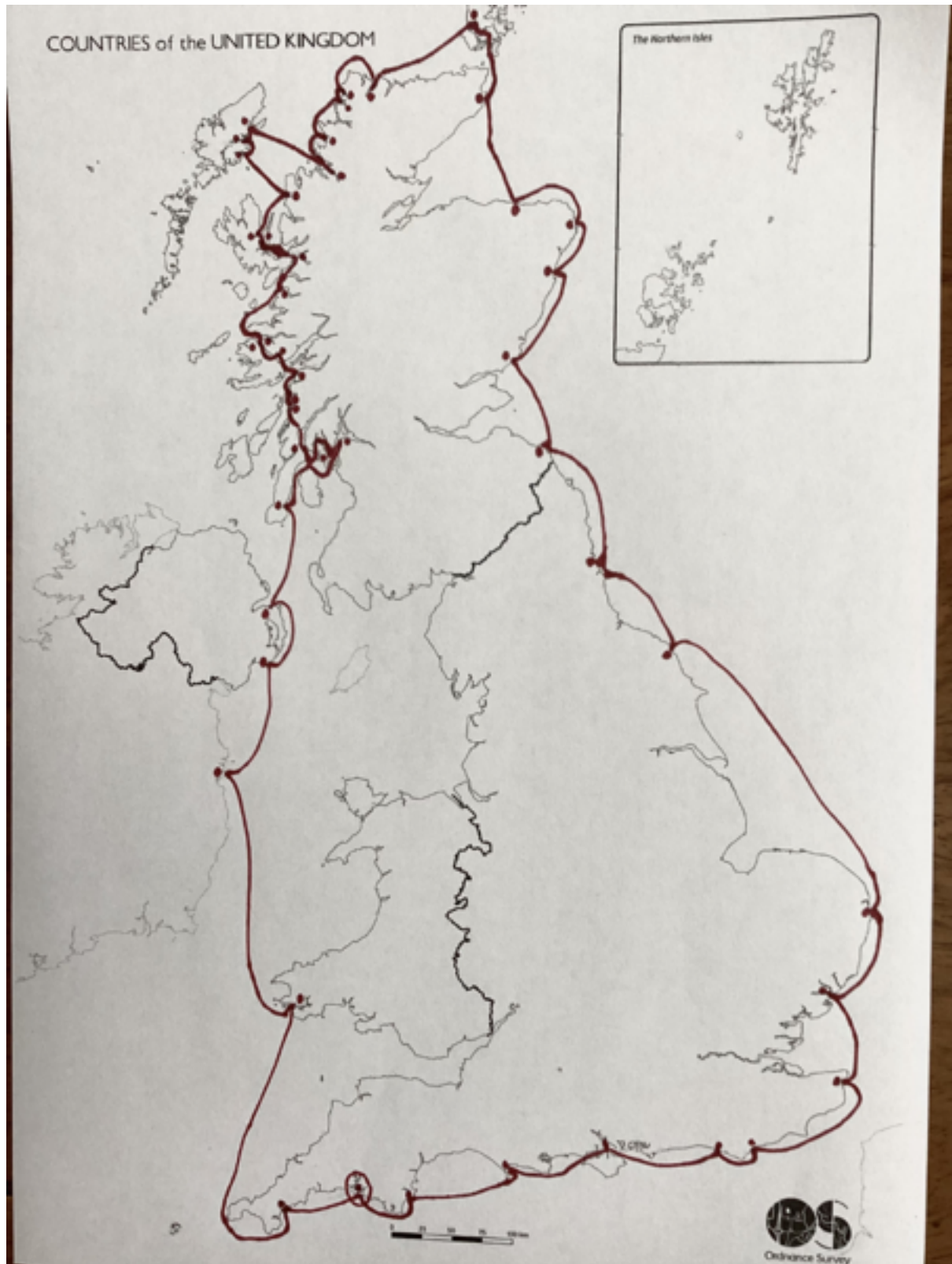


Walker Cruising Log

Dragonfly of Clwyd's 1,922 miles round Britain 2023 – Russell & Karen Walker



A short forward:

Some of you will know that this award was first given by my father, Robin Walker, sometime in the 1950's. At the time he owned Mermaid, a 49'6" gaff rigged yawl with a 15' bowsprit and a 5' bumpkin. She was very similar to Saunterer, who can still be seen today on a mooring in Dartmouth.

The original purpose of the log, apart from an account of the cruise, was to record information that might subsequently be useful to other RNYC members. Navigational and pilotage information in those days bore no comparison to what we have now, so information about tides, transits and uncharted rocks was invaluable. I can recall, aged 8, him reading the entries and tut-tutting as many of the logs that were submitted had completely misunderstood the Cup's objectives.

