hill to the Sound of Ulva, which separates it from Mull. Well there wasn't, but there were plenty of midges welcoming the opportunity of some calm conditions to go hunting for unsuspecting human prey.



Tranquil Craigaig Bay, Ulva

So I grabbed a sprig of heather to put on the bow to celebrate our return round Ardnamurchan and legged it back to Kingfisher, beating the drizzle which arrived at 1130.



A bit of smurrin wasn't enough to dull our urge to explore, so 1145 saw us on the short hop over to Inch Kenneth, a small island on the south side of Loch na Keal, famous (if that is the right word) as the secluded retreat of Unity Mitford after she shot herself with a pistol given to her by Hitler. Kenneth was a saintly contemporary of St Columba and there was probably an early daughter monastery of Iona there, of which no trace remains. But there is a lovely ruined chapel with some spectacular medieval grave stones preserved there and watched over by protective sheep, as well as what is known as the White House, the rather austere Mitford home until the 1960s.



The ruined chapel at Inch Kenneth

Inch Kenneth has two anchorages. The north one is easy to enter, recommended by the cruising guide, but not that close to the landing place. By contrast the south anchorage is accessible only through a line of reefs, (thanks again Antares), but generally better sheltered and more convenient once you get in there, as we did in time for lunch and the welcome return of the sun.



Celtic Cross overlooking South Harbour, Inch Kenneth

After a very interesting trip ashore to the ruined chapel we were off again by 1430 for the easy 10 mile passage past Staffa to Iona, where we wanted to attend the Sunday service at the magnificent abbey the next morning.

There then followed a rather unsatisfactory search for a good anchorage for the night. The sound between Iona and Mull is notoriously poor as an anchorage, affected by strong tides and the south-west swell, besides being generally poor holding. As so often, the best anchorage off the village was encumbered by moorings. There are no visitors buoys or pontoons for yachts, and the very frequent small Calmac ferry has to be left a good route for getting in and out. So after rolling away there for tea we tried the famous Bull Hole on the Mull side, with its picturesque pink rocks. It was empty at the southern end and we should probably have stayed there, but we turned up our nose at it in favour of the anchorage off the pier at Erraid – too much swell – then Tinkers Hole to the South, where the perfect spot was already occupied by another yacht in a position which made safe sharing overnight impossible. In the end we anchored at the northern entrance of the Tinkers Hole area, in a spot which, again, only Antares made possible. There we were reasonably peaceful, and easily rocked to sleep after a local lamb shank and aubergine dinner on board.



Pink rocks at Bull Hole

Iona

This is the great modern pilgrimage centre in the Western Isles, founded by St Columba, and the place from which both Scotland and much of the North of England was introduced to Christianity. Modern scholarship suggests that much of Ireland was evangelised from there as well, rather than the other way round. Its continuing vitality was fully demonstrated by a packed abbey (which must seat over 500) for the Sunday morning interdenominational communion service, even on a late season day in (Scottish) term time.



The Abbey, Iona

After a thoroughly uplifting morning we were off again by 1300, actually sailing on deck for the first time in the cruise, in the now settled calm weather, headed for West Loch Tarbet on Jura, another of our 'must-sees', for the night. It was a calm 25 mile passage round the north end of Colonsay into this spectacular loch which runs in from the west side of Jura, just north of the famous twin mountains called the Paps and almost cuts the island in two.



The Paps of Jura, from Loch Tarbet,

Apart from the unrivalled views of the Paps, West loch Tarbet is famous for two things: first the extraordinary raised beaches, 50 ft or so above sea level, left over from a time when sea levels were much higher; and secondly for the ultra-hairy top part of the loch, with very narrow channels and roaring tides called Cumhann Beag, first marked out with copious leading marks by Blondie Haslar. Cumhann Beag is every yacht navigator's dare, but even the wonderful Antares chart notes firmly advised against trying it on spring tides (which there were when we visited). So we called it a day in the upper loch, in utter peace and tranquillity. Jura is by no means a small island, but it is almost deserted apart from game and wildlife, and as peaceful a place as you could wish for.



