

Introduction

The Corryvreckan Cruising Club was ten years old in 2008. It makes annual cruises on the West Coast of Scotland (but never under any circumstances through the extremely worrying Corryvreckan). Members sail singlehanded in identical boats – formerly open Drascombe Longboats with their commodious but humid tents, more recently Cornish Shrimpers with their large luxurious cabins.

David Burnett's *Mrs Plumb* is a MkII Shrimper with inboard diesel and interior paintwork by Farrow and Ball. Signature beverage: the Lucretia Borgia - 50% Van Houten Cocoa, 50% Laphroaig.

Tim Hextall's *Molly Brown* is an elderly MkI carrying a suit of snow-white racing sails. Hextall holds the club record for open-boat egg frying in winds of F5 and above. Signature beverage: Boddington's.

Bertie Maxwell's *Curlew* is largely unmodified. New sails from Crusader and a propeller-free engine have made a frightening difference to his windward performance. Signature beverage: Chateau Leoville-Barton 1986.

Sam Llewellyn's *Daisy* spent her early life in the Baltic. She has cream sails, teak decks, and a Swiss Chalet style interior. Signature beverage: cleaning products.

The 10th Anniversary Cruise

The West Coast of Scotland is an ideal spot for trailer-sailers. It is one of the world's great cruising grounds, spattered with safe, remote, anchorages, heaving with whales and eagles, save from overcrowding by Land's End, Ramsey Island, Anglesea, the Mull of Kintyre and Ardnamurchan.

This year the Corryvreckan Cruising Club had craned in at Mallaig. We were on a horticultural mission, objective the sub-tropical gardens of Inverewe, a two hundred NM round trip as the boat floats.

The first evening, the scattered sails broad-reached up the Sound of Sleat for the white lighthouse at Isleornsay. The wind dropped. A porpoise gasped in the deep Highland quiet. Into the light came the drone of an outboard. Through the glasses I saw Tim and Bertie in line ahead, connected by a towrope. Tim was motoring. Bertie was not.

We picked up someone's mooring in the lee of Isleornsay and rafted up and started taking Bertie's engine to bits. A smallish clump of weed had sheared the driveshaft. Cursing Mr Tohatsu and all his works, we ate the rituals first-night stew.

Passage making inside Skye is entirely dependent on tides. Day 2's tidal gate did not open until 1400, so Bertie spent the morning scouring the Isleornsay hinterland for a marine engineer. Another party ran a boat up the beach – Shrimpers are too small for tenders – to visit the distillery shop. There was plenty of whisky, but no engineer. Dropping the mooring, we set off for Kyle Rhea.

Kyle Rhea is a narrow channel separating Skye from the mainland. The flood runs through it at somewhere between four and nine knots, and as you do not so much sail through it as shoot it. We pirouetted through the eddies, sails lip and slatting, in company with large shoals of fish and a shrieking cloud of terns. After a six-minute mile we were shot into an oily-calm Loch Alsh. Under the mountain ramparts of Loch Duich a lead-coloured shadow was racing across the water. There was just time to scabble down the first reef before the sails filled with a bang and *Daisy* began to emit a gurgling roar that means hull speed. Through a cloud of spray the rest of the fleet could be dimly perceived skidding around the loch like pigs on an ice rink.

Last time we passed Kyle, a piper was playing Kenneth McKellar's greatest hits on the sunny pontoon in front of the hotel. This time, we fought the sails down as the squalls tried to blow us onto a lee shore

covered with old iron, coming to rest at last in the lee of a gigantic tug. Bertie trudged into the rain, looking for more engineers, but the town was empty except for a WWII torpedo plunged into the pavement and a litter bin made from a floating mine. Unnerved by these encouragements to Safety at Sea, we scurried under the Skye Road Bridge and into the Inner Sound heading for Crowlin.

Crowlin is a small, soggy island with something of the Arabian Nights about it. The prudent mariner coasts up its eastern side, depositing a couple of lobsterpots at its northern end. He then follows the cliff into what looks like an inlet. Just as it seems he must go smash on a stony beach, the rocks magically part before his bowsprit, revealing a choice of deep pools in perfect shelter (though a purist might be uncomfortable in a northerly). An eider drake, immaculate in black and white with pea-soup green head patches, escorted his wife to a previous engagement. Silence fell, broken by the merry pop of corks.

It was the hour of communal cookery. Boards of chopped veg were passed from boat to boat. Salt cellars took the aerial route. After dinner and a burst of guitar-and mandolin, the boats separated to the four corners of the anchorage for night of unobtrusive snoring.

Next morning the whistle of the kettle merged with the tootle of the a Hebridean cuckoo and the gentle hiss of the Hebridean drizzle. Stornoway coastguard spoke of high pressure somewhere between us and Greenland. We ghosted out of the anchorage, hauled the pots (green crabs only) and set off for the southern end of Raasay, our wakes mere creases in a sea like ground glass. The warm-front raindrops remained small and cold, but fell closer together. Minutes became hours. The wind dropped from force two to nothing. A mile across the water, Tim's white sail close with Bertie's tan sail. A tow line passed. We were getting wet. Six hours later, trudging into the anchorage at Eilean Fladday, we were a lot wetter. The anchors went down. The kettles went on. We rafted up.

'Cold', said Tim, shivering. 'Brr' said I, shivering too. 'Bad luck' said Dave, not shivering.

