

Owl's Scottish Cruise - 1999

For four successive alternate years I have taken my Contessa 33, *Owl*, to Scotland for the Clyde Cruising Club's Scottish Series, a northern equivalent of Cowes Week, followed by a fortnight's extensive cruise around the Western Islands. It has always been a gallop to cover the distances in the time available, and a system of switching crew at weekends has always worked well. In the 1999 Scotland trip which, to my delight, fitted in well with the RYS Scottish Cruise, there were seventeen different people who sailed in *Owl* at some stage.

We, that is Jonathan Dalrymple-Smith, Ian Smail, and myself, left Lymington at 1030 on 15 May 1999, bound for Falmouth. Limbara, RYS, overtook us in Poole Bay. 'Was she going to Scotland?' we asked. 'No ... Too far' came the reply. By 0200 we had arrived off Salcombe and anchored in pitch-black darkness at Elender Cove until daylight. Our next stop, in the late afternoon was at Malpas, well up the attractive Fal River, where welcoming cousins, Peter and Jane Peace, were to be found. In the morning we moved to the visitor's yacht haven in Falmouth where the first crew exchange took place. Tim Jeffreys and Simon Prichard arrived and Lucy and I left to get back to work using, of course, the same car each way.

Owl set off north, mostly under engine, and stopped at Wicklow. After that she was not short of wind, and she experienced 35 knots in Dublin Bay. The worried owner, seeing the dire forecast, phoned to suggest that the crew stop somewhere. 'We're quite happy' they said.

As planned, they did stop at Bangor to land Jonathan (described as un chef extraordinaire in the log) and Simon. Then it was just Tim and Ian for the hop over to Scotland. Having stopped at Campbeltown, they arrived with perfect timing at Tarbert, where Mike Saqui and I were there to meet them. Tarbert was the base for the Scottish Series, so we unloaded a heap of cruising gear such as charts, books, food, cruising sails, the outboard motor etc, and stored it in a friend's boathouse. We dropped our hefty cruising anchor and chain alongside the pontoon, leaving the bitter end shackled to a ring. Then we sailed for Kip Marina, near Greenock, where the offshore race was to start, stopping to have lunch with friends, Anthony and Kathy Wills, who live overlooking the lovely Loch Riddon in the Kyles of Bute.

Ian left, having done the whole trip north, and the rest of the racing crew arrived: Simon Cameron, Ben Slatter, Gregg Clifford, Stefan Leveel, and Charlie Tavner. All had gone like clockwork so far, and we even led our class down the Clyde at the start of the offshore race, but in the night the fleet was becalmed and *Owl* suffered badly on handicap, being placed only tenth in class. Racing on Loch Fyne was, as usual, very well organised, though the breeze was light and fickle. *Owl* did surprisingly well in these conditions, perhaps helped by an experimental keel attachment. Only an alleged premature start prevented her from winning the class but, as it was, she came only fourth overall.

On came the cruising gear, and on came Ole Van der Vorm and Frida Dorow, these two just arriving in time to overlap with the racing crew's final evening activities. Next morning,

the racing crew left, and the three of us set off for the Mull of Kintyre in sunny weather but, as forecast, before long it began to rain heavily. As the tide swept us round the Mull, we overheard exchanges between the Campbeltown lifeboat and a familiar yacht aground on Patterson's Rock, only a mile away. 'Could we help?' we said. 'No thanks.' came the firm reply. We stood by, listening on the radio, and were relieved when we heard some time later that the yacht was off, unholed, though not without breaking the rudder.

Round the Mull we found a brisk northerly, and in the early hours picked up a mooring at Ardmish Bay, Gigha. It had been quite an eventful first day on board for Ole and Frida. After breakfast, we dropped our mooring and exchanged pleasantries with Chivalrous RYS, moored nearby, then sailed for Ormsary, Loch Caolisport, where Henry and Kate Bickett (RYS) had kindly offered us dinner. Thanks to William and Mary Clare Lithgow (guests at dinner and friends from Dalvina's Scottish visit in 1994), who intentionally do little to publicise their beautiful loch, Caolisport remains one of the best kept secrets of Western Scotland. *Owl's* log describes the evening in superlative terms.

Taking advantage of a fresh breeze and sunny conditions next morning (4 June), we sailed for Craobh where we berthed beside Tony Stevenson's Jesmond. We gathered up two more crew, David and Diana Johnson, before going to dinner at the Loch Melfort Hotel. This party made a tremendous start to the cruise, happily, with no after effects.

Our first visit was close at hand. We were invited to lunch at Ardmaddy Castle within Loch Melfort, grand home of Charles and Minette Struthers, who both David and I had known in the Navy. We anchored off the castle and after lunch were given a tour of Minette's gardens. Once the tide had turned in Cuan Sound we were off, arriving at Loch Aline at 2100, to find Ole's parent's yacht *Zwerver* (RYS) with David and Sue Balme on board, keen to have us alongside. We invited the *Zwerver* crew for drinks in *Owl*, which made for a splendid party. Everything had gone well since Tarbert, yet it was to become even better.

