

Realms of Gold

Around the Isle of Mull in a Swift 18, by Charlie Hitchen

I SEEM TO REMEMBER THAT it was on Loch Melfort, on one of our Wayfarer cruises, that we first discussed the possibility of buying a trailer-sailer. My hands, increasingly painful from more than thirty years of rock climbing, canoeing, cycling and dinghy racing in all weathers — activities collectively characterised by my late mother as 'acting daft' — were beginning to complain at the movement of stores and camping gear from shore to boat and back again. And so, in the autumn of 2011, we parted with *Nora the Explorer*, our beloved Wayfarer Mk2, and bought *Martinet*, a Swift 18 which had been offered to us as 'a dinghy with a lid.' Outings on Ullswater and on the Clyde suggested to us that we had made a big mistake. *Martinet* sailed like a dog!

We made changes. Raking the mast, a new system for applying backstay tension and a more efficient kicking strap all helped. But the most effective change we made was to build up the lip of the outboard well by 125mm. This raised the prop of the 5hp Honda outboard behind the stub keel thus reducing drag and transforming the upwind performance of the boat. Having done all of this, it was still clear that she was no Wayfarer, but she would do. Another significant improvement we made was the production of a boom tent which allowed us to spread out a little and meant that we could dry out our wet sailing gear without contaminating the inner sanctum of the compact cabin.

Our plan for the summer of 2012 was to launch using the excellent slipway at Largs Marina and to make our way up to Oban, passing through the Crinan Canal. We had the idea that we might retrieve the boat further



north and so have the flexibility and extended scope of a one-way sea journey. Things went well even though we enjoyed pretty mixed weather. The canal was a delight and allowed us to avoid strong winds and still to make northerly progress. Unknown to us, our transit coincided with the Crinan Canal Festival. This event was based on the meadow adjacent to Lock 9. When we arrived there, the crowds were being entertained by a giant Scotsman on stilts accompanied by his giant pantomime dog. (I believe the pair are known professionally as Big Rory and Ochie). Some wit had provided Ochie the dog with fully functioning waterworks. It took great delight in cocking its leg and urinating on us as we languished at the bottom of Lock 9. Feeling that this was somewhat disrespectful to the dignity of our ship I was minded to find out if Ochie could swim as well as micturate, but the Skipper just smiled.

'Ce'st la vie,' she laughed. A born philosopher she is.

In just five days we reached Oban, our objective, but we still had a month of holidays left! We decided to mooch on up the Sound of Mull to Lochaline. Over the years since, this place has become one of our favourite anchorages. It always was a hurricane hole but now it sports pontoon berths and a swish new marina building for those so inclined. When we arrived there was no marina and after a couple of days exploring the area we



Ochie in full flow



(left) *Martinet* and boom tent

were ready to move on. But to where?

I had carried with me a copy of the late Alan Glanville's excellent article about the Mull circumnavigation he had made in his *Ness Yawl*, *Lowly Worm*. This is perhaps my favourite trip log from the many brilliant accounts to grace the DCA journals over the years. I flashed it under the Skipper's nose. Could we not do something similar? The weather looked unusually settled and the Met Office were predicting an unchanged weather pattern for the next two weeks. In August, around the coasts of Mull, that was something approaching a miracle. 'A once in a lifetime chance,' I argued. The Skipper, ever the voice of reason (some would say realism) agreed that we should '...push on carefully and see how things went.' As it turned out, things went rather well.

Day One. Lochaline to Loch Droma na Buidhe 15Nm 4th August 2012 HW Oban 14:00

We left early in the morning to go north. A pleasant following breeze pushed us onward up the Sound of Mull. It was time to try our secret weapon. A couple of weeks before, Bernie had unearthed a spinnaker hiding in the bottom of a cardboard box at a boat jumble. It was the right height for the *Swift* but much too wide. With the nicety of judgement which comes from a lifetime of working with cloth and teaching others to do the same, she cut out a triangular wedge from the centre of it, sewed it back together and pronounced it good. We had never even hoisted it because I had only fitted the halyard onto the mast on the car-park at Largs on the day we launched. I had visions of it ballooning out like grandma's bloomers, but to my surprise, it set beautifully and gave us a real boost in the light winds. Of course, we had no proper fittings for it and so jury-rigged it by lashing sheets to the toe-rails, but it did the job nicely.