Modern Chartplotters, Sailing Directions and Reeds Almanac have now rendered most of the Cup's original aims superfluous. However, apart from an entertaining account of an adventure, there is still room for good tips that can only be found by someone who has been there. Readers will hopefully find some of them useful.

The Log

As we keep our boat, a Hallberg Rassy 34, in Plymouth, we opted to go anticlockwise. There are pros and cons either way, but, for us, the prospect of a 200 mile windward slog back from Dover against prevailing SW'lies did not appeal.

As we've sailed all of the south coast and most of the east coast, the idea was to get swiftly north so we could spend a good 6 weeks in the Western Isles. Then, assuming settled weather, we would have time to explore some of Wales and Padstow on the way back.

It didn't quite work out like that.

We left Plymouth, bound for the 40 miles to Dartmouth on 13th May. The log records a light SW wind, so we motored nearly all the way. You need to get the tide right at Start Point, as it often runs much stronger than the Almanac suggests – 4 knots at times. Also, the change in direction doesn't coincide with the times of HW or LW and has roughly a 3 hour time lag in either direction. Even in a moderate SW F4 wind over tide, the race off the Point is best avoided. If going west, stand on south until Bolt Head is open on Prawle Point, then tack.

A point to note is that if going east, a NE wind always strengthens under the cliffs going past Bolt Tail and Salcombe towards Start Point. F3 across Bigbury Bay turns into F4 or even F5/6, which can be quite disconcerting.

Marina berths in Dartmouth are pricey and anchoring is prohibited, save for one spot between the Darthaven Marina and the big yellow mooring buoys midstream. It's out of the way of the river traffic, the holding is good and dinghying across to the landing pontoon on the Dartmouth side isn't a problem. Better still, it's free.

Next stop was Weymouth. Timing the tide at Portland Bill is crucial, so a light N to NE wind meant that it was engine on. Half way across Lyme Bay, fog closed in, with visibility reducing to about 150 yards or less by the time we got to Portland. Then followed navigation which simply couldn't be done without a plotter and AIS, resulting in rounding the Bill, using the inside passage. We were 100 yards from the shore but didn't see it. It helps if you've done it before and know that it's deep water right up to the shore, and also that when you

get to a certain point you need a sharp 90 degrees turn to port to avoid being swept into the Race. Even so, it's not for the fainthearted. Fortunately, the visibility improved to about a mile as we neared Weymouth, which was a relief as there's quite a lot of commercial traffic in and out of Portland Harbour. Weymouth was cold and deserted, but we were cheered by a really helpful harbour office who directed us to a berth on the town quay. In summer Weymouth gets very busy and you usually have to raft up. Pubs, shops and restaurants are all close by.



Weymouth Town Quay

The general idea was to avoid night passages, so it was on to Cowes. For this we got a clear, sunny but cold day with a boisterous N'y F5 occ 6, so it was a fast passage. The scenery past the Dorset coast is good too. If you want to catch a full east going tide to Brighton or Eastbourne the next day, you need to be at least as far east as Cowes to catch the split in the Solent tidal streams on departure. Weymouth to Cowes on one tide is doable, but not much more. Berthing in any of the Cowes marinas is to be endured, not enjoyed. We went to Shephard's Wharf marina, whose organisation can only be described as shambolic. In the end we just found a berth and stayed put. Cowes Yacht Haven, if you can get in, is probably better. Cowes, out of season, wasn't very inspiring and a lot of the pubs and restaurants that used to be there have gone. The new breakwater makes the entrance calmer, and leaving via the new east passage, which is buoyed, is a bonus.

Leaving at 0730 the next morning for Brighton gave us the last of the east going tide. Whatever we did today we would have to buck the tide at some point. We got a pleasant N4 for the first two hours, but then the wind died so it was engine on (again). We duly arrived at

Brighton Marina at the prescribed time of 2 hours after LW, as Reeds advises that the entrance is shallow. It certainly is! We nosed our way in past the breakwater but executed a hasty reverse as the depth below the keel approached zero. Twenty minutes later another HR34 appeared and edged his way in, keeping much closer to the breakwater. If he could float, so could we, so we followed him in. It transpired that the Marina suffers from silting up, and dredging was due to start the next day.

Tom and Anna, who used to race with us in Cosmic Dancer, came aboard for supper, bringing with them a takeaway from the superb Indian restaurant at the top of the quay.

That said, the facilities are good and there's an Asda next to the marina. There's a good bus service to Brighton if you want to explore the Lanes and visit the Brighton Pavilion.

