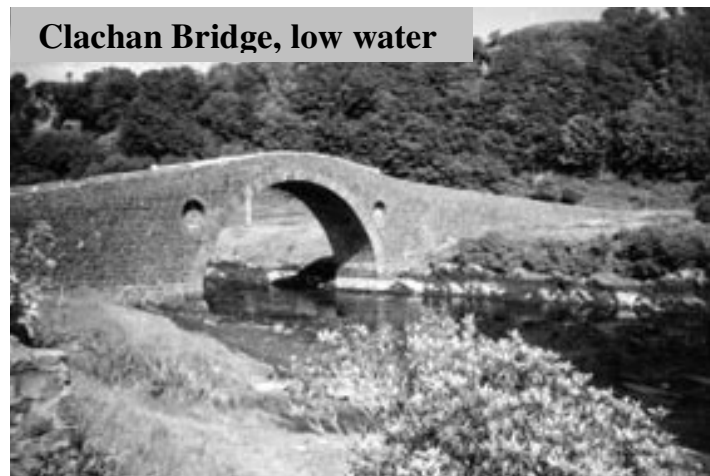


Underneath the Arches from Clachan to Connel by Heather & Billy Howard

We spent a happy week in and around Loch Melfort during August 2000, where the locals were complaining of a prolonged drought, while the rest of Britain languished under grey skies, high winds and lashing rain. Having explored all the local lochs and creeks that could be reached by the day, we decided to move on north, in the general direction of Oban after a meet of the Royal Cruising Club. "Jubilate" was the smallest boat by a factor of two or three, but the subject of admiration and even some envy on the part of owners of large and splendid cruising yachts. Many of them had sailed up from various homeports in England, while we quietly cruised up the motorway.

We had been eyeing the Clachan Bridge, known locally as the Bridge over the Atlantic, which joins Seil Island to the mainland. Both our pilot books were distinctly unenthusiastic about the feasibility of a passage through the Clachan Sound and under the bridge, but we reckoned that it could be done, just. It would certainly prove a handy short cut to the Firth of Lorn, avoiding the Cruan Sound, which the pilot books made uninviting to small boats like ours. The Clachan Bridge is very beautiful, like so many pieces of practical engineering, a glorious steep arch built of local stone towards the end of the eighteenth century. It looked rather daunting when we first visited it, by car, at low tide,

with a mere trickle of water among the rocks and thick weed. There is a 2.4 metre dry shoal clearly visible beyond the north end of the Sound, where a disused slate quarry has caused much silting of the old channel. So we decided to return for another look at high water, armed with an old lead-line and chest waders, Billy muttering Napoleon's dictum : "Time spent in reconnaissance is seldom



Clachan Bridge, low water

wasted," with the added rider : "This must be one of those rare occasions," as we trudged the best part of a mile along a narrow, boggy path, knee-deep in rushes, reeds and bracken, to survey the shallows at the head of the Sound. The local seal, who was peacefully fishing there, was very surprised when Heather donned her chest waders and life-jacket, relieved her grumbling bearer of a large oar which he had carried through the jungle from the bridge, and took soundings with it over the last hundred yards of the channel. All seemed to be well, plenty of water, which threatened to invade her waders, and she could hardly stand up in the strong current, which starts flowing south, rather surprisingly, an hour or so before high water. Now for the bridge, where we got a good reading with the leadline, which we calculated would give us just sufficient room to pass through at high tide on the day when we intended to make the passage, though it would be prudent to lower both gaff and burgee to be sure of clearing the bridge. The trick is to work your tides so as to have enough water under you to clear the shoals, but not so much as to

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prevent passage under the bridge. We were aiming to go through half way between springs and neaps, which seemed to be ideal.