Raised beach at Loch Tarbet, Jura

Islay

Although Jura and Islay are adjacent, they could not be more different. They are separated by a long, narrow sound through which the tide hurtles, and to catch it going the right way demanded an early start, with over 13 kts being achieved over the ground as the tide squirted us through. Then it was a short passage along the south-east side of Islay to the Ardmore Islands. Poorly charted by Garmin and Navionics, its inner recesses were minutely detailed and sounded by Antares, and it looked like the perfect place for a peaceful day in the hot sun that was developing. We were at anchor in the oddly named Plod Sgeirean by 0945, watched by the usual gang of suspicious, slightly growly, seals, but with no yachts or other signs of human habitation anywhere to be seen.



Growly seal, Ardmore Islands, Islay

The afternoon was spent rowing, swimming, even sunbathing until a slight but cold breeze forced us back into long trousers and sweaters at 1745. But there was still a memorable sunset followed by a new moon, to end a very peaceful day.



Sunset over Ardmore Islands, Mull of Kintyre in the background

Port Ellen, at the south-east corner of Islay, was our next day's destination, passing four of the world's most famous whiskey distilleries in the space of just half an hour. The famous single malt brand names Bunnahabhain, Ardbeg, Lagavulin and Laphroaig were all written in large black script on white painted factories. They are the engine-room of what we discovered later in the day is the most prosperous island in the Hebrides.



One of the famous whiskey distilleries, Islay

Our reason for going to Port Ellen, apart from its new-ish mini-marina for walking ashore, was to be able to hire a car for the day, for a really thorough exploration of the island. Our journey took us first to the ruined Kildalton chapel, with one of the finest Celtic crosses of all in its churchyard, probably carved in the 8th century.



Ancient Celtic cross, Kildalton, Islay

Then back via Port Ellen to Bowmore, the main town in the island, with its unusual round church (alas locked) at the top of the High Street. They say it was built round so that there could be no corner for the devil to hide in.



The Round Church at Bowmore, Islay

Then it was off to Finlaggan, the historic centre and meeting place (so it is said) of the Lords of the Isles. It consists of a couple of tiny islands on a fresh-water loch, which looked much too small to be the centre of power of any potentate. Unfortunately the footbridge to the island was closed for repairs, but we were made very welcome in the little visitor centre. We were probably one of the very few visitors all day.



Finlaggan, Islay

Then back to Bowmore for lunch in a good pizza restaurant on the shore of the large, very shallow, Loch Indaal.

The afternoon was spent on an extended drive round the much less populated west side of Islay, starting with the Rhinns peninsula to the West of Loch Indaal, taking in Port Charlotte, another picturesque model fishing village built in the early 19th century.



Port Charlotte, Islay

Then on to the stupendous sandy Machir Bay: miles and miles of unspoilt sand facing the western swells with scarcely a person on it.



Machir Bay, Rhinns of Islay

We finished on the lonely west side of the shallow creek-like Loch Gruinart in the far north west. Then it was back to Port Ellen to return the car, followed by an excellent fish dinner at the Seasalt bistro.

Overall we hadn't been much impressed by the architectural merit of much of the new house building in the Western Isles. Lots of featureless modern boxes, no doubt a real improvement for the occupants on the crofters' cottages which they replaced, but not exactly picturesque, or even the result of any carefully thought-out planning policy. But Islay was the exception. Quite apart from the well-preserved and prosperous-looking towns and villages like Port Ellen, Bowmore and Port Charlotte, the bulk of the new building was of a visually pleasing quality, and respect for antecedents, that pleased the eye and lifted the heart. I think it was the prosperity engendered by all the whisky distilling that probably made all the difference. Whatever it was, Islay came across as a community in harmony with itself and its surroundings, even if it lacked some of the geological grandeur of its mountainous neighbours Jura, Mull and Skye.

After supper the Ardmore Islands were calling us back for another peaceful evening, and an ideal jumping-off point for our next day's destination: Gigha. It was only a 7 mile skip back from Port Ellen, so an early evening passage got us tucked safely in there before dusk, with just the usual few seals for company, and not a yacht or human being in sight.