The problem with Brighton, which we didn't fully appreciate beforehand, is that because you can't get out until at least two hours after LW, the average yacht (unless bowled along by a strong SW'ly) hasn't got enough tide left to make it to the flood/ebb split at Dungeness. So, next day was just a short hop to Sovereign Harbour at Eastbourne. The marina is locked (access every 30 mins), but there are floating pontoons to tie on to inside the lock so it's pretty straightforward. There's an Asda nearby. Our verdict is that Sovereign Harbour is a much nicer place than Brighton. And top marks to the office lady, who not only told us that Hallberg Rassy owners get a 10% discount (Premier Marinas), but gave us our discount for the previous two nights at Brighton.

Next goal was Dover or possibly Ramsgate if we made good progress. With a light NE wind it was engine on yet again. We made Dover in good time, so calculated that we could just carry the tide to Ramsgate, which would be a better jumping off point for the next leg. However, by now the wind had increased to a good F4 so it was time to sail. With a NE wind and a bit of tide, making Ramsgate shouldn't have been a problem. Trouble was, the wind backed NNE and increased as we passed South Foreland and, much worse, the tide stopped running – an hour early – making the last 5 miles a right slog. Beware of the shallow patch to starboard as you enter the inner harbour, so stay well to port.

This feature of the tide turning early happened again at Lowestoft, Stonehaven, then Rattray Head, the Pentland Firth and even Cape Wrath.

Had we got the date, or the time, or BST wrong? No, we hadn't. My theory is that the persistent High to the north of Scotland, with the constant NE'lies, combined to push a big volume of water south, impacting the tides.

At Ramsgate we endured 3 days of strong N or NE winds. You need the tide to make any progress northwards, but this combination kicks up a really unpleasant sea. Worse, it's the worst direction for getting through the mass of wind farms in the Thames Estuary. So we stayed put. The consolation prizes are the Waitrose in town (5 minutes' walk), the Royal Temple YC is a hospitable watering hole, and you can get the train to visit Canterbury Cathedral. If you've never been, go – it's amazing to stand on the spot where Thomas Becket was murdered.



Ramsgate – sunny, windy and COLD!

On day 4 the wind relented (but only to NE 5), so off we went to Suffolk Yacht Harbour on the Orwell. It's 45 miles. The log records a windy and rough beat nearly all the way, taking 8 ½ hours, even with the tide. There we met up with an old racing friend for dinner aboard. Next day we discovered that the Raymarine EVO compass had failed, but, long story short, the Raymarine dealer at SYH was able to supply a replacement unit. For £750. Ouch! SYH is the best marina for yacht services. On site there is a chandlery with a specialist classic boat section, a sailmaker (One Sails), Electronics (Sea Power), an outboard specialist, Evolution Rigging, a stainless steel fabricator (Mr Stainless) who will make you anything, French Marine Motors, and a yacht repair yard. Shotley Marina is closer to the sea but has few facilities. Fox's Marina, at Ipswich, has the biggest chandlery and does yacht repairs – they finish off Oyster yachts.

Light NE'lies meant another motor all the way to Lowestoft, home to the RN&SYC with its lovely old clubhouse and an excellent pint. You can get into Lowestoft in practically any weather and, once inside it's well sheltered. Next day, with the wind going round to a nice ENE 3, we set off for the 150 miles to Whitby. The wind held for the first four hours but then died to a light SE so we ended up motoring the remaining 120 miles overnight to Whitby. As we got closer we saw a yacht heading south with the kite up. Interesting! Twenty minutes later what wind there was went round 180 degrees accompanied by a cold mist, although we could still see the entrance to the piers.

In the marina we discovered there weren't enough gate fobs for everyone. A super couple, Jo and Josh, who had just bought an old Sigma 33, lent us their spare fob. As it was Whitby Regatta they invited us to the clubhouse for the prizegiving. It turned out that Josh was a techie wizard and helped set up our blog (walkersdragonfly.blog – use Chrome not Google). They plan to refurbish the Sigma and race her, so you may see them on the NECRA circuit.

On to Blyth, wind ENE 3, a grey and lumpy sea, passage time 8 hours, 51.7 nm logged, average 6.5 knots. It was a Sunday evening, so there was hardly anyone in the bar!

Monday, calm but sunny. Departed for Holy Island. At least that was the plan. Wind filled in from the SE, up went the kite, glorious sunny sail up the Northumbrian coast. But as we went past Bamburgh the wind increased to a 5 and the Holy Island anchorage looked distinctly uninviting, so, as we had both wind and tide under us, we decided to carry on to Eyemouth. Off Berwick a Pilot Whale surfaced right next to the boat. It was huge, just as well it missed us. There's not much I can say about Eyemouth that RNYC members don't already know, except that it had the cheapest diesel of anywhere (£1.15 a litre) and the HM was very welcoming. The boatyard has been bought out and the new team were really helpful. We needed some gelcoat to mend a small chip: they didn't have any tubes for sale, but gave us some gel and hardener in a yoghurt pot. No charge, just a £5 donation to the RNLI.