So off we set two days later with a lovely leading wind up Seil Sound and into the Sound of Clachan, where we proceeded with caution as the channel is narrow, with plenty of rocky shoals which have never been properly charted. We rested at a jetty half way up so as to get the last of the tide up to the bridge, where it had already begun to run south at a couple of knots by the time we arrived. This at least gave us the chance to stop and turn back if we chickened out. All was well, however, our mast cleared the arch of the bridge by two feet or so, and with plate and rudder



Low Water the end showing bar out into Firth of Lorne (dries completely)

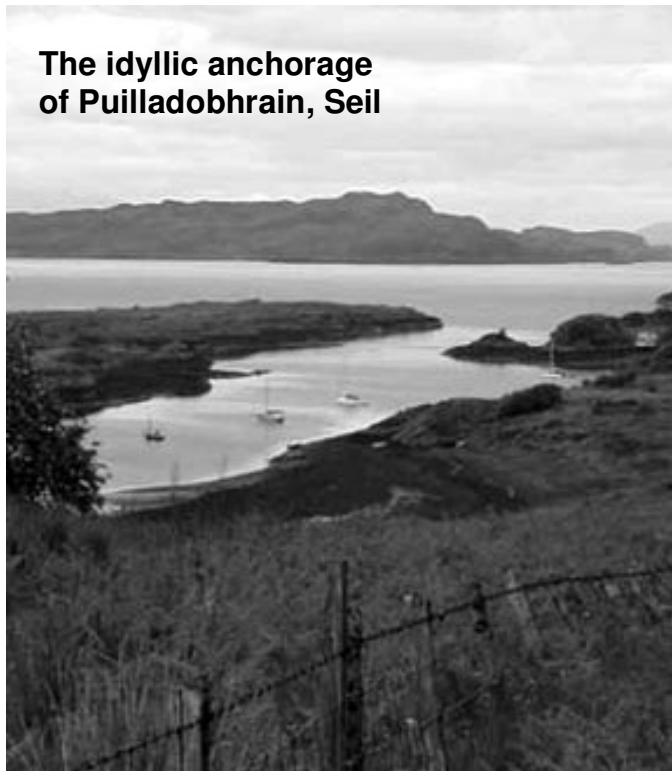
right up we chugged through on our 5 hp outboard without touching anything above or below us. Despite the strong current, we were soon in the pool at the head of the Sound, where we

exchanged greetings with our seal friend before clearing the bar by the slate quarry and turning gratefully to port and into the enchanting little anchorage of Puilladobhrain (pronounced Pooldoran, and meaning Pool of the Otter in Gaelic). A perfect landfall on a perfect, clear, West Coast summer's day, and made even better by the sight of a fellow RCC member hanging out his fenders on "Morven" to welcome us alongside. What peace! This must be one of Britain's loveliest anchorages, with shelter all round and not a building in sight, though there is a convenient footpath leading over the hill to the pub by the Clachan Bridge. After visiting this excellent place of refreshment, we rounded off a very happy day with supper and the exchange of yarns on board "Morven."

Our next objective was to get nearly to the head of Loch Etive, via the Sound of Kerrera and Dunstaffnage, spending a couple of nights on the way. Getting into Loch Etive involves going under the Connel Bridge ; no problems about headroom here, as there are 15 metres of clearance at HW Springs ; but the pilot book speaks in

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dark tones of the Falls of Lora, just to the east of the bridge, and an alarming sight at most states of the tide. The channel is restricted by a submarine ledge on the north side, the centre part of which dries at half tide down, creating impressive rapids of white water on a full ebb, and causing violent eddies in the only navigable channel. Slack water, or half an hour either side, is what the pilot books recommend as the ideal time to pass through but with a caveat that slack water is almost non-existent. Meteorological conditions can also cause the time of tides to vary by as much as one and a half hours with a bias towards being early rather than late. The



