

Adventure to the Firth of Clyde (Part 3) by Maxine Smith

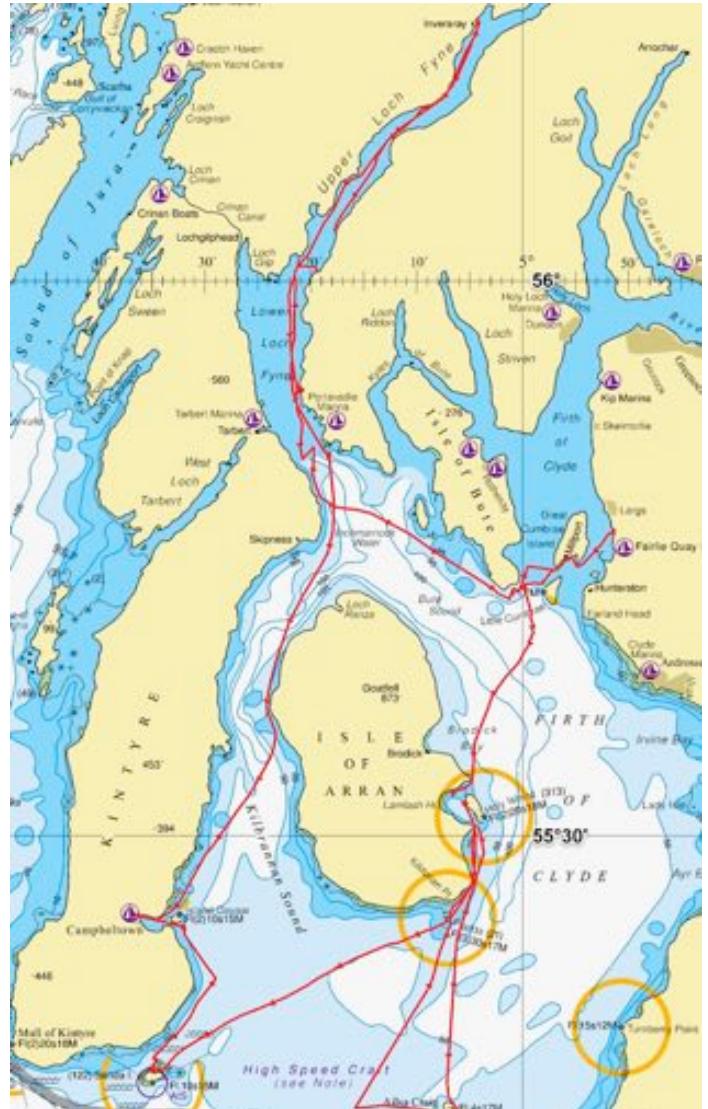
Phyllis 848 (Shrimper 19), Nick Clark as skipper/engineer and Maxine Smith as crew/cook/quartermaster

In early May 2025 we set off with our Shrimper *Phyllis* (848) to the Firth of Clyde for a third 2-week trip: we had made the same trip in 2023 and 2024 but we felt there was still so much more to see. The Firth of Clyde is a fantastic cruising area for Shrimpers as it's relatively sheltered and there are many marinas and anchorages within easy range. We planned on the hoof on a day-by-day basis with a vague idea about the following 2 days. There are only 3 places in the area where you need to pay attention to the tides: the Kyles, Otter Spit and Rhu Point, otherwise it's not necessary to worry too much about them.

Again, we used Largs Yacht Haven as our base as it has loads of facilities, plus we decided to treat ourselves to a lift in and out, and didn't need to pack even more rope, launching ramps and waders.

Also we didn't want the cruise to be dictated by the need to find shops, so we packed sufficient meals for the entire trip: noodles decanted into bags, precooked grains in packets, Spice Tailor curry kits and tinned veg, fresh and long-life milk, cheese and fruit, wine boxes, a 10 litre water bag plus a few bottles of water, along with a couple of Thermos cold bags plus a very small fridge-freezer. We also brought along an electricity cable so that when we stayed in a marina we could freeze down the cold packs overnight and replace the 'warmed up' cold packs that had been in the cold bags.

A new item of equipment for the 2025 trip was a spill-proof Heemburg French Press (https://heemburg.com/product/french_press/) so we could have a decent coffee at any time without spending too much money (assuming we also brought along the Porlex hand grinder).



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We set off from home at lunchtime on Friday 3rd May, arriving at Largs about midnight. The marina is open 24 hours and the night-watchman directed us to where we could set up near water and electricity. We spent the weekend rigging and were ready to be hoisted in first-thing on Monday.

After the lift in, we victualled the boat and loaded the inflatable kayak and paddles, which served as the tender. The inflatable kayak rolled up and fitted underneath the tiller and there was plenty of space for paddles up the front end as we have the Classic layout.

Before setting off, we met the next-door berth holder and he was happy to pass on 'local knowledge', and discuss the lack of wind in the forecast, suggesting that we might be using our engine a lot. He also let us try out his pair of Canon 10x30 binoculars with 'Image Stabilizer' which comes in handy when bobbing about at sea.

We set off from Largs at about 1600 and headed for Millport on Great Cumbrae. It is about 3 miles so only took a couple of hours. There are 15 free visitor buoys at Millport and this year there was the bonus of a new breakwater, protecting moored boats from the south. Some of the buoys are tucked into corners or next to rocks/breakwater, which are perfect for Shrimpers as the larger boats steer clear of these.



Rigging Phyllis at Largs Marina



Moorings at Millport on Great Cumbrae

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After a relaxing night on the mooring and a morning swim around the boat (which we both did every day except in Campbeltown), we set off south as the forecast looked very settled with light northerlies.

