

Betsy's trip to Oronsay – Martyn & Jane Todd

Not long after we bought *Betsy* in December 2000 and brought her back to Strangford Lough, I ordered courtesy flags for Ireland, Scotland, Wales and the Isle of Man. By 2006 all but the Saltire had had an outing. When launching *Betsy* for the season in 2007 and packing everything on board, I promised the pristine white cross on blue that this was its year. We booked a ferry to Cairnryan, leaving the decision on where to launch to be decided by the weather nearer the time.

When we arrived in Scotland on 4th June 2007 the forecast was set fair so we headed for Craobh Haven to launch, reasoning that if the weather held we would try to get to Mull and, if it didn't, we would head for the Crinan Canal and stay within the Clyde. The facilities in Craobh were good and the people very friendly and helpful, so it was an excellent base. On 5th June we had a very gentle sail round Shuna to Tobernochy and then into the delightful little sheltered Ardinamir Bay, at the north end of Luing, for the night. It has, according to the pilot, "a very tricky entrance between drying rocks", which makes it ideal for a Shrimper! A couple in a neighbouring boat knew the local waters well and recommended various places to aim for, most of which we did reach during our two weeks and did enjoy as much as they had promised.

One of my lifelong ambitions has been to sail under Clachan Bridge (the famous 'Bridge over the Atlantic') in Seil Sound. It is a truly magnificent bridge, curved horizontally as well as vertically, built in 1798 and still carrying all the coaches and commercial traffic to Seil Island. We decided to have a go while the weather held. The charted clearance is 7m at HWS and, as the north end of Clachan Sound dries, I chose HW for the attempt. So we left Ardinamir at 0630 on 6th June and motored north in flat calm up through beautiful scenery lit by the early morning sunshine, leaving a wake visible for miles, arriving in the pool south of the bridge at 0800 to await HW. I did a recce in the tender to find a lot of weed and huge fronds of kelp to the N of the bridge in 1m of water – not ideal for motoring.

There was still no wind and the tide had started to flood gently into the pool from the north so, not knowing whether this tide strengthened after HW, I lifted *Betsy's* anchor and chain into the tender and rowed gently under the bridge. With Jane at the helm *Betsy* followed docilely. I felt we were in control as, if the current grew too strong for me, I could easily just toss the anchor in from the tender. The north end of Clachan Sound is about 0.75nm from the bridge and the tide was steadily strengthening against us. Jane started the engine when we were in 1.5m of water and gently trickled along, with me standing in the tender at the bowsprit,

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feeling like Geronimo, and ready to drop the anchor if the propeller fouled. For anyone planning this route, at 1 hr before HW Oban there was 1m clearance above Betsy's masthead aerial at the bridge and 0.6m under her at the bar at the north end of the Sound.

After breakfast in the sun in Puilladobhrain and a forecast of a settled day we set off for the Garvellach Islands to see the beehive huts and early monastic settlement on Eilean na Naoimh. These islands are very exposed to the west and can only be approached in settled weather. Two and a half hours motoring with the ebb tide under us took us to the sheltered bay off the settlement, which we had to ourselves.



We explored the ruins and admired the clear views of Jura, Colonsay and Mull in one direction and the mountains of the mainland in the other. There was enough wind to motor sail and then sail home with the first of the flood, and we arrived back in Puilladobhrain at 1930.

The 7th June was again sunny and calm and in shorts and shirtsleeves we motored gently north and into Loch Feochan, negotiating the well buoyed but tortuous channel with the strong flood and seeing the isolated cottage where *King of Bright Water* was filmed. After a long leisurely lunch in Ardentalen with old friends, we left the Loch with the last of the ebb and sailed NW across the south end of Kerrera, inside Bach Island and then across the Firth of Lorn. We punched the very last of the ebb to enter Loch Don on the SE corner of Mull. This loch has another very tortuous entrance and is not buoyed, so this year's present to *Betsy*, a chart-plotter, really came into its own to guide us to a perfect, sheltered anchorage above a sill. After our meal we were on deck in the waning sun when we saw an osprey fly over with a big fish clutched in both talons, presumably heading to feed a partner or young in a nest in the rocky hills visible in the distance.