Gigha

My late father, from whom I learned to love cruising in general and the Western Isles in particular, always said that tiny Gigha, on the west side of the Mull of Kintyre, was a jewel of an island, not to be missed. But since it's off the beaten track running north from the Crinan canal, and I had never ventured the long way round the Mull of Kintyre, I had not yet managed to visit it. Now was time to put that right, and a calm spell that laid it all open to exploration. It's a 10 mile hop across the tide from the Ardmore islands to the passage between Gigha and its satellite islands to the south-west, so we didn't have to make the early start which catching the tide had demanded on so many earlier occasions. We were across by 1000, and despite a gentle 5 kt north easterly wind blowing straight into the main anchorage in Ardmish Bay, the conditions were so settled that we thought we could get away with berthing on the new pontoon on what was a dead lee shore, to save having to get out the dinghy and row.



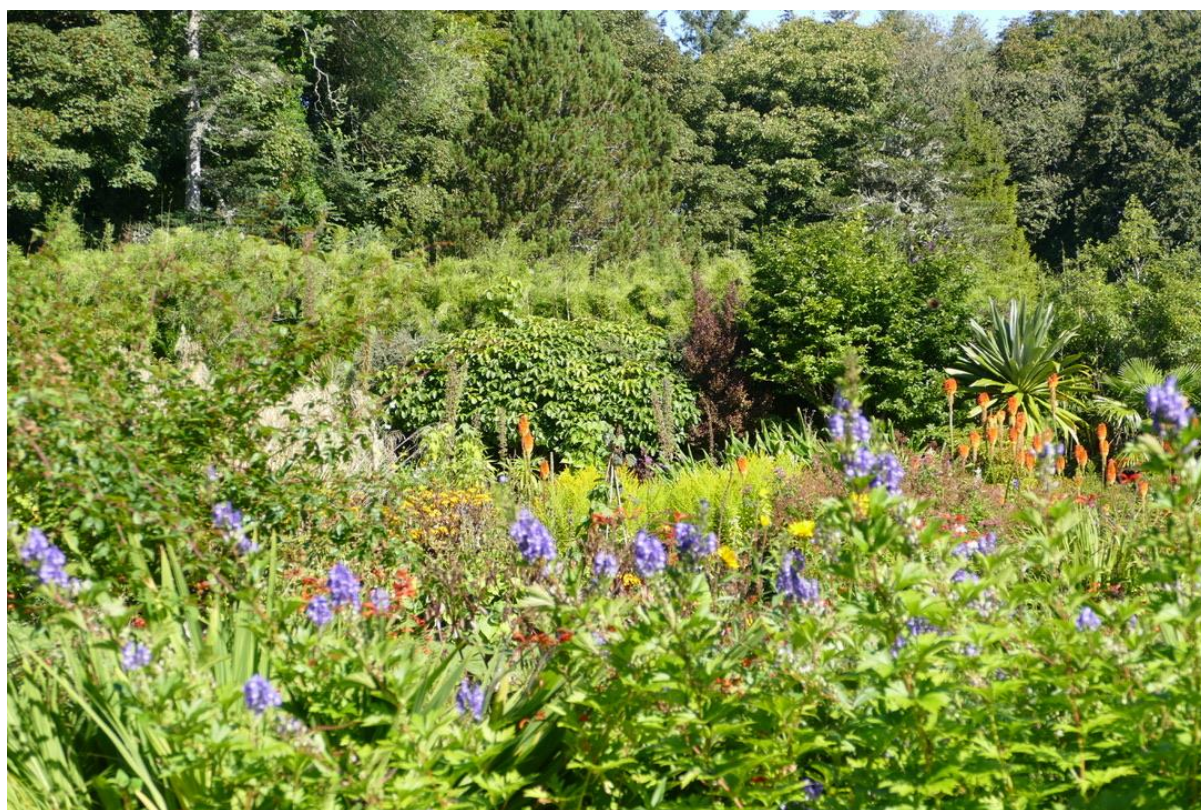
Anchorage at Gigha

So it proved, and a mile and a half's brisk walk took us to the fabled Achamore Gardens, planted in the 19th century around the quite grand Achamore House, benefiting from the protection of hills to the West and the almost complete absence of frost, due to the proximity of the Gulf Stream.



Achamore House, Gigha

In sharp contrast to the Inverewe gardens we had visited earlier, we had the place almost to ourselves, wandering among huge mature trees and rhododendrons round to wonderful herbaceous borders in the old kitchen gardens behind the house.



The old kitchen gardens at Achamore, Gigha

All to generate appetite sufficient for a very long lunch in the Boathouse restaurant beside the pontoon, one of the best in the Hebrides, specialising in Gigha halibut, preceded by local scallops swimming in oxtail gravy.