The temperature soared and even in the light breeze provided by our motion, we were positively wilting in the heat. The Morvern coast crept by. Then, at Auliston Point, the headland at which the Sound of Mull rounds into Loch Sunart, the wind failed completely. We drifted on for a while before resorting to the engine to navigate the constricted rocky channel into the magnificent anchorage of Loch Droma na Buidhe. We had read much about this place and its perfect shelter but were unprepared for its breath-taking beauty. Tired and

hungry, we found anchoring difficult with our limited ground gear but eventually the Skipper declared us firmly set and after a quick bite to eat, it was time for sundowners in the cockpit. The quality of the light was extraordinary and as the last rays of the sun poured into the anchorage over the golden ridge which gives the place its name, the intricate morphology of the landscape was revealed as it so often is at this time of day. It had been a long, hot but very rewarding day.

Day Two: Loch Droma na Buidhe to Port Croig 17Nm 5th August 2012 HW Oban 14:37

Daybreak transfigured the anchorage and those surfaces which on the previous evening had been hidden in shadow were now revealed. We have visited this special place a number of times since but this first morning with the little terns wheeling and diving over the glassy surface of the loch can never be forgotten. Yet it was not a day for procrastination! Decisive action was called for and the Skipper was soon up and we were away through the narrow, rocky entrance with genny out in the developing southerly breeze.

The Sound of Mull is famous for its fluky winds but the breeze remained faithfully in the south. We avoided the Stirks, a series of evil reefs just off Auliston Point and headed for Tobermory to pick up supplies. For a while, we strolled amongst crowds of people surrounded by the delicate, though hardly complementary, aromas of fish, chips and scented candles. It was all a bit much after days of solitude. Then a piper struck up on the pier to entertain the shoppers. Despite my Scots ancestry, I am not a huge fan. Don't get me wrong, I have the greatest respect for pipers. Anyone who has the perseverance and musicality to wring a recognisable tune out of something so obviously unsuited to the purpose deserves no less. When in close proximity to a piper, I have been tempted to ask them can they play, 'Over the Hills and Far Away', but I have lacked the courage to do so. I have it on good authority that they carry knives. It was time to go.

Leaving Tobermory, we made for Ardmore Point — the northerly tip of Mull — under sail. Again our progress was slow but we were determined to use the motor as little as possible. We were sailors after all! It seemed to take an age but by 18:00 we could say that we had at last rounded Ardmore and we hardened up in the direction of Caliach Point, the next major obstacle on our journey. Time was pressing and it was clear that we would not be rounding the fearsome headland that day. Thus we made for Loch na Chumhainn, one of the possible bolt holes we had written into our passage plan. The pilot guide issued worrying warnings of marked and unmarked rocks scattered in the approaches to this narrow inlet. Caution was called for and it was late evening before we entered the constricted anchorage of Port Croig and with keel raised were able to manoeuvre ourselves amongst moored fishing boats and drop anchor. Two returning fishermen gave us a cheery wave which we took to be a good sign.

It was another wonderfully clear evening. Away to

(right) *The Skipper*

the north were the Small Isles and the bright wand of the Ardnamurchan Light illuminated in the declining sun. Directly out, across the unruffled sea, the dark line of Coll, transfixed in molten splendour, defined the western horizon. All this beauty — but our minds were on Caliach Point.

**Day Three: Croig to Gometra 13Nm
6th August 2012 HW Oban 15:03**

We were up at 05:30 to catch the last few hours of southerly tide at Caliach Point. I was recently told by a local that the fishermen hereabouts view Caliach with more trepidation than its infamous near neighbour, Ardnamurchan, and we were anxious to be done with it. The morning was a dull monochrome: mist veiled the islands which last night had exploded with colour and as we nosed carefully out of Croig, Caliach appeared before us as a glooming shadow. There was little wind and so by judicious use of the motor and the insistence of the tide, we arrived exactly at the appointed hour. Caliach proved to be in benevolent mood and after forty minutes of swirls, ripples and worrying upwellings of water, we breathed a deep sigh of relief and declared ourselves clear of its formidable presence.

