

“About Time” Summer 2011 Orkney Trip

Work and leave dictated for 2011 that May was available for an extended trip and as we have normally gone in July/August time we thought it would be good to listen to some of the experienced holiday sailors who have said May and June is the time to go. Steve’s “Melady Fair” is presently laid up whilst Steve spends time on degree study, so over refreshments we hatched a plan for myself Steve and Jill to holiday in Orkney. Tombs, Ancient Monuments, history and wildlife. There is no doubt that Orkney is the place to get all that. We had hoped for a bit of decent weather as well.

Whilst seafaring, I had a short spell on the North ferries and had visited Stromness and Kirkwall but it was the Lossiemouth organised 2008 trip north which really whetted my appetite for the Orkneys and their associated history. At school my limited attention picked up that the Vikings visited occasionally. Famously a raiding party near Gamrie were supposedly beaten off by the wild women, and I’m sure that was not the last time the Gamrie quines had a wild outing! This indicated that the Vikings rowed and sailed across from Norway picked up there ill gotten gains and headed on back over the North Sea. Orkney 2008 lit an interest in me for our history of which I certainly had little interest in at school. Past is past and only present and future were important in those days. This realisation that the Vikings were well ensconced in Orkney made me do a bit of reading and research and when you finish up realising that King Harold, blinded and beat at Hastings in 1066, was of Viking descent and was beaten by Willie the Conqueror who was of Viking descent and apparently according to Magnus Magnusson Old Harry and his boys were beat because they had hot footed from Stamford Bridge and were tired, having just whipped the behinds of another raiding Viking bunch who had landed at Hull. Well there was only one thing for it but to return to Orkney and walk the way of Rognvald, Magnus, Cubbie Roo and of course Svein, my he was a lad. The Gamrie quines would’ve struggled with him but probably wouldn’t have chased him away. Apparently one of Svein’s summer cruises down the west coast found them in Dublin where they raided 2 vessels. One with yards of material and the other with fine wines etc. After the raid they sailed home with the material colourfully sown into their sails and the fine wines consumed. They can’t remember their homeward passage but named it their “Cloth Cruise”. In this day and age it would be frowned upon, with Duncan Pocket there on Stromness pier with the breathalyser and it would be known as the booze cruise. So with 2008 a distant memory and all this reading under the belt we returned for more prehistoric tombs, Viking doings and of course May and June is Puffin time.

We sailed from Whitehills on Friday 27th May heading North for Stromness into a short, awkward, corkscrew chop, you know, the one which makes you think, do I really like this? But as always, things improved and we sailed on until, with a deteriorating forecast, an increase in the wind and the final straw being the rain, we altered to the North West and decided that Wick would be our first stop arriving at 10 past 8 in the evening.

The pontoons in Wick are a joy with their decking size, depth and space. Malcolm Bremner the harbourmaster said there were wild days in winter with the pontoons not being accessible but no serious damage which answers questions we raised at the opening in 2009. Malcolm said the only problems they had were the parting of ropes by chafe and snatch from boats lashed tight to the pontoon fingers. The boats which had been moored with lines on both sides effectively holding the vessels off the fingers survived virtually unscathed. A visit to the Museum was worthwhile, again, positively a Tardis of a building but with great insight to Wick’s past. Stock up from the shops, with the essential visits to Weatherspoons and a walk around the headlands, but there is only so much time you can spend in Wick.

Monday morning finally gave us the clearing of the Friday night low pressure and we headed North round Noss head with a wee swing into Sinclair bay to avoid offshore flood tide and past

Duncansby with the tide now well into the ebb. We crossed the firth and rounded the South West corner of Swona and although with boisterous eddies “Tails of the Tarf” the day was fine and nothing the boat couldn’t handle. Safer route or less boisterous would’ve been to pass North of the island and in less benign conditions would be the route to take. We entered into Scapa Flow via Cantick Sound and West Weddel Sound and made directly for Stromness arriving after a 6 hour run on sail with a fair bit of engine time as well.

Stromness, Kirkwall and Lerwick all have narrow, squiggly main streets but each have their own character. For me the first time I walked the Stromness Street I was taken by that feeling of closeness, community and history. As you sail into Stromness you see a small town but look into the past and you find a port that was the jump off point for many explorers and traders who found the North route less hazardous than the English Channel. I am sure there were other reasons but if you consider the Hudson Bay Company formed in 1670 had by the late eighteenth century $\frac{3}{4}$ of its workforce of Orcadian decent and at one point the largest landowner in the world, Stromness is not such a small place. Even Captain Cook and Sir John Franklin stored up in Stromness although the new Coppy wasn’t open at the time.