Next morning we beat up the Sound of Mull. The strong northerly did not encourage us to round Ardnamurchan, whilst the sheltered east-west lying Loch Sunart deserved full exploration. We put into Tobermory briefly to top up with water and ice, then set off well-reefed for Sunart. Whilst careering down the loch in 35 knots of wind, we became confused by a waypoint which was supposed to take us clear of the rocks off Risga Island but was taking us onto Carna Island. David cleared up the mystery by asking the distance. We found it to be 6000 miles.

The upper reaches of Loch Sunart were new to all of us and are dramatic, varied and beautiful. The wind had dropped and we motored into Salen which was nice, but we thought the Garbh Eilean anchorage would be prettier, so on we went, only to find - to our delight - that *Zwerver* was there too. Next morning, using *Zwerver's* dinghy, we went over to the south side of the loch and climbed above the tree line to find a stunning view of the loch from one end to the other. Before leaving, we borrowed a bronze rod from Otto Van der Vorm to replace *Owl's* VHF aerial that had blown off the previous day. Back in Tobermory we used our ad hoc aerial to invite our RYS neighbours to drinks. The aerial must have been working well as later we learnt that every RYS yacht for miles around had heard our call.

The wind had moderated and it was sunny and clear. *Owl* had a super sail to Moidart, one of the loveliest of all mainland anchorages, where we had been invited to join *Zwerver* for dinner. On arrival there was time for shore expeditions: the girls went to the beach at Castle Tioram to sunbathe and the boys took the beautiful walk on the north

side of Shona Island. We picked a sprig of heather, which *Owl* was entitled to wear at the bow, now being north of Ardnamurchan.

Our plan after Moidart was to visit Eigg for lunch and Rhum for supper. Zwerver was going to Skavaig, so we said thank you and goodbye.

We had a nice beat to Eigg and there, in the anchorage off Galmisdale pier, we found Donald Campbell (RYS) and his crew in Caludh. We went alongside and enjoyed more splendid 'rallying', as John Roome would describe it. In a fit of after-lunch enthusiasm we decided to race each other to Rhum. *Owl* went southabout, looking in at the Bay of Laig and Caludh went northabout after glancing off a rock on the way out. To our surprise and pleasure we crossed tacks off the mouth of Loch Scresort.

There was a cluster of RYS yachts at the end of the loch, including what Ole described as 'our tender', Zwerver, evidently back from Scavaig. As we reached the anchorage Ronnie and SM Sharp invited us aboard Ultimate (RYS) where we found a party in full swing. In the morning we landed and explored Kinloch Castle. Ole said he would like to get married there. Then we headed for Loch Slapin, Skye, where David's parents live. David had invited Zwerver and Caludh to join us and, after a happy tea party in the sun at Drinan House, the combined crews reassembled for dinner at the Hayloft Restaurant where we were all able to sit down together at one very large table.

Next day, now 11 June, we warmly thanked our hosts and gave a heartfelt send off to Zwerver and Caludh whose cruise was coming to an end. We then set sail ourselves for Armadale, with the sun shining and the great Cuillin Hills glowering in the background. Diana needed to collect her car from Fort William, and on turning the corner at the Point of Sleat we found a fresh northeasterly blowing right into Armadale harbour, which made her transfer to the ferry pier rather difficult. We waited for the ferry to turn before berthing and this gave a temporary lee, just enough to put Diana onto the ladder on the nearby jetty.

We found a mooring but after lunch went ashore to escape the uncomfortable chop. Meanwhile Diana, unknown to us, had discovered that she had left the car keys behind, and had been trying with the ferry radio to raise *Owl* for advice! After a pleasant walk, Fleur Rutherford arrived in place of David, Diana and Frida, and we had a good dinner at the Ardvasar Hotel to celebrate.

We were all signed up for flying with the Air Squadron and Drinan House was subject to several flypasts though, it turned out, David's parents were out! Others explored the Sound of Sleat. Only Ole, for some reason, missed a flight. That night we joined the Air Squadron for their dinner, which was great fun, if a little midgy.

Next morning Frida left for Mallaig and home in Norway. From the forecast it looked as if the wind was going to change from cold clear northerlies to the south and to strengthen. We had a day before the Skye Gathering, when David was to become one of our hosts, and rather than take *Owl* round to Portree it seemed wise to keep her on the south side of Skye and take advantage of David's offer of a lift. So with Ole and our new arrival Fleur we made a wet but most enjoyable tour of the extremities of Loch Nevis. The loch is rather deep for anchoring, but we found a visitor's mooring in the sheltered inlet at Taret where we made friends with Donald MacDonald the sole inhabitant, a retired crofter who lives with a pet sheep. After a comfortable night we walked up the hill as Donald recommended, and viewed the adjoining steeply banked and wooded Loch Morar which looked very attractive even in the rain.

We then sailed back to Armadale, admiring the great white streams of water leaping down every mountain face, and were duly picked up by David and Diana to go to the Skye Gathering. It was another hugely enjoyable occasion especially as David had briefed us on all our hosts, such as Rury Hilary. We were sorry that several RYS yachts had not made it because of the weather, and no doubt we'd have had the same problem if we had tried to go by sea. After the party David and Diana took us to dinner at Drinan House, an event which did not start until 2200.