The southern part of this sailing around is the most exposed so we thought we would head that way and make the best use of the weather given to us. We thought we'd have a go at sailing to Ailsa Craig but couldn't do the trip in one go from Great Cumbrae so decided to sail 15 miles to Lamlash on Arran. We anchored in the bay just off the town beach.



Lamlash from Holy Isle

We set off early the next day for Ailsa Craig. Helming took a lot of concentration as the winds were light, we were on a run, and we didn't want to squander any wind that we were given! It was about 18 miles to get there from Lamlash. We knew it was going to be a long day, but the sailing wasn't very stressful and it was VERY exciting. When we got close to Ailsa Craig we turned to port and kept the island on our starboard side, now with the light northerlies abeam, and like a moon slingshot, we got whizzed around the island: past the north foghorn, the lighthouse and the seals on the rocky beach, the south foghorn, then the basalt columns and millions of gannets. It was AMAZING.



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After waving the island goodbye, the plan was to head west for Campbeltown, but the wind died after a couple of miles so at that point we decided to head back to Lamlash. As we approached Arran the wind picked up a little from the north so the trek back to Lamlash became a bit of a hard slog.

You really do need a sense of humour to sail in this area. Although it is well protected, sailing in the lochs and between the islands means the winds can be fickle, changeable, funnel between the islands, or even disappear completely. At about 2030 we reached the anchorage off the west shore of Holy Isle.



Approaching Holy Isle

With the continued settled conditions forecast for the next day, we decided to head for Sanda, a small island off the southern tip of the Mull of Kintyre. We motored for approx. 25 miles as there was no wind! Although the motor was somewhat boring, it was a lovely day and when would we get another chance to reach Sanda in a Shrimper?



Sanda looking towards the Mull of Kintyre

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Sanda is a private island, which is now owned by a massive global fish farm company: there is talk of installing a few visitor moorings but for now anchoring is required. While anchored, we watched various yachts making the trip around the Mull of Kintyre, and some briefly stopped off at Sanda for a rest before continuing. The gannets also put on a formation flying show, heading to and from Ailsa Craig. Eventually, an ex-lifeboat turned up and anchored just before nightfall, so it was just a Shrimper, a lifeboat and the birds.

We left Sanda at lunchtime, timing the passage through the overfalls so that we were pushed towards the east. There was a light southerly wind so the 12 miles to Campbeltown was enjoyable, and it was great to pass Davaar Island at the entrance to Campbeltown Loch, which had a pleasing camouflage appearance this year. We did discuss whether to anchor, but we needed to stock up on fresh provisions and the marina would be more convenient. The marina in Campbeltown is small but has good facilities and everyone is very friendly (£3 per metre in 2025, pay in cash). The showers are good, and there's a Co-op, Tesco store and petrol station in town, amongst many other shops.



Approaching Davaar Island

The next day we made use of the light southerly and sailed north to Otter Ferry, about 40 miles. If anyone heads up Loch Fyne to Otter Ferry, note that the green concrete marker at the end of Otter Spit has lost its colour so it is difficult to find the mark from a distance through binoculars. There are about 10 visitor buoys at Otter Ferry but you can also anchor if you're clear of the buoys. If you use the buoys, you can pay the £10 fee by BACS if you're short of cash.

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Otter Ferry Moorings

The next day we decided to head further north up Loch Fyne to Inveraray, about 18 miles away. There was a light easterly wind and it was a lovely sail with wonderful scenery and huge mountains in the distance. At Inveraray went ashore in the kayak and made use of the tap on the quay and the fish and chip shop (pay in cash) and also had a good luck at the *Vital Spark*, which was used in a BBC Scotland TV series set in the western isles of 1930s Scotland, based on the Para Handy books by Neil Munro. Inveraray has 3 visitor mooring buoys (which are as tall as a Shrimper coach roof, and will take boats up to 9 metres) and each costs £10 per night (can pay by PayPal, 2025 price).



Phyllis moored at Inveraray and Vital Spark on the quay

We sailed south the next morning, after the customary swim around the boat and headed for Ardmarnock Bay, which is on the eastern side of Lower Loch Fyne, opposite Tarbert. We had great 25-mile sail down there in a light north-easterly wind and instead of using the main channel we decided to sail between the small islands in the Minard narrows. It was lovely to sail pass the sea birds and rocks and was one of the highlights of the trip.

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We anchored in the southern corner of Ardmarnock bay, to the north of and near the isthmus. (Across the isthmus is a similar bay to the one we were in but is sheltered from northerlies.) Our anchorage was sheltered from the south or east but there was hardly any wind, so we didn't have to worry. Due to the lack of wind we decided to spend a second night there, so we launched the kayak and spent the day exploring the bay and its sub-bay 'Black Harbour', where we found the remnants of a timber jetty. We were the only boat there and only spotted two other yachts sailing past in Loch Fyne all the time we were there.



Ardmarnock Bay and Black Harbour

It was baking hot, so we did quite a bit of swimming to keep cool: there's no escape from the heat on a Shrimper! I had brought some blackout material to place over the coach roof opening and a mesh fore-hatch cover, but next year I'm bringing porthole covers made of blackout material to help keep the boat cooler.

On Wednesday 14th May we headed off in a light westerly to spend another night at Great Cumbrae, about 20 miles away. It was our last night before we had to head back to Largs marina and the Friday lift out. We returned to Largs Thursday afternoon and unloaded the boat ready for the lift out first-thing on Friday 16th May. We spent the rest of Friday dismantling Phyllis, and we back home early on the Sunday. On this trip we sailed and motored about 208 nm.

After three 3 trips we still haven't completely explored this area and will hopefully be back, although in 2026 we're planning to sail in the Oban area.

Fun fact: all the curling stones in the 2024 European Curling Championships and the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics came from Ailsa Craig.