Across the Forth to Arbroath on a grey, calm and windless day. If you don't want to cook, the Old Boatyard Restaurant is not only good but good value too. And, if you've never been, Arbroath Abbey is worth a visit. Home of the first Scottish Declaration of Independence (the Declaration of Arbroath) in 1320 – it didn't last long.

Thence to Stonehaven. We got something of a pasting, with the wind building to NE 5, with a growing swell amplifying an increasingly lumpy sea. You wouldn't normally aim to enter Stonehaven at LW in such conditions, but it was less hairy than it looked. Interestingly, the sea stopped as soon as we rounded the pier end, with hardly any movement when tied up to the pier. At LW springs we were just afloat at the inner end with our 1.85m draft. Chatting to the amiable HM solved why we were chewing up the alternator belt. Pitting on the flywheel, he said, just clean it up. Correct – problem fixed.

Next day produced a light SE 2, so, wanting to get north and take advantage of the tide, it was a motorsail to Peterhead. Off Buchan Ness we found a surprisingly big swell from the north – where had that come from? The marina isn't exactly pretty, but it's a good sheltered stop off point for timing the tide round Rattray Head. Incredibly, the harbour office still had a good stock of the 4.5kg blue butane cylinders, so we grabbed the chance to swop a nearly empty cylinder for a new one. Alas, we've now had to bite the bullet and change to Camping Gaz.

Destination Whitehills, so we left Peterhead on time to save the last of the tide round Rattray Head. Except that the tide was turning even as we left the piers and was already running the wrong way at Rattray Head. What a pain! RNYC members will know that the tide eases once you pass Fraserburgh. As we did so the wind (F2/3) filled in from the north so we got a nice reach along the coast for a while before the wind, once again, faded away.

We can't add much about Whitehills except that you will be photographed by the HM, Bertie Milne, as you approach. He does this for every yacht that arrives – 5000 pics so far. He's a former fishing boat owner/skipper who, if you have the time, is a mine of information about what fishing is really about. Don't go in further than the first two pontoons in the inner harbour as there's only just enough depth at LW springs to lie afloat. Also, it's not advisable, says Bertie, to enter the harbour until at least an hour after LW. The village has a recently

opened Premier convenience store with a good range of stock, although the gin is stupidly expensive.



Whitehills

By now we were getting closer to the centre of the persistent High, so the calm, but grey and cold weather continued, giving another long motor all the way to Wick. This involved a slight diversion westwards to avoid two huge wind farms in the Moray Firth, Beatrice, and the second, Moray East, which is currently under construction. In June 2023 we could pass through the gap between the west of them and the rigs of the old Beatrice oilfield. However, this will soon be a much bigger diversion, as construction of the new Moray West wind farm has now started. The exclusion zone marker buoys are as far south as 58.00N on the southern extent and 003.13W on the western side. All three together take up a huge part of the Moray Firth, so whether in future it will be better to go up and across, or west and up will depend on wind and tide.

Wick is Wick. There's plenty of room in the marina and it's accessible, for a yacht, in just about all weathers, although the entrance to the harbour is quite narrow. There's a good Co-Op about 10 minutes' walk away. If you want to eat out, Mackay's Hotel just by the upper bridge has a small bistro which is surprisingly good. But, even at the beginning of June, it was still ridiculously cold. The ladies in the Harbour Office had the heating on.

Now for the fun bit. Stromness. You can spend hours figuring out the best tactics for crossing the Pentland Firth. But it's much easier to listen to the Wick HM, who said, simply, you need to be at Duncansby Head at HW Wick and you get across in slack water. We did just that, but, once again, the tide had turned early and was already running westwards at 4 knots. Roughly speaking, you aim to pass close to the Lothar Rock on the other side (off the southern tip of Ronaldsay) at which point the tide eases off considerably. Luckily it was flat calm, but we were setting off at 45 degrees to starboard to make a COG of north. We made

it to the other side, but even so, it was an anxious 40 minutes. With hindsight, even if the tide had turned on time, I'd say there's no harm in being 30 minutes early, as the worst that can happen is that you will be pushed eastwards towards Muckle Skerry and so will be uptide if it does turn sooner than predicted. Having made Hoxa Sound we continued motoring all the way through Scapa Flow, in brilliant afternoon sunshine.