Tim and I have spent big money on Goretex wet gear. This may be fine for those who can stuff it in the tumble dryer of their Swan 69. On a small boat lashed by Hebridean rain, studies show that Goretex is about as waterproof as kitchen roll. Sensible Dave had stocked up on PVC fishermen's dungarees at a piscatorial outfitter at Mallaig. Dave was warm and dry. But sweaty, I suggested. Dave pointed out that if you were sweating in these temperatures you should seek malaria treatment, not Goretex. He then harpooned a cork and the conversation became general.

Next morning the sky was high and blue, the glass was up, the breeze a brisk northwesterly forecast to veer north, northeast later. Unrolling the jib I sailed out of the anchorage, hung out a red rubber eel, and trolled the maze of skerries for saithe. The air had a particular sparkle. *Daisy* wallowed steadily through the blue swells creaming on the sunken rocks. A white plume of vapour from the summit of Fladday turned the island into an erupting volcano...

Abruptly the world was swallowed by fog. The charming skerries were looming grey buffaloes. I could hear the voices of the other boats weirdly amplified as they left the anchorage.

We closed up. We pressed on. The world was small and grey, but we did not care. Of all the places to get fogged in, this is one of the best. An hour's close-reaching away lay the beautiful natural harbour of Acairseid Mhor. The approach is rocky, and so hard to identify that some good soul has painted a big white arrow on the island that can stop its mouth. So off we went, lee-bowing the tide pouring up the Sound of Rona, until the arrow popped out of the fog. At which point the world cleared, and we sailed in procession into the harbour.

Next morning the wind had gone northeast, as per forecast. We tacked up the Inner Sound, alert for periscopes of nuclear submarines that exercise here. The wind dropped. We plugged north past windless miles of machair. As we put the helm down for Gairloch, a puff of wind hit, then another. Suddenly it was blowing a steady force 4 from the east, and we were moving tack on tack up the loch for Badachro, water roaring in

the chainplates. On the fourth long board there was the sound of splitting timber, and the main hatch came right off. It is a custom hatch, made of teak. I had noticed it was cracked, but naturally I had put off doing anything about it. Now its uphill side had split clear away, leaving it free of its sides and allowing it to slither merrily down to leeward. I came up on the wind, heart in mouth, sails clattering, and got a hand to it as it slid over the gunwale. Lashing it home, I bore up for Badachro, dropped anchor and called for a meeting with Dave, the fleet carpenter.

If you enjoy mending smashed hatches in Paradise, Badachro is the spot for you. Next morning Dave and I took *Daisy* alongside a granite slipway at the mouth of a small but charming river whose current kept the hull gently of the wall, making fenders unnecessary. We borrowed tools from a fisherman, and cut anew hatch side on a workbench stationed in the dappled shade of a group of birches. People stopped by and chatted. Dave screwed and glued the hatch up better than new. And later in the day we made the four-mile hike across the sthmus to the sub-tropical gardens of Inverewe, blazing above the Great Northern divers swimming in the sea loch. We were at the same latitude as Moscow.

Two days later we were homeward bound, running south down the Inner Sound, goosewinged, jibs poled out, preventers on the booms, drowsing in the steady creak and splosh of the swells rolling from the Hebrides. Somewhere down to leeward, at the bottom of the tide, was the tricky entrance to Poll Creadha. But we were not worrying about that. Perhaps we should have been.

After a while I felt the wind on the back of my head. Also the GPS seemed broken, because it claimed that we were at seven knots and the tide was against us and *Daisy's* hull speed is something like five. When I looked astern the sea was the colour of slate, ridged with sharp white wave-tops and hissing like a basket of snakes. Then the wavetops had spread and there was a crack from *Molly Brown* as her whisker pole broke and she broached and Bertie's mast was going all over the sky like a fly rod and Dave was out there somewhere, but I was too busy to find out where on account of taking off the whisker pole and unreeving the

preventer and coming up on the wind, the *shrieking* wind, and dropping the main, and looking sown the white streaks of foam that pointed straight at the breakers on the skerries guarding Poll Creadha where there were supposed to be perches and leading marks, but the land was brownish and you could bet that Highland perches would be rusty enough to match it, and anyway there were no perches to be seen.

It had however been my idea to go there, and it was my job to find the entrance. I therefore sailed down on the skerries under three rolls of jib and edged along outside the breakers. The perches were still invisible, and as for the white cottage mentioned in the pilot book, well, there has been a building boom in the Highlands and white is a popular colour, so there seemed to be a choice of twelve. So I bucketed along, wishing that my favourite and only pilot book was not Mark Brackenbury's, pub 1986. And there on the edge of the white water a saintly person had installed perches to mark the channel into the harbour. The greens were reddish with rust, and the reds were greenish with weed. We were complaining? Not us. No way.

So into Poll Creadh we slid, and spent the night in a windless bay in the last convolution of the harbour. Next day we drifted down a flat-calm Kyle Rhea at six knots, past rafts of auks and shearwaters, to Nevis and the crane at Mallaig. And agreed, as we lashed down the boats and clambered into the Land Rovers for the long grind home, that we would certainly find a garden to visit next year. Or a rock. Or a tree. Or any excuse, really.

Sam Llewellyn is a patriotic native of the Isles of Scilly. He is a well-known author of columns, articles and sea thrillers, and editor of the *Marine Quarterly*. An enthusiastic fisherman and naturalist, he is passionately involved in the campaign for sustainable fisheries policies.