

## Picts, Celts and Manx: A Cruise of the Four Nations



### Summary

After returning from my Atlantic Circuit in 2018/19, I had anticipated a few summers cruising in European waters. Covid stymied my 2020 plans – we managed a decent period of time in Scilly but ventured no further. Planning for 2021 was still very constrained, particularly when it came to foreign travel, so I decided to head up the Irish Sea and cruise Scottish, Northern Irish, Manx and Welsh waters, to take the temperature across our 4 nations post-Brexit and mid-pandemic, as well as to visit some of our country's most beautiful places.

I left Gosport on 24<sup>th</sup> May and returned on 5<sup>th</sup> September. After an initial passage direct to Whitehaven, Cumbria, I headed around the Mulls of Galloway and Kintyre and passed through Jura. I then cruised the north of Mull and the Small Isles from Oban, before heading to Mallaig, Skye, Rona and the Outer Hebrides (Harris / Lewis and the Shiantis). I returned to the mainland just south of Cape Wrath. Rounding the latter, I headed to Scapa Flow in Orkney, before descending the east coast via Wick to Inverness. Going through the Caledonian Canal, I then explored the south side of Mull, Iona, Staffa, the Treshnish Isles, Tiree and Islay. With the north of Scotland behind me, it was the turn of Northern Ireland: Belfast, Strangford Loch and Glenarm on the Antrim coast. I then spent an enjoyable period in the Clyde before heading south to the Isle of Man. Then it was Wales: the Menai Strait and the beautiful Pembrokeshire coast. I returned to the Channel via Lundy and Padstow having logged 2558 nautical miles – as it transpired longer than a circumnavigation of Great Britain - with 12 different crew coming with me at various times.

Highlights were undoubtedly the wild north of Harris, Lewis and the Shiantis; meeting John and Marie Christine Ridgeway, and his old yachts anchored in Loch Laxford just south of Cape Wrath; running before some strong winds into Scapa Flow; Tinker's Hole on Mull; puffins galore on Staffa and Treshnish; transiting the hugely tidal Jack, Ramsey and Bardsey sounds; the beauty of Solva harbour and anchoring on the west side of Lundy and scaling cliffs to attain the plateau.

Below is an abridged version of my cruise. I hope it of some interest to the reader. A fuller version can be found on my blog at <https://travels Spellbinder.blog>, which also contains many more photos.

## Overview of Voyage



**Red** – Gosport to Oban via Whitehaven, Mull of Galloway and Jura (24 May – 1 June)

**Yellow** – Small Isles, Rona, Skye, Outer Hebrides, Cape Wrath, Orkney, Caledonian Canal (2 -24 June)

**Green** – Mull, Iona, Staffa, Treshnish, Tiree, Islay, Belfast, Portpatrick, Strangford, Glenarm, Clyde (4 Jul – 4 Aug 21)

**Blue** – Clyde, Isle of Man, Anglesey, Pembrokeshire, Lundy, Padstow, Falmouth, Gosport (14 Aug – 5 Sep)

The 2020 season had been very short – if I recall correctly, we didn't escape lockdown until 26<sup>th</sup> July, and had time for a brief foray to Scilly as things started to reopen again. The lockdowns in late 2020 made me reflect on how I could make the most out of 2021, and it became increasingly clear that a combination of new Brexit regulations, and continued Covid-related restrictions and administrative requirements for going abroad meant that a trip to Scotland, to include Northern Ireland and Wales, would make sense while things settled down.

As the season approached, I toyed with the idea of being a little more ambitious, taking in the Faroes and Shetland too. I equipped myself with the requisite charts and pilot books, but in the end a succession of May gales and unseasonably cold westerly weather delayed my departure and meant that Orkney would be the limit of my exploration.