We found plenty of spare berths in Stromness. The shower facilities, in the ferry terminal, are really good – and it's warm inside the building too. We were told that there are plans, if they get the funding, for more pontoons (i.e., further into the bay) and a proper wave break. If you go to Orkney there are three must-sees: the ancient settlement of Skara Brae, the Italian Chapel built by Italian POW's in WW2 and St Magnus' Cathedral in Kirkwall. The latter two are easily accessible with the regular bus service that goes to Kirkwall and the ferry terminal at St Margaret's Hope. Skara Brae isn't so easy to get to and a taxi is best. After we were quoted a stupid price for the short trip someone suggested that we phone "Billy". So we did, agreed a deal, and Billy turned up on the quayside a few minutes later. In an ancient Skoda Octavia with 267,000 miles on the clock, still going strong. He intended to keep it until it hit 300,000. At Skara Brae Scottish Heritage have built a full size replica of one of the houses, and you can really appreciate how people might actually have lived in them, in relative comfort, 4,500 years ago.



Stromness

Continuing west, it's a good 50 miles to Loch Eriboll, so bucking a foul tide is inescapable. You can't time it so as to get a whole favourable tide to start with, as you have to exit Hoy Sound on the last of the ebb, partly to avoid the roost (tide race) in Hoy Mouth that you get

with wind over tide just at the entrance to the Sound, and also to avoid being swept back in by the strong incoming eastwards (flood) tide, which can hit 8 knots on springs.



Leaving Stromness – the spectacular cliffs of Hoy

On this occasion we were blessed with sunshine, calm seas and East F3, so it was kite up for an hour two. The views of the 1000' cliffs of Hoy are just spectacular. The wind veered to the SE so turned it into a white sail reach, but that was still good. Later the wind backed again to the East and increased to a good 25 knots at the entrance to Loch Eriboll, blowing more or less straight down the loch. The anchorage on the SW side of the small promontory of Ard Neackie was a brilliant solution. Calm and practically devoid of wind, you wouldn't think it was blowing that hard outside. Shortly after we got there a small crab boat dropped a line of pots right over our anchor chain. Which, as we have a Rocna anchor with a roll bar on top, duly got hauled up by us the next morning. Luckily it was low (ish) tide, so we were able to hold the pot line with the boathook while we dropped the anchor underneath it.

One point to note, if we'd had a SW'ly instead of the easterly that we got, we would have tacked west for an hour to clear the tide from Stromness, then tacked south so as to tack back west in flat water under the lee of the mainland. In Loch Eriboll the small bay to the NE of Ard Neackie (i.e. on the other side to where we anchored) looked as if it would be nicely sheltered from the south west.

Now for Cape Wrath. The Sailing Directions tell you not to go anywhere near it in wind over tide conditions. They are right. Once again, although we got our arrival time spot on for slack water, we found that the tide had turned early and was running east at a good two knots. With an ENE wind of 20 knots+ we had little option but to bash on through big,

confused, 2.5m seas. Not recommended. Just as well the HR 34 is a strong boat. The race was only about two miles across so we continued westwards until we were clear then gybed south. A mile south of the headland the sea quickly abated and we had a fast reach in flat water and sparkling sunshine. An hour later the wind dropped to F2 so we ended up motoring to Kinlochbervie.



Windy conditions past Cape Wrath. Past the worst of the seas.

Kinlochbervie is a small, but incredibly sheltered inlet. It has a big fish landing quay that backs on to a warehouse with loading docks for at least 12 artics. The visitor pontoon for yachts has spare room for three or four yachts. There's a Spar store five minutes away. The showers are inside the HM's shed and you had to clamber over bits of fishing gear to get to them. Mrs W was not impressed! The HM goes off duty at weekends so nobody bothers to collect harbour dues, even if you try to call the number on the notice board. They have a deal with Lochinver: if you stay in one you get the next night (provided it's consecutive) free at the other.



Kinlochbervie

One of our goals was to find remote and rarely visited anchorages, so our next stop was Loch a' Chad-fi – home of John Ridgway's Adventure School - just round the corner. It's completely landlocked. It was also warm enough to have dinner in the cockpit. During the night we had a massive thunderstorm, causing the boat to dance round the anchor, but it didn't budge.

On to Lochinver. It's a safe enough spot, with impressive views of Suilven, but it's a mile to the nearest shop round the head of the bay. The butcher's doesn't open on a Monday. In Kinlochbervie we'd met an HR 37 (Jandina) who was also going round Britain. They too had gone to Lochinver, so we invited the owner round for a few gins, his crew having gone to the pub. The north pontoon, to which you'll probably moor, had been badly damaged in a February gale and had no electricity. It still hadn't been repaired as the harbour was awaiting funds from Highland Council. It's actually OK, although it doesn't look like it, to pick a berth anywhere if it isn't occupied. As an aside, you may have read Libby Purves book, *One Summer's Grace*, about the Heineys' trip round Britain. In it she eulogises about the calm and tranquillity of Loch Nedd. Jandina was in Loch Nedd when we were in Loch a Chad'h Fi. He told us that the best spots are taken up by moorings and that, far from being peaceful, they had experienced a rough night in the thunderstorm with violent snubbing on the anchor.