The diminished, but happy crew of Ole, Fleur and myself set off next morning for Ardnamurchan. We had a pleasant uneventful sail in light headwinds and dropped anchor at 1625 in Loch a'Chumhainn, Mull also known (more easily) as Loch Cuan. It was a very pretty loch with a river leading up to the village of Dervaig. We were pleased to have rounded Ardnamurchan before the bad weather arrived, as the lunchtime forecast had offered S or SW 4 to 5 occasionally 7 in north, which was where we were. By the 1755 forecast, this was revised to S to SW gale 7 or 8. At first we felt pretty snug in our sheltered anchorage, but when it really came on to blow in the night the boat tugged and swung furiously at her chain. I had no need to worry as our 35lb anchor on its 170ft of 3/8in chain was deeply imbedded in the river mud, but worry I did all night. However nothing could dampen the confidence and high spirits of Ole and Fleur, who seemed to sleep peacefully through it all.

The wind was still blowing quite hard in the morning of 16 June, but not so much that Fleur and I couldn't make a dinghy excursion up river. We had a friendly exchange with some people gathering oysters, enjoyed the eider duck and herons, and identified numerous wild flowers from a book, which was one of many gifts from Diana. We didn't reach the village, as the tide was too low, moreover a valve seemed to be leaking on the inflatable dinghy.

We left well-reefed in the afternoon for Tobermory, looking into the alluring Loch Mingary as we passed, and thinking we'd just have to come back to it another year. Having luckily found a mooring in the crowded harbour, we met in the pub Members with some gale tales of rounding Ardnamurchan in rather more discomfort than our own.

At 10am we dropped our mooring and set off south down the sound, thinking how fortunate it is that Scotland has these inshore passages for use in bad weather. Actually the sun was out, clothes were drying, and we were at peace with the world until Tony Stevenson in Jesmond came up from behind and invited us to join them for a drink in Duart Bay. Though I had planned to drop in to Oban to pick up a replacement dinghy valve before going on to Craobh, a quick calculation showed that we had at least two hours in hand. Hugh Arbuthnot in Kelana came too, and we had a memorable party. What fun it was. We seemed to have found another 'tender'!

We made a flying visit to Oban, collected the valve, which was soon to be fitted, had a nice beat through the Kerrera Sound and on to the Cuan Sound and thence to Craobh. We thought the party at Lunga House was a great success and we would have danced all night had not the last bus seemed preferable to walking a mile or two back to the boat in the rain. It was goodbye to gallant and charming Ole, and after drinks aboard the Bown's Cattleya, Tony Stevenson's magnificent birthday party aboard Jesmond, an overnight visit to Charles and Minette at Ardmaddy Castle, followed by drinks aboard John Worlidge's Blae, goodbye to Fleur, whose amazing strength on deck was matched by her domestic skill. My car had arrived with the new crew of Lucy, Charlie Tavner,

who'd been in the racing crew at Tarbert, and Axel de Beaufort, a French student who had raced in *Owl* at Cork. Fleur was to drive my car south.

Leaving next day, 21 June, *Owl* made a tremendously fast passage to Ardglass Marina, but after spending the night there with contrary winds forecast and extant, we backtracked to Strangford Loch, a place I'd long hoped to visit. Picking slack tide is all-important for entry (and departure), but we got this right and arrived after a rainy passage at the sheltered Quoile Yacht Club where we were invited to berth alongside. The Quoile YC adjoins a nature reserve where wild life thrives, swifts and tufted duck being most numerous. They were remarkably tame. We met Jack Carol the owner of well-kept sloop *Glance*, age 105 years, and Brian Black, owner of the yacht *Caelen* shortly to be leaving for Greenland. We asked them and their crew on board for a drink.

Next day we left at 0800 to catch slack tide at the entrance and, as the wind had dropped to nothing, we motored through mist and then thick fog. Only when past The Smalls did the fog clear, revealing large formations of gannets, no doubt from Grassholm. We sailed on in bright sunshine and then found a school of dolphins in attendance. Could we lean far enough over the bow to touch a dolphin? At first the dolphins were shy of the proffered hand, but after the first touch - dolphin skin feels rather rubbery - all the dolphins jostled to be touched. Every now and again they would all leave to make a circle round *Owl*, leaping well clear of the water at four or five at a time, before coming back again to be touched. It seemed a rather remarkable experience.

The dawn of 25 June found *Owl* bowling along in a fresh easterly off Land's End, and as we turned the corner into a sea of basking sharks, the wind reached force six. We thrashed to windward all day, and rather than bash on all night too, Fowey seemed an attractive option. The east wind dropped and we had a delightful warm, sunny last visit to Fowey before our arrival home. We berthed in Lymington at 0615 on 27 June to find, by some happy chance, breakfast being cooked beside the pontoon, and soon there was Fleur to meet us with my car, she having co-opted First Sea Lord, Michael Boyce to chauffeur her home.

Owl had logged 1827 miles. It had been a perfect cruise, hugely enjoyed by all seventeen of the crew.

25 Nov 1999