A friendly westerly breeze arrived and we were able to reach slowly across Calgary Bay and as we did so, the wind shredded the thin clouds, exposing for us the strange seascape of the Passage of Tiree. Away to starboard, the Treshnish Islands emerged from the mirk, each one shaped in its own unique form, like prototypes of islands discarded in some primordial sea. Off the port bow lay the majestic cliffs of the Ardmeanach headland, an impressive relic of Mull's volcanic past, and ahead lay Staffa, squat and dark. Beyond, gleaming on the horizon, lay the bright smudge of Iona. The wind dropped again as we passed Treshnish Point but we persevered under sail making a slow crossing of Loch Tuath toward Gometra and our planned destination for the night, Arcarseid Mor, the big harbour. The pilot guide spoke of a concealed entrance and we almost missed it before circling back to enter through the rocky channel into another wildly idyllic anchorage. The harbour is shoal in many areas but again the lifting keel allowed us to anchor well up into the head of the loch. Now we felt really exposed. Perhaps this was due to the remoteness and the lack of anything one could call civilisation. Perhaps it was the difference in the seas here: long muscular swells which carried unsettling rumours of the powerful Atlantic. Maybe it was the strangeness and variety of the landscapes but there was a very real sense of being 'out there.'

The Gometra and Ulva anchorages are very special to us. We have since sailed a great deal on this west side of Mull and revisited these remote harbours several times. For us, they are places of extraordinary beauty, yet some have called them sombre. I have read much about these islands and the terrible conditions experienced by the



islanders during the Clearances. It is easy to consider these islands as some sort of historical cliché, for our perception of them to be dominated by only the history of the Clearances. These lovely harbours knew hardship and unspeakable cruelty, but surely they also echoed with the joy and the song of those who lived and worked here. We fell asleep to the busy sound of oystercatchers.

**Day Four. Gometra to Bull Hole. 10Nm
7th August 2012 HW Oban 15:38**

We awoke to the sight of a sea eagle circling far overhead, a dot against the faultless blue of the sky. In our several subsequent visits to this anchorage, we have never failed to see one. Rounding the islet of Eilean Dioghluim, which guards the mouth of the anchorage, we could see our day's course set out before us. Iona lay some 10Nm ahead and Staffa in a direct line for half that distance. The westerly airflow persisted, offering us a light breeze just abaft of the beam to help us across to Iona. It was the perfect sailing day and we were going to make the most of it. The secret weapon was again produced and we were delighted to find that it set perfectly on the reach too! The sea-state was slight and with no chop to obstruct her, *Martinet* surged forward toward Staffa. All was right with the world. The GPS told us that we were travelling at better than five knots. We were flying! The boat could not have been planing but from the spray coming over the bow, it certainly felt like it! It was, however, becoming clear that the wind was increasing steadily and within minutes the GPS was reading six knots, surely higher than the hull speed? Even for a couple of old National Scorpion racers, it was all becoming a little interesting. And then, there was another palpable jump in wind speed and a further leap forward in boat speed!

'Perhaps,' said the Skipper through a clenched jaw, 'We should lower this spinnaker.' (I'm paraphrasing a little here!).

But to do this proved much easier said than done. Our foolishly jury-rigged lines were virtually impossible to release under load no matter how hard we tried. As resourceful as ever, the Skipper came up with a plan.

'Right, we'll live with it. Sheet the main out. Sit out and come aft. We'll be in the lee of Staffa in five minutes and then we'll heave-to. When we do, get forward and bring the bloody thing down. And here you are,' she said, passing me her knife with a piratical glint in her eye, just

(right) Charlie at Martyr's Bay, Iona

like Gina Davies in Cut-throat Island, 'Use this if you need to!'