Next stop was the Summer Isles. We sailed about half way, but then the wind died so it was engine on (again). Another warm evening, with a fab sunset and an equally fab sunrise in the morning. We anchored in Tanera Beg. The Sailing Directions recommend two small bays, but they are smaller than they look on the chart and you need to pick your spot carefully to avoid swinging onto the shore. On the other hand, anchoring anywhere within

the main pool would be fine. There are a couple of ways in to Tanera Beg. We tried both. The west side looks easier on the chart, but in practice the way in as recommended in the CCC Sailing Directions (i.e. close to the west side of Eilean Fada Mor) is easier than it looks and is the way we'd go if we went there again.

A short sail to Ullapool (kite up – yay!) elicited a brand new (less than 2 weeks old) extension to the visitor pontoon, so there was plenty of room. There's a Tesco not far away and a serviced laundry, who collected our laundry at 12 and delivered it back to the boat, washed, dried and ironed, for 5. All for £12. You can't stay on the pontoon overnight, so you have to pick up a mooring. All afternoon black clouds had been building, and we got to the mooring just as the thunderstorm burst with big downdraughts, making the husband and wife relationship of picking up the riser buoy somewhat fraught. It also produced two very bedraggled guests who had rowed out in their dinghy for dinner aboard.

Off to Stornoway in warm sunshine, to which we motorsailed most of the way. The port had no diesel, as the supply vessel had broken down, to the consternation of boats arriving expecting to fill up. It's a proper town with some smart shops and a fantastic fresh fish shop next to the marina. The restored Lews Castle (entry is free) is worth a visit, if only for the views over the harbour.



Stornoway

Then it was off to another remote and landlocked anchorage nearby, Loch Thorasdaidh. This is quite tricky to get into, involving transits to avoid rocks down a narrow channel. As we turned left onto the second transit, we were astounded to discover a new fish farm, that

wasn't on the chart despite having updated it in May. Their nets went right to the edge of the transit which you needed to follow to avoid a couple of rocks. As it was HW we edged slowly in but our track was uncomfortably close to the inside rock. Next morning, we had the same problem, but solved it by going inside both rocks and following the depth contour. There is an alternative way in, but that, although we couldn't verify it, appeared to be blocked completely by the fish farm. Outside we spotted a large new Norwegian support vessel. The capital investment must be £millions.

Loch Shell, a few miles south, was next on the list. It's much easier to get in to and provides all round shelter but has no facilities whatsoever, although once again, the view is just – wow. MOWI fish farms have a landing pontoon at the head of the bay which we used to go ashore. Nobody seemed to mind.



Loch Shell

We now needed to make our way south, as we were being joined by some friends at Kyle of Lochalsh in about 10 days' time. A motor, in flat calm, to Badachro in the Gairloch ensued. It's arguably Scotland's prettiest anchorage and the Badachro Inn is highly recommended. There are four visitor buoys, but if they are taken there's still plenty of room to anchor. Some yachts had anchored in the bay SE of Eilean Horrisdale which looked perfectly comfortable. It's also very sheltered, which was just as well as here we rode out the first of many subsequent gales. If you go ashore in the dinghy, beware of the rocks which stick out to the north of the jetty, which have claimed a few outboard propellers before now. The Sailing Directions state that the buoys are free to patrons of the Badachro Inn. This is wrong – the arrangement has been discontinued. If the visitor buoys are taken and you're

not keen on anchoring, the HM, Rob Adam (07775 652911) is very helpful and may be able to direct you to an unoccupied local's mooring.



The Badachro Inn, Gairloch. Our mast is behind the plant.

After the gale had gone, we went to investigate Portree. Sailing down the Sound of Raasay, even in a moderate wind, is entertaining to say the least: the huge cliffs give rise to fierce and unpredictable downdraughts - no wind one minute, 20 knots the next, laying you flat. Portree only really works if the wind has a good westerly component, as the moorings can be exposed to strong southerlies. There's a small visitor pontoon that we tied up to for a short shopping trip ashore, but we weren't popular as the tripper boats regard it as their sole territory. Having heard about some new pontoons at Churchtown on Raasay, we decided to have a look. These were indeed new, so new that water and electricity weren't yet connected, and dues were by voluntary donation only. At present they are somewhat exposed to the southwest, but we were told there are plans to increase the number of berthing spaces and to add a wave break. Still, they were there, the weather was settled, and it's only a short walk to the very smart lawn bar of the Raasay Distillery with superb views towards the Red Cuillins on Skye.