I finally set off in Spellbinder on 23rd May with two friends, both called Alan, which added slight challenge to the giving of the skipper's instructions! We started the bash westwards – as it so often is – a couple of days after a fairly strong depression had come through, and the seas had largely abated. My usual plan is to press on, and dive into the well-known anchorages of Studland, Portland, Torbay, Cawsand and Penzance, to recoup as required. This time we waited in Studland to get a fair tide around Portland and overnighted in Cawsand to dry out and rest, before refuelling in Penzance and heading up the Irish Sea in clearing and moderating conditions. The sea life in the Irish Sea was excellent, and we were followed by dolphins for lengthy periods as we headed up to our first destination, and crew change, in Whitehaven. Locking in after 4 days, I was glad to be north, but we had yet to have any decent sailing – it had been a motor sail then longish motor.



*Porpoises at dawn: middle of the Irish Sea*

The cruise proper started a few days later when I was joined by younger son Jonty. Heading west, we had to tackle the Mulls of Galloway and Kintyre to get to our next destination, Oban. Anchored in East Tarbet Bay, just inside the hook of the former, we awaited the tide and rose at dawn to head up towards Sanda Island, where we anchored to await the next tide. The trip up the North Channel was uneventful, although the tides run fiercely here, and care is needed. We anchored for the night beneath the Paps of Jura at Craighouse, making last orders at the Craighouse Hotel and buying a bottle of Jura whisky. Making use of the early light, we rose at 0430 the next day to ride the tide on silky smooth seas through the Sounds of Jura and Luing to Oban.

Oban now has a relatively new transit marina in the town centre, making crew changes and replenishment much easier. My wife Sue arrived by train, and we made the most of her precious half term by sailing to Tobermory then Loch Aline, taking in a number of beautiful walks including up into the hills above Ardtornish Castle which dominated the north end of

Aline, where we anchored. Heading back to Oban, we anchored at Oitir Mhor bay and walked around much of the island of Kerrera, enjoying the scenery and Highland cattle.



*Approaching East Tarbert Bay, Mull of Galloway*



*The Paps of Jura: 0430hrs*



*Dressing overall in Tobermory – 2<sup>nd</sup> June 2021*

With Sue heading back to teach, we were joined by Jonty's friend Caspar. Heading back up the Sound of Mull, we anchored in Loch Na Droma Buidhe in murky conditions (it appears that more and more Gaelic versions of placenames are used, making life a little more confusing for the English). It served as a jumping off point to head around Ardnamurchan Point, the totemic headland which not only takes you on to the next Clyde Cruising Club pilot book, but also means you are truly north and beginning to get into the wilder cruising grounds. We had a most enjoyable few days exploring the Small Isles, taking them in the order Muck, Canna, Rum and Eigg. We enjoyed them all, for different reasons, and they were an excellent way of having a mini cruise from Oban or Mallaig, to where we repaired having enjoyed them. I was particularly struck by the beauty of Canna harbour, and the approach and anchorage at Loch Scresort as you come into Rum.



*Sailing past Ardnamurchan Point*



*Dawn at Canna*

Joined by old friend Paul at Mallaig, we then headed on towards the most adventurous part of the cruise. It started gently enough, with a quiet anchorage amongst the seals in Eilean a' Phiobaire, Loch Hourn, and a well-timed passage through the very tidal Kyle Rhea, under the Skye bridge and up to the delightful Plockton, where we ate and drank well. Single malt and haggis are comfortable bedfellows. After Plockton we sailed north again, up to the tip of Skye, and found respite from the breeze at the lovely anchorage of Arcarseid Mhor in Rona before crossing the Little Minch in a F6/7 and finding shelter in Loch Mharaig in Loch Seaforth. This was the windiest part of the whole cruise: we stayed in Seaforth for 48hrs and had 44 knots funnelling down it at one stage. Spellbinder's anchor (a Kobra 2) held well with

its snubber, as it always has, and we escaped around to Eilean Thinngarstaigh in Loch Claidh, disturbing some red deer on the hillside as we approached. Eilean Thinngarstaigh is truly delightful, and we were alone to enjoy it.