Our meteoric approach to Staffa must have been a fine spectacle for the boat loads of tourists converging on the island. In the end, the knife was not necessary and hove-to we managed to stow the spinnaker and pull down generous reefs in the main and genny. The wind was now fresh and a long rolling swell had set in as we reached away toward Iona. *Martinet* coped with it beautifully. The skipper was on the helm and she relishes this stuff but it was with some relief on my part that we passed into the lee of Eilean Amraidh at the northern entrance to the Sound of Iona and the swell subsided. But so did the wind and we were compelled to resort to the motor to enter the magnificent anchorage of Bull Hole, so named because of the squat, bovine, granite island which shelters it from the often boisterous conditions in the sound. We dropped anchor, rowed ashore and climbed a grassy gully to reach a rocky promontory overlooking the anchorage. What a view! Perhaps it was a residue of adrenalin from the day's excitement but I felt distinctly poetical! I had been reading about John Keats's travels around Mull and his Chapman's Homer sonnet came to mind. I put on my poetry recitation voice.

'Much have I travelled in the realms of gold
And many goodly states and kingdoms seen
Round many western islands I have been....'

The Skipper listened respectfully. She is used to this sort of pseudo-academic rubbish from me. And so, like Cortez at Darien, we gazed out over the Passage of Tiree toward Coll, the Small Isles and the jagged Cuillin of Skye in the far distance as the sun set. It had been some day.

Day Five. Bull Hole to Tinker's Hole 4 Nm 8th August 2012 HW 16:08

It was another radiant morning, perhaps the hottest of the trip. Our plan for the day was simple. We were running out of water and to replenish our supply was the first priority. If the Skipper does not get a couple of ample cups of Tetley's in the morning before coming on deck, she turns into a regular Ahab!

We crossed to Iona and anchored in Martyrs' Bay with lovely white sand below us. A tap was located near the ferry slipway and we filled up our assortment of water containers and set about wandering through the island's many historic sites. St Mary's nunnery was our favourite — very peaceful and calming after the excitement of the previous day. We decided to give the Abbey a miss. It looked a little modern for our taste and besides there was a pretty steep entrance fee which tended to



put a dampener on the spirit. The Skipper has trouble enough dragging me into our local church for free! (Fr Kelly, if you are reading this — it's a joke.) The tour boats and the ferry were beginning to disgorge hordes of pilgrims onto the island, all keen to get into closer communion with St Columba. Perhaps a more effective method would have been to clamber on board a small open boat, hoist sail and make out to sea. By all accounts, the lad was a fair-to-middling small boat cruiser.

It was time to go and so we crossed back over the Sound of Iona toward Tinker's Hole, our destination for the night. The Sound is a strange piece of water with a constantly changing sandy seabed. In places, it is very shallow indeed but such matters were little problems for *Martinet*. Nor was the northern entrance to Tinker's Hole, a narrow channel between a series of rocky islets and skerries and the island of Erraid. This passage is shallow and tortuous, but with the keel wound up, a Swift 18 will float in 200mm of water and we were able to cautiously nose in on the rising tide.

At last, the anchorage opened out before us and we were able to find secure holding in a sheltered bight of the channel. After lunch, in mirror calm conditions, we took the inflatable to explore the glorious sandy skerries to the west and later ventured around to Traigh Gheal or David Balfour's Bay. This is the bay made famous in Robert Louis Stevenson's *Kidnapped* and much frequented by the author as a boy. There was a yacht at anchor there but the beach itself was deserted. To visit this place on such a wonderful evening with its



(right) David Balfour's Bay

white sands and its backdrop of red cliffs is to know something of the complexion of Paradise. It was an old rock climber's wonderland and I spent a happy hour scrambling about the perfect granite outcrops.

We made a brew and had a snooze on the sands. It all felt very tropical. Too soon, however, the lapping waves warned us that an onshore breeze had developed. It was time to go and the resulting chop made the trip back to the boat a rather damp though exciting affair but we were not bothered. It had been a great day.