Brand new pontoons at Churchtown

By now it was the 20th June and the first hints of July's weather breakdown were appearing. Faced with a fearsome forecast, we abandoned plans to collect some friends at Kyle of Lochalsh and directed them to Mallaig instead, where we experienced another gale. Even behind the hill, inside Mallaig, we had 35 knots. On paper the berthing at Kyleakin looks preferable as it has better shelter than the pontoons on the Kyle of Lochalsh side. In practice, the Kyleakin pontoon is wholly occupied by fishing boats and other semi-abandoned boats and there are no facilities (no electric either), although there's a good bus service across the bridge. But, even on the Lochalsh side it's not much better. Yes, there's a laundry and supermarket, but there was no electricity on the yacht pontoons, partly due to a long standing funding issue that hadn't been resolved.

While in Mallaig, awaiting the arrival of aforesaid friends, another yacht, whom we didn't know, but sporting the Percy lion on her ensign, pitched up. We went to say hello, only to find a very well disguised Diane Carr in oilies (and David) aboard Wavelength. A very convivial evening (way too much gin!) aboard Dragonfly ensued. While Wavelength departed the next day for Plockton in pouring rain, we opted to stay in Mallaig until the wind abated as our friends were novice sailors.

We got a window to sail to Tobermory and another to stop in Loch Aline, where we treated ourselves to dinner at the White House. Expensive but good. Plans for Loch Spelve had to be abandoned, so we ended up in Loch Drumbuie (another gale, but well sheltered). Needing various supplies, we motored back to Tobermory in the pouring rain where we endured yet more wind, but at least there was space on the pontoons. Another window allowed us to sail to Puilladobhrain, where the rain and wind set in again. Some RNYC

members will know that Puilladobhrain is a sheltered anchorage with good holding, but it has limited space – say 5 or 6 yachts for comfort. In the end there were 13 yachts, all far too close. Luckily the wind stayed in the south so nobody swung into anyone else. We retreated to the marina on Kerrera (opposite Oban), arriving in pouring rain and a rising wind. It was mayhem, as lots of other boats had the same idea and the marina was full. As a smaller boat, they had found us a berth, but by the time we got there a motorboat had pinched it and they weren't budging. The marina staff, having seen what was happening, were terrific and gave us the space where the water taxi normally goes, which proved in the ensuing storm to be the best spot of the lot. The friends we had picked up at Mallaig had a very disappointing week. Forecasts had no consistency from one day to the next, making planning for trips virtually impossible. We were stuck in Kerrera for four days.

Having said goodbye to one lot of friends at Oban, we welcomed a former neighbour (Adrian) the same day. He didn't get a great week either. The berthing at Oban, for those who don't know it, is rather better than the Sailing Directions suggest. Noise from the town isn't excessive. Tesco's, once you find the short cut through the car park, is closer than Mr Google tells you. Screwfix is next door. Yachts can't stay for more than three days: it's first come first served with no advance booking, so you've a good chance of finding a spare berth. The outer pontoon provides a good wave break, so even with quite a fresh south westerly, there wasn't much movement on the inside finger berths.

After Oban it was, disappointingly, a matter of getting south when we could. We wanted to go to Easdale, but had to abandon it. We did whizz through (at 9 kts!) the Cuan Sound, down to Kilchattan Bay for lunch and back to the anchorage in Balvicar Bay, but then had to make for the marina at Croabh, where we were stuck yet again with another blow. A few reasonable days ensued, including a lovely sunny day to transit the Crinan Canal. If you haven't done it before, you can - at a pinch - do it with two people, but three makes it much easier. If you're lucky you can do the whole transit (in and out) in a day, but most times it's in one day and out the next morning.



Cracking day for the Crinan Canal – ascending the Dunardry Locks

From Ardrishaig to East Loch Tarbert in torrential rain, then a better day through the Kyles of Bute to Rothesay. It's tempting to take the easy option of berthing in the outer harbour, but you get a lot of wash from the ferry arrivals and departures, which is more of a nuisance than you might expect. Getting the HM to raise the bridge to go into the inner harbour (much better) is no problem. Just call him on the VHF and (except when a ferry is doing a turnaround) he raises the bridge straightaway – there's no set timetable and he's on duty all hours that the ferry is operating. You can tie up to one of the pontoons in the outer harbour and nip ashore for a quick look at the inner harbour to see if there's a space.

Thence followed by a trip to Kip Marina to drop off our neighbour. There we got stuck for another four days, more wind and torrential rain. A squally day down to Campbeltown, where, if it's busy, the really helpful HM will squeeze you in somehow.



Campbeltown squeeze. Later we got another one between us and the white yacht.

The big surprise as we left Campbeltown, which you don't hear about in the news, was the three warships patrolling the entrance to the Firth of Clyde. This wasn't just the play exercises that we see at Plymouth, it looked deadly serious. Hmm. Something to do with keeping out Russian subs?