On the 8th we felt our way gingerly out of the winding channel, passing within 30m of two more osprey on an isolated rock, and motored against a light N breeze.

through slight overfalls to Duart Point with its stunning castle on a crag by the shore. There was F3 NE coming down Loch Linne, which allowed us to sail at 5kn up into the Sound of Mull. The wind gradually died and so from Fishnish Bay it was on with the engine again and we continued in blue sky and flat calm on to Tobermory, taking the shortcut in through Doirlinn and anchoring at HW just off the town wall near the distillery.



We had a good pub lunch on shore but had to sit in the shade, as it was so hot. After a shower in the Mishnish Hotel for those who needed it, we carried some stores and a bottle of Tobermoray 10-year-old back on board and set off for Loch Drumbuie, making 5kn in a westerly F4.

We anchored in the inlet in the north of the Loch. This is one of the most magical anchorages I have ever been in, with views to the south of Scottish hills, pine trees, rocky outcrops and stone walls, which were all reflected in the calm waters of the Loch. North of the anchorage is a valley that almost splits Oronsay, with salt marsh for about half a mile and then old birch groves and a few ancient oaks. We walked up this valley and then up on to the hilltop to see the panoramic view of Loch Sunart from Ardnamurchan Point in the west to Carna in the east, with hills and mountains of all shapes, sizes and shades of green ranged all around. We explored a roofless long-house, described well by Adam Nicholson in his book about the Shiantis, *Sea Room*. While we were having an excellent meal (with Chateaufneuf du Pape and a wee dram of Tobermoray) in the evening sun, we watched two deer come down to graze the salt marsh.

The 9th was again calm and, in bright sunshine, we lazily motored around the perimeter of the loch before setting back to Tobermory. We were convinced that Arthur Ransome had been



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in Loch Drumbuie, as the whole area seemed to be straight from *Great Northern*. We followed another osprey for half an hour, hoping to see a catch, but didn't. After another good lunch and showers in Tobermory, there was enough breeze to run back down the Sound of Mull at between 4.5 and 5.5kn, gybing to stay in the deep channel to get the most from the ebb under us. We motored into Loch Aline against the last of the ebb and anchored at the NE corner - as always with a Shrimper, inside the other boats and moorings. Our meal on board was again eaten in shorts and tee-shirts. On our evening walk we saw a few pairs of merganser, a pair of black-throated divers and a great northern diver, the last just adding to the feeling that we were following in the wake of AR.

On the 10th, another fine calm day, we set off at 0600 and motored out of the Loch past Ardtornish Castle, where the Treaty of Westminster-Ardtornish was signed in 1462 between Edward IV and John MacDonald, Lord of the Isles and King of Man. During this trip I was reading *The Sea Kingdoms* by Alistair Moffat, which is an excellent history of Celtic Britain and Ireland and describes this signing and many other fascinating turning points in the events of the Western Isles.

Once again the overfalls on the chart were matched by those on the sea, even though the wind was very light and we had timed it to arrive at Eilean Musdile at LW. I would not cross this stretch in a Shrimper in a strong breeze and tide. Once past Lismore Island the sea flattened again and we motored on into Oban Bay, down Kerrera Sound and on to the north end of Clachan Sound, where we anchored for breakfast and to await the tide.



At 1200 when the tide started to flow south into Clachan Sound, I again lifted the anchor into the tender and rowed the length of the sound, under the bridge, where a few people were intrigued by my efforts, and dropped the anchor into the pool. This time it was easy with the help of the tide. We had an excellent lunch in the pub by the pool (Tighe na Truish). The landlady was very pleased to have

customers arrive by boat. After lunch we gently sailed or motored, depending on the breeze, on down Seil Sound and into Lough Melfort, anchoring at 1700 inside the moorings of Kilmelford Yacht Haven. On these moorings were some very interesting cruising and racing yachts, including a famous Vertue, *Poppy*, and the Shrimper *Sir Reepacheep*. The facilities were basic but clean.