**Day Six. Tinker's Hole to Loch Spelve. 32 Nm
9th August 2012 HW Oban 16:41**

We were up early to catch the favourable tide going North East along the coast of the Ross of Mull towards the Firth of Lorn. We emerged from the southern entrance of Tinker's Hole to a breathless seascape. The sun was rising over the jet fangs of the infamous Torran Rocks, each one fringed white with the merest hint of foam. This group of rocks proved to be the undoing of Davey Balfour in *Kidnapped* and even now, it was possible to see why. We have since made this passage in a larger boat, in very different conditions when it is a fearsome place indeed. But today the rocks were in kindly mood and we were able to locate the channel through without difficulty. As the hours passed, the blush granite of Erraid and the Ross of Mull gave way to the towering black basalt cliffs of Malcolm's Point and Aioeadh Mor. There is little in the way of bolt-hole, refuge or anchorage along this formidable coast. We had to wait until the improbable bay of Carsaig opened up and we were able to anchor behind Gamhnach Mhor, an island known locally as The Cow, unsurprisingly a similar-shaped though rather more delicate affair than the Bull of Bull Hole.

We had a particular interest in Carsaig. It was one of the locations used in the 1945 Ealing film, *I know where I'm Going*. You have got to love a bit of Powell and Pressburger! We had come a long way from Tinker's Hole and were tempted to stay the night but the Skipper was not impressed by the anchorage and had no wish to emulate the film's heroine, Joan Webster, who was stormbound here for several days and so we resolved to push on for Loch Spelve, the next nearest secure anchorage some 15Nm further on. Once again, we had a light following breeze which saw us quickly past the open mouth of Loch Buie. We had judged the tide nicely and it had helped the cause. However, several moments of anxiety were experienced as we passed Frank Lockwood's Island. Here the north-going tide collides with this unimpressive islet squeezing the current sideways

and outward, creating a good deal of turbulence. The sea boiled as we passed through this area giving us a rough half-hour before calm was restored. Northward we went, into the twilight, under the towering cliffs of Mull until at last they gradually fell away and the tricky entrance of Loch Spelve opened before us. We chose the simplest anchorage, ate briefly and turned in.

**Day Seven Loch Spelve to Lochaline. 12 Nm
10th August 2012 HW Oban 17:18**

The day dawned dull with a thin mist hanging over the loch. We decided that visibility was good enough to venture out into the Firth of Lorn. We motored out but the engine seemed out of sorts, a fault which we later traced to a trapped fuel line between the motor and the remote fuel tank. We need not have worried about the visibility. By the time we had rounded the shoal which almost blocks the entrance, a light breeze had blown the mist to ribbons and Ben More was once more dominating the Mull skyline. Away to starboard, the Garvellachs — the Isles of the Sea — rose in splendid irregularity. Apparently these were Columba's favourite islands. One can easily see why, but you would need to choose your sailing days carefully if you owned the sort of craft Columba is thought to have sailed.

With the wind behind us, we rounded Duart Point and made up into the Sound of Mull once more. Here was another chance to fly 'the bag' which we took with rather more caution than on our previous hoist. As we passed Dùn da Ghaoithe, 'the Fort of the Two Winds', the point at which the strange tides of the Sound of the Mull divide, we could truly say that our circumnavigation was over. We pulled onto the newly constructed pontoon at Lochaline, had a much-needed shower in the Dive Centre and that night celebrated with a slap-up meal in the Lochaline Hotel.

Afterthoughts.

We had been outrageously lucky with the weather. A week of nearly cloudless weather around the coasts



(right) Martinet in Bulls Hole



(left Croig)

of Mull in August is unusual to say the least. Of course, our trip was not as impressive as Alan Glanville's sail and oar trip because we had the motor. Ours was a steep learning curve, even given the depth of the Skipper's experience. Looking back with the hindsight of a number of subsequent trips onto the west coast of Mull, it is clear to us now that we had pushed our luck. The boat performed well and yet in other conditions, she would have struggled. Her diminutive size had aroused some curiosity on the trip. An old salt came to cast his eye over her when we were taking on water at Lochaline. I told him that we had sailed her around Mull.