**The idyllic anchorage
of Puilladobhrain, Seil**

writers of pilot books are a cheerful crowd, whose aim seems sometimes to discourage anyone from going to sea! Reality proved less dreadful than their predictions, and we passed through with no trouble at low water. Driven by our faithful outboard, but getting the sails up as soon as we were clear of the worst of the witches' cauldron near the Falls, to take advantage of a fine leading wind which accompanied us all the way up the loch to our destination. There are two lots of narrows after the Falls of Lora, at Kilmarnaig and Bonawe, with currents up to five knots, so it is advisable to work your tides correctly, and the tide elsewhere in the loch is powerful enough to give a small boat remarkable speed over the land. You

pass the well known Inverawe Smokery at Tayinault and several fish farms, one of which had just sprung a leak and released a large number of hungry and rather stupid trout into the loch, greatly to the benefit of local anglers, who were pulling them in like mackerel.

Loch Etive is extremely attractive all the way up, but north of Inverawe it becomes spectacularly beautiful, with the mountains around Glencoe closing in on both sides as you near the head of the loch, floodlit by the evening sun and only occasionally shrouded in low cloud. The main objective of our voyage was to visit friends, who have an attractive old stalking lodge as their holiday retreat. The lodge has no electricity, and is therefore blissfully free of TV and other banes of "civilisation". What a joy it was to see them as they chugged out in a little motor boat to greet us. "Jubilate" was anchored alongside William's 17 foot Norfolk Oyster, making a pretty pair of traditional boats. William and his son Tom had just returned from a five day circumnavigation of Mull in their Oyster, landing on the Treshnish Islands and Iona, among many other places. When I asked William that evening to show me where

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they had been, he looked a bit sheepish as he took a beautifully clean new Martin Lawrence "Isles of Mull Pilot" from his bookcase ; he had forgotten to take it with him, doing all his cruise on the chart alone. Quite an achievement, and it made our puny inland cruise look very unadventurous. Dinner by the soft light of oil lamps, and bed by candlelight - pure delight !

Luck was on our side, as we woke to a fine, moist morning, with cloud on the mountains and a good SE wind to take us down the loch on a broad reach. The squalls in the upper loch can be severe with so many high hills around. The weather was clearly about to break but, we had no trouble apart from arriving too soon at the Falls of Lora, almost inevitable with such a favourable wind and a strong spring ebb under us. The solution was to find a suitable anchorage and fill in an hour or two with lunch, which we did between the two small, pretty Abbot' s Isles, which provided perfect shelter from a long, squally shower of rain. When this had cleared, we sailed the final two miles under jib, started the motor close to the narrows, and took the last of the ebb under the bridge and into Dunstaffnage marina, where we set about the business of unrigging "Jubilate" and getting her ready for the long journey back to Lymington. By now the rain was pouring down, and we felt even more blessed to have had two perfect weeks in such a wonderful cruising ground, and delighted to have done it in such a marvellous little boat as the Cornish Shrimper. You can take them anywhere.

The overland part of our travels ended in rather a bizarre fashion. We paused for the night at a hotel on the Great North Road, parking the Jeep and boat trailer outside. When we went out in the morning, "Jubilate" was sitting rather forlornly on her trailer with no Jeep in sight. It had been "borrowed" by some local villains to transport the computers from our hotel, and another one a few miles down the road, leaving us in the middle of Yorkshire with a ton and a half of boat on trailer and no towing vehicle. Fortunately the police were already in the hotel, whose loss had been noticed before ours. They dealt with us quickly and sympathetically, as did the AA, who, rather to our surprise, undertook to tow us all the way home to Lymington, Shrimper and all, free of charge. Three weeks later we were reunited with our much loved Jeep, also delivered free of charge by our insurers after minor repairs to the door locks. It had clearly been stolen by professionals, who broke in without causing unnecessary damage and left the vehicle neatly parked in a back street in Leeds. Needless to say the radio had gone, together with all our sailing gear, to the tune of £3,000, which was irritating but insurance companies have their uses, and "Jubilate" now carries a crew resplendent in smart new oilskins.

**For a guide to pottering on the west coast of Scotland visit
www.westcoastboating.org.**

Translated into French, Spanish, Italian and German