*Anchorage at Eilean a' Phiobaire, Loch Hourn, with seals on the rocks and a volcanic backdrop*



*Puffins and guillemots galore in the Shiants*

The next day our destination was Stornoway, but the breeze was fair for a trip en route out to the Shiant Islands, which challenged our resources of superlatives. Arriving to thousands of puffins and guillemots in the sky and on land, we anchored amongst them and clambered up one of the islands, enjoying a truly magical place, which again we had to ourselves. After lunch we headed to Stornoway to prepare for Cape Wrath and Orkney, and meet old friends James and Dorothy, who have settled there and who very kindly drove us around Lewis and entertained us.



*Dressed overall in Stornoway – 12 June 2021*

My plan was to head across the Minch to the mainland, which we did in a lively F7, broad reaching with 3 reefs in the main and genoa, in rough seas and mist and drizzle. It was an exhilarating and fast ride, which Hallberg Rassys are well made for. With the help of the plotter, we found the entrance to Loch Laxford, anchoring in Loch a' Chadh-fi and escaping the swell. This loch is known for its pink granite and adventure school, founded by the adventurer John Ridgeway. I had always wanted to meet him, so set off in the morning with Paul to find him. He and his wife live a good mile from the nearest roadstead, and everything they and their very few neighbours need must come by foot over the hills, or by boat. They were very hospitable and gave us a coffee in their front room – they don't get many visitors! His yachts English Rose IV (of Golden Globe 1968 fame) and VI (which he took around the world) still lie at the bottom of the hill. The adventure school is still going and is now run by their daughter.



*Sailing into Loch Laxford, just south of Cape Wrath, in a F7 and mist*



*Dinghy landing, Loch Laxford*



*John and Marie Christine Ridgeway. We were only their second visitors since March 2020*



*English Rose IV (a bilge keel Westerly 30). In the 1968 Golden Globe Race John got as far as Brazil in her.*





*English Rose VI: a Bowman 57*

After Laxford we briefly visited Kinlochbervie, the last loch before Cape Wrath, spending a night at the quay (for all its remoteness there is a remarkably large fish processing plant there). At dawn we were up and rounded Cape Wrath in spectacular dawn sunlight, finding the Atlantic swell which had hitherto been hidden by Ireland and the Hebrides. We just squeezed into Hoy Sound motoring against a building foul tide and strong winds – I should really have left an hour earlier - and got into the marina at Stromness in Scapa Flow. From there we enjoyed the southern part of Orkney by car, learning of its maritime history (notably the scuttling of the German fleet in 1919, and the audacious sinking of HMS Royal Oak in 1939 by a U Boat) and enjoying its wild beauty. Paul and Caspar flew out, and Jonty and I caught mackerel and had a night in Long Hope in the southern part of Scapa Flow before heading across the Pentland Firth and going into Wick, where we unexpectedly found a rather good French restaurant.



*Just before Cape Wrath, at dawn*



*Spellbinder at anchor in Scapa Flow*



*In the Pentland Firth, rounding NE Scotland*

Next was Inverness, and I swapped younger son for his elder brother Tom. Tom has crossed the Atlantic with me on Spellbinder, so was slightly put out that his time off coincided with more of a 'boating holiday' as we descended the Caledonian Canal. It was enjoyable though; we liked the locks and their keepers, who were universally jovial and helpful, and had a brief sail down Loch Ness. Tom then ran up and down Ben Nevis before we descended Neptune's Staircase back to sea level, after a three-day transit.