'Good for you,' he said. 'She's a bonny wee thing but you do need to bear in mind that there are seas hereabouts that would flip her end over end and no bother at all.'

Needless to say, we did bear this in mind on later voyages. Yet the trip gave us confidence and the experience to try more ambitious trips in other places and in other boats. Two years later, we sold *Martinet*, replacing her with another Wayfarer and a 27ft yacht. We were sad to see her go. She had taken good care of us, not only on this trip but on others where we had been rather less fortunate with the weather. We understand that she is now based in Scotland and wish her well. We hope that her new owner will enjoy sailing her as much as we did, with as much love and laughter as we enjoyed on this marvellous trip. And perhaps, with that second-hand kite flying and a fresh breeze streaming over the beam, she may well travel as fast again as she did on that never to be forgotten morning when we sailed her from Gometra to Staffa.

Notes

Launching: We launched at Largs Marina. This has an excellent slipway. For heavier boats they also offer tractor launch and recovery. We eventually recovered *Martinet* at Dunstaffnage Marina near Oban, using their slipway.

Navigation: For navigation, we used the *Imray Pilot Guide, Mull and Adjacent Coasts*, by Martin Lawrence. This has since been superseded by the excellent CCC *Kintyre to Ardnamuchan Pilot Guide*, now in its 2nd edition.

We used Imray Chart C65 *Crinan to Mallaig and Barra* for large scale work and the Imray folder *Kintyre to the Point of Ardnamurchan* when we needed more detail. We also used the Admiralty Tidal Stream Atlas NP214 *West Coast of Scotland* and we had a small chart plotter which we used

sparingly to conserve battery power.

We also had complete coverage of the coast of Mull in OS 1:50,000 maps. If I were to repeat the trip today, I would also use the Antares Charts package on tablet/smart phone. Incidentally, the tidal atlas is also available digitally now.

Anchoring: Our main anchor was a 6kg Bruce anchor with 20 metres of 8mm chain. Our second anchor was a 6kg Fortress anchor with 10 metres of 8mm chain. We only used the second anchor once on this trip to prevent swinging in Tinker's Hole.

Anchorage:

1. Lochaline: N 56 33.372, W 005 45.236
2. Loch Droma Na Buibhe: N 56 39.178, W 005 56.030
3. Port Croig: N 56 36.449, W 005 56.030
4. Gometra, Acaseid Mor: N 56 29.603, W 006 18.030
5. Bull Hole: N56 20.350, W006 21.834
6. Tinker's Hole: N 56 17.500, W 006 23.034
7. Carsaig: N 56 18.952, W 005 58.095
8. Loch Spelve: N 56 23.458, W 005 44.460

General reading: We had a copy of *The Scottish islands*, by Hamish Haswell-Smith, which gives great basic information on each Scottish island, including notes on history, geology and wildlife.

Much has been written about the clearances and the Mull communities. A particular favourite is: *As it was — an Ulva boyhood*, by Donal B McKenzie. The title for this article is pinched from the Keats sonnet, *On Once looking into Chapman's Homer*. (Pretentious? *Moi*?) As a retired English teacher you tend to have this sort of stuff rattling around in the memory and it seemed to fit. I had been reading about Keats's 1818 trip to Mull, Staffa and Iona. Apparently, he did not like Mull at all, as is obvious in the letter to Tom Keats on 23rd July, 1818.

Columba: Despite my flippancy about Iona, I am a great admirer of St Columba. A good read is, *Columba: Pilgrim, Priest & Patron Saint*, by Tim Clarkson.

Pipers: I put my aversion to pipers down to enforced watching of *The White Heather Club* as a child. I know that others were similarly scarred. A GP friend of mine, when introduced to a new patient, a Mr McDonald, was unable to prevent himself asking the gentleman, 'Whar's yr troozars?' Recently, I did watch Rura in concert at the Beacon Centre in Greenock. They are a group of young men trying to breath new life into the pipes. Very enjoyable. I may be converted yet. **CH**