After a lengthy siesta we thought it best to escape the easterly slight popple by then developing to anchor in the north part of West Tarbert bay on the north-west side of Gigha, normally inhospitable due to the typical swell from the west, but now completely abated. This is another perfect cove with a sandy beach at its head, separated by a ridge of dunes from the even more pristine (but less protected) bay to the north. An hour and a half ashore completed our day's exercise, followed by a completely calm clear evening and night under the stars and the new setting moon. Gigha was all it had been cracked up to be. Thanks Dad.



Setting moon from West Tarbert Bay, Gigha

Loch Sween

The overall timetable was starting to call us back to the Clyde, and we had to decide whether to carry on South round the Mull of Kintyre through North Channel (where we had been in May) or take the more sheltered route back through the Crinan Canal. There wasn't much to choose between the two in terms of distance, but the impending end of our week's calm settled weather, to be followed by strengthening easterlies, made the Crinan route look the more prudent. It also enabled us to spend a day exploring Loch Sween, another place we had never visited, apart from a long-past visit to Tayvallich by car.



Tiny anchorage at Eilean Mor, off Loch Sween

This called for another early start to catch the last 2 hours of the north-going tide, which duly petered out as we reached Eilean Mor, just off the entrance to the loch, by 0745. This little island, with its one occupied house and one ruin, has the tiniest cove anchorage we had yet encountered, too small even for swinging to an anchor, even though the obstructive rock in the middle of the cove had been dynamited some years previously to make a little more space. So on we went to a much more spacious anchorage in Loch na Cille, just north of Loch Sween, to have a look at a supposedly ruined chapel on its north shore, before tackling Loch Sween proper. The chapel turned out not to be ruined at all, but instead beautifully restored, as a sheltered repository for an exquisite collection of Celtic burial stones and crosses. Well worth the short walk from the jetty at the head of the loch.



Not so ruined chapel, Loch na Cille

From there it was only a couple of miles back to the wide entrance of Loch Sween, up which we steamed majestically for almost all its 7.5 mile length, past the imposing Castle Sween on the east side, much despoiled by a large surrounding caravan park, and past Tayvallich on the west side, before coming to anchor inside the Fairy Isles at 1245. The inner pool there, too shallow for deep keeled yachts, was accessible only through an extremely narrow channel, courtesy of Antares, and utterly deserted apart from the usual guardian seals. There we stayed for the rest of the day and following night, enjoying the last settled fair weather we were to encounter on the cruise, surrounded by thick woodland, with shallow creeks to explore with our silent electric outboard on the dinghy without disturbing the wildlife.



The Fairy Isles, Loch Sween

Crinan again

By the following morning (2nd September) the barograph had shown a falling glass for two days, and after another early start to catch the tide, the Easterly wind started to build from 0640. By the time we re-entered the Sound of Jura the Paps, still visible to the south west, had acquired cloud caps, but what was meant to be a powerful fair tide proved to be a rather disappointing half a knot. But we were still into the sea lock at Crinan by 0900, ready to hunker down in the basin under the forecast wind and rain, and enjoy the delights of the village, with its excellent hotel, boatyard, art gallery and friendly fellow yachts.



The Admiral and the lock keeper, Crinan basin

With a forecast of continuing wind and rain, the Crinan Canal remained our sheltering-place for the next three days. The canal is a beautiful place in almost any weather. On the evening of the first day (2nd Sept) we treated ourselves to a slap-up seafood dinner at the Crinan Hotel. On the following day we entertained Carol Middleton on board who had sailed in Kingfisher in the 1970s and had not seen her since. It was a real tearful reunion on her part, and we gained a vital insight into a previously obscure part of her history. We also got introduced to John Dunlop, the owner of the Crinan Boatyard. He had looked after two Silvers over the years, Samara (1952) and Cerveza (1938), the latter now owned by David and Kristy Aisher (RYS). He is also nearing the completion of a steam puffer now called Auld Reekie. So there was plenty to see and to talk about, and we came away armed with a copy of the (now defunct) Silver Register, numerous copies of the (equally defunct) Silver Owners Newsletter from the 1990s, the original detailed spec for Samara and Cerveza's complete yard file.