*Sailing down Loch Ness: no monsters seen*



*Mid-point in the Caledonian Canal*



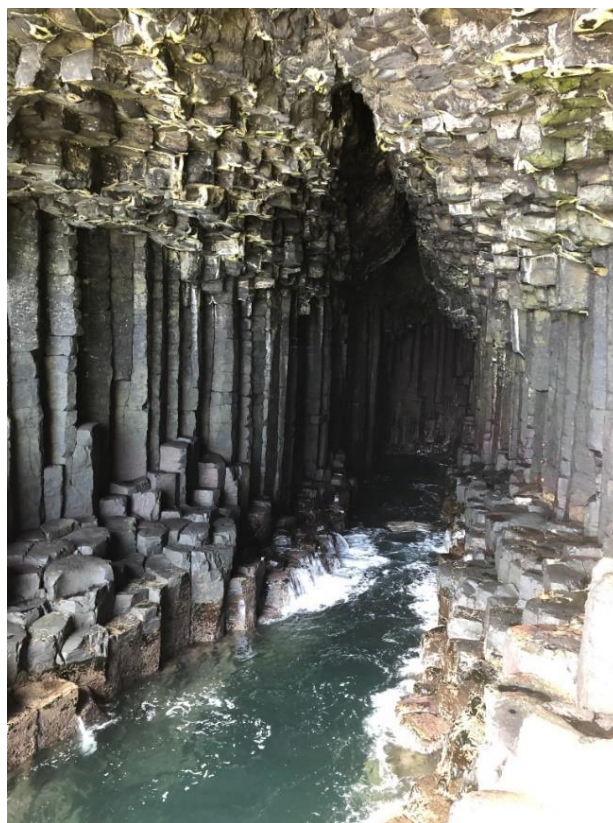
*Descending Neptune's Staircase*

I left Spellbinder at the excellent Linnhe Marine, a large mooring field sheltered by Shuna Island. I returned a few days later with friend Crispin to explore the south side of Mull and further west. Stopping back in Oban to replenish stores, we sailed down past Loch Spelve where we bought mussels, before sailing on along the coast to find the delightful and well-hidden Tinker's Hole. It wasn't too crowded, and we enjoyed the company of two other yachts, with whom we socialised and cruised in company for the next couple of days, taking in Iona, Staffa and the Treshnish Islands. The latter two were still full of puffins, who were virtually tame. We also had a good look into Fingal's cave on Staffa. After a night in Tiree, we headed south and anchored firstly in Laphroaig, then Lagavulin Bay on Islay – you can see what attracted us – before a longish sail down into Belfast Loch, where we tied up in the very central Abercorn Basin at the heart of the city. Having been there in a professional

capacity in less happy times, it was a joy to stroll around what is now quite a vibrant place, and the adjacent Titanic Centre is well worth a visit.



*Tinker's Hole, with Spellbinder in the foreground and Iona top left*



*Fingal's Cave, Staffa*



*Up close and personal with puffins: on Staffa, with Spellbinder behind*



*Anchored in the Treshnish Isles...*



*...and Lagavulin Bay, Islay*



### *Sailing into the heart of Belfast*

My next crew were Neil and Clare, and we decided to cross the North Channel and tie up against the harbour wall at Portpatrick. In the right conditions this is a great place to come, and we nestled amongst the nesting guillemots as the tide came and went, with Spellbinder just touching the bottom at low water. After exploring the village, we set off the next day for Strangford Loch, enjoying a pleasant cruising chute run across and timing our entrance to make the most of the flood, which catapulted us through the narrows at almost 12 knots SOG. We found the Down Cruising Club very welcoming, and a member lent us his buoy for a couple of days as we explored the area. The tides are very strong, but it's well worth venturing into the loch, and on the way out we visited Strangford and Portaferry opposite, before heading up the coast to Glenarm marina, where we enjoyed walks in the Glen and visited its castle. A passage back north into the Clyde followed, and we explored Lamlash and Holy Isle in Arran before the next crew change, which was to take place at Ardrrossan.

Spellbinder had been performing well, but I had been having autopilot and wind indicator problems, so decided to make use of a short break from the cruise to arrange for both to be replaced. The original 2006 Raymarine kit had served its purpose, and I upgraded to the latest versions.