The 11th was again fine with a F2 westerly, which we used to explore the head of the loch and sail gently out again around Arduaine Point and back into Craobh Haven. The boat beside us on the pontoon was a small cabin cruiser (18 ft 6 ins) in marine ply that had been designed by Alan Machlachlan, who also designed the Aran Class lifeboats. We were taken out in it for a spin round Shuna at between 27 and 30kn. It was fun for about 3 minutes and then boring after that.

The plan for the 12th was for me to sail single-handed from Craobh round the Craignish peninsula and for Jane to take the car across to meet me in Ardfern Marina. I left in time to reach Dorus Mor at slack water according to the tidal atlas, believing this in preference to the pilot, which predicted slack water over an hour earlier. However, when I reached Craignish Point there was more flow than I wished. I was able to use the back eddy in close to the shore to make 5kn until I met the strong S-going tide along the east shore of the point. My progress then became 4kn sideways and then 5kn backwards (the chart-plotter is invaluable in such situations). I quickly turned and, now in the middle of the channel, made 9kn back to the west side of Craignish Point. There is a delightful little bay, Loch Beag, about 1 Nm north of the point, where I anchored to wait the next tide. While there I saw a naval ship plough through Dorus Mor against the tide with a huge plume of white water at her stern and another of black smoke from her funnel. For my next attempt at Dorus Mor I followed the advice of the Imray pilot and went through flat water with ease and then up through the lagoon and into the marina at Ardfern only six hours late.

The forecast for the 13th was F 4-5, but we had no wind as we set out in the morning for Jura. With the tide we hit 9.7kn through Dorus Mor and motor-sailed for the Aird of Kinuachdrachd at the NE end of Jura. As we approached the shore, the tide running N grew stronger and stronger until we were making 1kn backwards while motoring at wide open throttle forwards. In Strangford Narrows I am used to strong tides, but I did not like the rocks with white water on them between the shore and us, so I turned and ferry glided back out across the tide. At first we seemed to be losing ground and seeing more of the

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Corryvreckan than either of us wished to, but after 10 minutes we were out of the strong flow and able to make it back to Loch Beag, where we anchored, ate and pondered just a little. According to the tidal atlas, which I consulted before every passage, the maximum flow along the Jura shore is about 2kn. Betsy can make 5 - 5.5kn with the engine at maximum revs and we were going backwards at over 1kn, so, be warned, if you are ever in this area, the flow can exceed 6kn and is directly towards the Corryvreckan and the Great Race. This is not comfortable Shrimper territory.

That afternoon we went through Dorus Mor again easily at slack water and motored across to Crinan, where we explored the first part of the canal on foot and had a drink in the excellent Crinan Hotel bar with its spectacular views. This is a bar worth sailing a long way for. We had a lovely F3 easterly to take us home to Ardfern, this time up the south side of the islands, with just a few fish farms spoiling the perfection. During the night we had our only rain in two weeks. The 14th was very blowy but dry, and so we spent the day exploring the gardens at Arduaine, Ardmaddy and An Cala by car. On the 15th we took *Betsy* back round to Craobh going through Dorus Mor for the fourth and final time. The wind was a very blustery F4 gusting in sharp squalls over the Craignish hills, making motoring more enjoyable than sailing for a change.

On the 16th we had light airs again and so gently sailed across Loch Shuna to Ardinamir for our last night, this time entering and anchoring under sail. The 17th was a perfect day for Shrimping. In a steady SW F2-3 and clear sunshine we weighed anchor under sail and gently circumnavigated Shuna, tacking in close to the pretty village and harbour at Tobernochy, and then found a bay just east of Degnish Point for lunch, beside a meadow with hundreds of orchids. In the afternoon we sailed up the north shore of Loch Melfort and then tacked back out along the south shore, enjoying the glorious views in the warm breeze.

Back in Craobh we prepared for the haul out in the morning. I took down the Saltire, folded it and put it with the other courtesy flags under my bunk. Now that they have all had their outings, maybe I will order a French Tricolour...

Martyn and Jane Todd - *Betsy* (459)