We meandered up the canal in spectacularly slow style, with sunshine to cheer us up from 1100 on 4th Sept. Kingfisher is just too big to make it comfortable in a Crinan-sized lock with another boat. But of course those running the canal like to pack us in, to minimise the amount of water used when the locks are filled and emptied. Furthermore the canal is by no means in good order, and faces draining from the top all the way down to Crinan Basin for major repairs this winter.



Looking down the locks to Cairnbaan

We spent the night of 3rd Sept in the short upper section, followed by lunch the next day at Cairnbaan Hotel, sitting outside in glorious sunshine, and the night just 2 miles South, in a beautifully peaceful spot under the moon.

Back in the Clyde

Loch Fyne and the Kyles

An improving weather forecast for the last few days of our cruise encouraged us out of the canal on Monday 5th Sept, leaving the sea lock at Ardrishaig at 1130, punching into a stiff south-south-east breeze and accompanying sea. It's a very strange sensation going back to sea after a time in the completely calm waters of a canal or lake. You have to remember all the securing for sea duties, stowing all the china, fruit bowl, galley kit and deck items so they don't charge around causing mayhem. But in the event we were pitching rather than rolling, which Kingfisher takes much more easily in her stride.

There was just enough east in the wind to make it worth exploring anchorages on the east side of Loch Fyne for an overnight stop. Auchalick Bay turned out to have too much deflected swell coming in, but the northerly arm of Black Harbour, a couple of miles short of Portavadie, proved ideal. We were escorted in by 4 dolphins doing their usual bravura display, which they carried on for an hour and a half after we anchored. By this time it had become a perfect sunny day, ideal for just doing nothing, lying quietly head to wind with a hot sun making the cockpit unseasonably warm for September despite the continuing but reducing wind. For most of the time we were on our own apart from one yacht on a summer mooring. But the dolphins made a repeat performance

during the night, something I've not experienced before. The sound of their blowing and splashing is unmistakable.



Sunset over Kintyre, from Black Harbour

The fuel gauges were starting to dip below half full, so when the following morning (6th Sept) dawned grey after a rainy night we decided to go for a bit of R & R in Portavadie, fuelling, showering, watering and enjoying a good lunch in their excellent restaurant.



Beautiful house at Loch Riddon

The writer was keen to visit Loch Riddon on the way back to Largs. It is reported as beautiful but too deep to anchor except for a couple of ledges. It lies just north of the junction between East and West Kyles, well sheltered in the forecast continuing Easterlies.

That's where we went, leaving Portavadie at 1415, entering West Kyle at 1503, and Loch Riddon an hour later. It was as beautiful as had been reported, but the only places suitable for anchoring were thoroughly encumbered by moorings. So, after a good look around we steamed back out again, to find a calm and unobstructed anchorage at the north-west end of Fearnoch Bay, just across from Caladh harbour, guarded only by a lonely heron.

Finding the ideal calm anchorage in the Western Isles is a curious mixture of trial, error and prediction. You can't just anchor out of the wind and sea which is there at the time you arrive, because it will almost always shift during the night. We found that the best bet was to assume that the wind would be affected by the land breeze effect during the night, unless the forecast strongly suggested otherwise. So if the wind was easterly on arrival, you assumed it would back to north-east or even north in the night, if lying off a northerly land mass, as we were that night.

And so it proved. By the following morning the wind was blowing straight out of our bit of the bay, giving us perfect shelter, even though it had been more across the bay at sunset.

That left only one more full day's cruising, which we were determined to use to the full. We were off at 0830 in mixed cloud, sun and showers, with a trip to the head of Loch Striven as the first objective. Loch Striven, opposite Rothesay, has quite a fierce reputation for squalls, surrounded as

it is by spectacular mountains. But an easterly wind blows across the loch, so it seemed a good day to go all the way up. It is a truly spectacular passage. Much of the steep sides are wooded, and logging has only just started to cut into the otherwise lonely beauty of the hills. Rather to our surprise we were passed by three swans, but otherwise the loch was deserted until we reached the head, where the hills level out a bit to reveal a much more gentle anchorage than expected.