### *On the wall at Portpatrick...*



*...not enjoying the final result of Euro 21...*



*...but our neighbouring guillemots cared not*



*A strong but fair tide heading into Strangford Loch*



*Upper reaches of Strangford Loch, and the Down Cruising Club  
(Spellbinder on a buoy in the middle)*



*Antrim in July: some things never change*

By now it was the end of term, and Sue re-joined me along with friends Johnny and Lucy for a week to explore the Clyde. First stop was Little Cumbrae, where we anchored overnight near seals on rocks, allowing us to visit Great Cumbrae and walk around the island the next day. The Kyles of Bute followed, and we anchored in the delightful Caladh Harbour, with half the crew walking and the other sailing the next morning, with a meet up planned at Portavadie for lunch to celebrate Sue's birthday. We then sailed up Loch Fyne, anchoring in Loch Gair for the night and then heading up to Inveraray, to visit the town and the Duke of Argyll's castle and to gain views down the loch. Our trip down Loch Fyne took in East Loch Tarbert, which has a marina in a beautiful setting. Before heading back to Ardrrossan, we took in more of Arran, staying in Brodick and Lamlash and enjoying some fine walking.





*Anchored off Holy Isle, Arran – looking back at Lamlash*



*Eilean Dubh, in Caladh Harbour, Bute*



*My crew enjoying some fine sailing in Loch Fyne, near Inveraray*

I left Spellbinder in Ardrossan once more (it's quite convenient for Glasgow Airport) before returning to do some single handing – firstly to Loch Ryan overnight, then down the east side of the Isle of Man, to Douglas. Here I got through a Covid paperwork inspection, and enjoyed a couple of days exploring the island, before heading back to Whitehaven for a final crew change.



*Single handing into Douglas, Isle of Man*



*Calf Sound: southern tip of Isle of Man*

Jonty re-joined me and we had a fabulous descent of the Welsh coast, sailing through windfarms to get to Beaumaris for the night, before negotiating the Swellies at the required HW Liverpool -2. Docking into Caernarfon, we enjoyed the Castle and Royal Welsh Yacht Club, which is within it. Thereafter we negotiated the Caernarfon Bar and took in three of the most notorious sounds – Bardsey, Ramsey and Jack – as we passed by Abersoch and Solva. A great sail across to Lundy followed. Owing to the easterlies we anchored in the lesser-known Jenny's Cove, dragging the dinghy above the high-water line and clambering

up the cliffs to the Lundy plateau, and enjoying a great supper at the Marisco Tavern. Padstow followed, heaving with people ('this lot are usually in Benidorm' quipped the harbourmaster) before we rounded Land's End once more, popping into the more familiar cruising grounds of the Helford River and Falmouth. We took in an Ocean Cruising Club rally in the latter, before a long motor back to the Solent against some light easterly winds, which had been blowing for weeks, it seemed.



*Out of the Swellies, and under Britannia Bridge*



*Caernarfon*



*Dawn departure from Abersoch: Snowdonia in the background*



*Solva. We anchored outside and dinghied into this fabulous harbour*



*Jack Sound. I was pleased to have transited three notorious passages – Bardsey, Jack and Ramsey*



*The wonderful Jenny's Cove, on the west side of Lundy. Quite steep cliffs to climb up though*



*Padstow. Nearly home*

It was a fun cruise – over 2500NM in all, taking in many iconic places on the cruising sailor's bucket list. I was surprised that more south coast yachtsmen didn't decide to do the same; apart from a few east coast sailors, who had come up via Inverness and the Caledonian Canal, I met few out of area yachts, and only a couple of foreign-flagged vessels. Strange times, but we made the most of them. On the whole the weather was quite benign, although cold in June, and we made quite a lot of use of the yacht's Webasto heater, including on midsummer's day! But the scenery and wildlife were magnificent, and our four nations – each of which had different approaches to the pandemic - offered a great deal. It was good to explore home turf.