It's 52 miles to the big marina at Bangor, where you find the Royal Ulster YC, which facilitated the first America's Cup challenge with Sir Thomas Lipton. It has an amazing collection of old America's Cup memorabilia. The lounge bar overlooks Belfast Lough and dinner is very good value. Be aware that it's a very traditional club though – if you hang your jacket on the back of your chair in the dining room it will be tactfully removed to the cloakroom.

Thence to Ardglass, which is small but provides excellent all round shelter, with a good convenience store in the village.



Ardglass

Our next stop was 56 miles past the Mountains of Mourne to Howth, where yet another windy low came through. Having been to both, we think that Howth is far preferable to Dun Laoghaire. Howth is run by a very active and modern sailing club, with good facilities and lots of good small shops nearby. It's where the Irish racing fraternity (yachts not horses) hang out, with lots of yachts with fancy paint jobs. It's home to the Howth 17' One Design that was established in 1896. There are 22 boats still afloat, many of which are regularly raced. We saw one that was built in 1903, still going strong.



Howth 17' OD. Built in 1903 and still being raced. HYC Clubhouse behind.

The next 125 miles to Milford Haven was rather uncomfortable as, much to my surprise, the sea from the previous day's northerly blow hadn't gone down. There we languished for 9 days, waiting for a chance to get round Land's End. S or SW'lies of F6 or more, with big seas, weren't on. Milford Haven has two main marinas, one at Neyland further inland, and the other, Milford Marina, which is located in an old shipping dock with a lock gate. Milford Marina is a much better option than Neyland. Access is slightly restricted (HW-5 to HW+4), but in practice it's not a problem as the lock is manned 24/7. A call to "Pierhead" gets an instant response – it's good. The lock is big, but has floating pontoons inside to tie up to. If you arrive at LW there's a waiting pontoon outside, but it's exposed to wash from passing traffic. If there's a SW wind more than F3 it gets uncomfortable and it's probably better to jill around in the fairway until you can get in. The dock area has been developed, with some smart cafes (great bacon butties!) and shops along the dock. The chandlery at the back of the marina office doesn't look much, but it stocks what active cruising yachts actually need. Tesco is 5 minutes' walk away at the end of the dock, as is the train station with a direct service to Cardiff and Birmingham. Whilst there we met a lovely couple (with two of the best behaved children we've ever seen) from Portree who had taken their Bavaria 34 to Cherbourg and were on their way home, but had also got stuck in Milford Haven. Their cruising plans had also been disrupted by July's weather. They told us of a plan for a marina at Portree that had so far come to naught owing to differences around the exact siting.



The waiting pontoon outside Milford Marina. Very different in a wind.

Eventually a decreasing forecast with an initial NW 4/5 appeared, but we still needed to wait another 8-12 hours to let the sea state go down. About 30 miles out the wind, contrary to forecast, began to build, as did the sea. 1st reef in, then 2nd reef in. When the wind hit 30 knots at midnight it was time to take the main down due to the risk of a crash gybe. We carried on under foresail only, which was safe, but seriously unpleasant as the boat was rolling violently due to the cross sea. About 4 miles north of Land's End, Falmouth Coastguard piped up to advise that a container had been washed overboard in the vicinity of the Land's End TSS, with three sightings. Shortly afterwards we spotted a recovery vessel right in our path searching for it. The only bonus was that we rounded Land's End bang on time to carry the tide, with both wind and sea subsiding as soon as we got to the Runnelstone Buoy.



Big seas past the Longships

Storm Antoni was imminent, so we diverted to Mylor in Falmouth Harbour. The log records 155 miles in 24 hours. Mylor is really sheltered behind the trees, but even in there we recorded a gust of 37.4 knots. The Falmouth Estuary was just a sea of white. Few members will have visited Falmouth. Pendennis Marina and Falmouth Yacht Harbour are usually full, but Mylor often has space at short notice as visitors are accommodated on the outside of the wave break pontoon and yachts come and go frequently. It's a good 20 minutes' walk to the excellent shop at Mylor Bridge, but if you have a trolleyful of groceries they'll give you a lift back to the marina. Just ask.

If you can't find space at Mylor and a SW blow is imminent, the best option is to go upriver, where there are three separate visitor pontoons, all of which are perfectly sheltered. There's always room. They're all good, but we think the middle one (i.e. the second one going upriver) is the best. They don't have water or electricity, but they do have waste and recycling bins. In a strong easterly Mylor is very uncomfortable, as the wind blows directly onto the outside pontoon where they put visitors. Go to St Mawes, opposite, or upriver as above.

Next day, 12 weeks after we set out, the wind dropped and went round to NW F3/4, giving a perfect reach back to Plymouth in sunshine and flat seas. The best sail of the entire trip.



Passing the Dodman, about 1/3rd of the way back to Plymouth. Perfect sailing. Friday 5th August.



Home & dry – the breakwater in Plymouth Sound