Forebidding Loch Striven

The Clyde and back to Largs

Being determined not ignominiously to end our cruise a day early, we cast around for somewhere interesting to visit on our last afternoon. My late Godfather Ninian Stewart (RYS) (who used to live in the summer at Clynder on the Gareloch) always spoke in admiring terms of Wemyss Bay, on the east side of the lower Clyde, where the great and good of Glasgow high society (including his ancestors) had their spectacular country houses, all looking out over the bay where their magnificent steam yachts were wont to lie at anchor. It is also one of the first places where the advancing railways found their way down to the sea, to connect with the famed Clyde steamers, in this case for the rapid passage across to Rothesay.



The railway station at Wemyss Bay

Apart from its splendid Art Deco railway station, the modern Wemyss Bay is a bit of a disappointment. Most of the grand houses have either been flatted or replaced. There is a rather stony bay and that's it. Still it was worth a short visit, and there was a wealth of much more spectacular houses, even small castles, to be seen among the woods on the passage back to Largs and the Cumbraes.



Castle on the lower Clyde

This left the question where to go for our last night. In theory the forecast east wind made all that side of the Clyde suitable for anchoring. In the end we decided to go for Millport on Great Cumbrae, which proved to be a very pretty little town encircling a bay sheltered from the north-east (from which the wind was predicted to blow). There is a row of free visitors' buoys off the pier, to one of which we secured as the sun went down. But we ended up lying right across a gentle swell from the south east, to which Millport is completely open. This threatened a night's rolling, but we cheated the swell by grabbing a second buoy and lying north-west / south-east between the two of them, stern to the gentle swell and in perfect comfort.

The town looked pretty quiet so we didn't go ashore, but lying there in the sunset was a picturesque end to the cruise, as we gorged ourselves on the remaining provisions (ham and leeks in cream sauce on pasta).



Millport in the evening

8th September really was our last day. We had a night sleeper booked from Glasgow, and had to get Kingfisher ready to be hauled out and trucked south the following Monday. As luck would have it, our good friend Peter Wright (with his dog) was there to help us. We had just lowered the mast and secured everything for the road when we learned of the death that very afternoon of HM the Queen, a sad and shocking event with which we are still coming to terms as I write up this log a month later.



Overview

This was not a cruise of which epic tales are to be told. We endured no big gales, no groundings, strandings, collisions, rescues, breakdowns or even dangerous moments of which gripping sea stories are told, although Beverly did have a nasty fall from which she almost completely recovered by the time the cruise was over, and Kingfisher did drag her anchor just once, while we were ashore. We had no night passages, only one really rough sea and one thick fog. Almost all our passages were short and uneventful. Careful planning made sure that they, and our anchorages, were almost all calm.

Kingfisher performed almost perfectly, with nothing worse than a slight hydraulic leak in the steering which was easily fixed once the offending loose coupling was identified. Since almost all her systems are duplicated it mattered not, for example, that we lost the use of one of her two electric bilge pumps due to a faulty wire. We still had the other and a hand pump to keep us going.

Nor was it our first cruise in the Western Isles, and all the others had been, more challengingly, under sail. But with all those caveats, it was still a memorable cruise, at least for us.

To start with, we lived comfortably, luxuriously even, on board for longer than we have done before, on her or any yacht, and in very mixed weather. We had only one day when the temperature rose above 20 degrees, and our summer clothes remained in their drawers throughout. But Kingfisher's combination of good insulation, central heating and an enclosed wheelhouse meant that we could enjoy our matchless surroundings while staying warm and dry throughout, no small consideration for sailors of our increasing age.

We went further North than ever before, on the mainland and in the Outer Hebrides. And by the judicious use of buses, taxis and a hired car we saw more, much more, of the places we visited than ever before. We really feel we know them now.

More to the point we went all the way up to the head of no less than ten big sea lochs, many smaller ones and encountered some 40 different islands, many of which we were visiting for the first time. The changeable weather meant that we saw Scotland in all her wild beauty, in wind, rain, cloud, mist, fog, moonlight and even the occasional blue sky and sunshine.

We saw some good friends and made some new ones. But for most of the time we were on our own, in empty seas, solitary anchorages and wild, uninhabited lochs and bays. Even the proliferating pontoons were either empty or sparsely occupied by other yachts. While afloat we probably saw more seals and dolphins than people. And the dolphins at least seemed genuinely pleased to see us.

Above all it was a time for deepening love. Love for each other, love for Kingfisher which looked after us so well and love for the Western Isles, quite simply the best cruising ground anywhere in the world, regardless of the weather.