I never mentioned that we headed North hoping to catch the Orkney Folk Music Festival which we even discovered is largely centred in Stromness although not exclusively. The musicians were getting out of town as we came in. Never mind, there’s always another year. We even missed getting our internet connection in the Ferry Inn as they closed on the Monday either for post festival re-build or planned re-furbishment. Anyway for those without a dongle (sailing technical term) the Ferry Inn and the Stromness Hotel both have wireless which you can use to access mail and weather forecasts. The Stromness Hotel, which we used, only has wireless in the Whisky Tasting Room upstairs due to the old solid stone walls, what an excuse. There may be other reputable establishments for a connect if required !!

So having downloaded mail, visited the wee book shop, and had a general lazy day we hired a car on Wednesday for the prehistoric tour. Scara Brae which like many of these sites littered around Orkney is well worth return visits. Trying to get your head round how long ago and the length of



time these establishments were occupied is enough to make your brain nip. The last time I was here we were going by bus and decided to miss out on Skaill house so this time we thought we had better take the time if we wanted to be proper tourists. It was an interesting historical house which

filled a lot of gaps surrounding the discovery of Scara Brae. There was also a lot of information regarding the family and their lineage. I suppose a bit of interest in how the other half live but also the history of land ownership in that part of Orkney which tied into how the land had changed hands from the time of the Vikings. On to Marwick Head and Lord Kitchener’s monument erected by the people of Orkney in memory of over 640 men, including Lord Kitchener, who lost their lives in the sinking of the HMS Hampshire, 12 others survived. The sun was out and the wind was light and it was glorious to be walking with the larks singing overhead. As interesting as it was to see the monument up close instead of an onshore identifiable mark from seaward, the sea cliffs, bird life and pounding surf was fantastic. Only 1 Puffin.



Next was the Brough of Birsay across the causeway from the car park and a quick look at the Viking settlement before onward in the search of Puffin. There were none. But it was a glorious day and a lazy walk among the rock pools on the way back to the car was pleasant. Onto to the Broch at Gurness which was another time period again and by this time we were beginning to get tombed

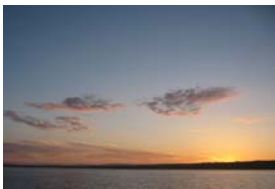
out. We used the car to do a clockwise tour of the mainland to get back to Stromness and put the feet up.

On Thursday it was a bus to Kirkwall for more shopping and ancient monuments. The cathedral is a must but if you go watch out for or speak to the custodian about tours of the upper parts. For us this was one of the highlights of our Orkney trip. On return to About Time we decided it was time to move on and with various considerations for Graemsay and Hoy we departed Stromness.



Graemsay pier is only half an hour across the sound and we went ashore for a look. That didn't take long and would be a nice stop off for a quiet day away from it all. We had a chance to see the water surging through Burra Sound between Graemsay and Hoy and considered that a night on the pier on Hoy was not an option as was Graemsay pier when the tide turned, so back across Hoy Sound and dropped anchor in the middle of the bay of Ireland to the East of Stromness. There was some comment about "It's great when a passage plan works out"!! We had a quiet night

there getting ready for an early start to catch the tide out of Hoy Sound.



Well we got up early and caught not only sunrise but the red glow from the rising sun spreading across the highlands of Hoy in a clear morning sky. Times like that are special although I got the feeling that the crew weren't as enthusiastic about the early morning as I was. Hey Ho and off we go. I didn't think the rapids were too rough and the for'd bunk had dried by night time. For'd hatch in ventilation mode wasn't the best idea for hurtling out of Hoy Mouth with ebb tide under an incoming westerly swell. My comment is usually "Pay money for a fairground ride like that!" the crew were still unimpressed with the 0400 start! The passage from Hoy Mouth north past Bay of Skail, Marwick Head and into Eynhallow sound was uneventful, although uncomfortable. The seas and sky on the other hand were alive with bird life and we had a small school of Dolphins heading south who stopped their journey to say hello. The crew were speaking to me again once we entered Eynhallow Sound with the sun pointing to a nice day. The disappearance of the corkscrew motion and a few ZZZ's in the cockpit probably helped their disposition. The flood tide into Eynhallow gave us 13.2 knots over the ground in flat water with sails up and engine on. Better than I had the last time I came out their on an ebb and what "Fantastique" had a few days later. Mairi and Neil's description of their passage is not repeatable here.

By nine o'clock we were all fast across the end of Wyre pier with not a soul about except for a few ducklings and mum for company. Lazed in the sun for a bit as it was coming up for a cracking day then it was bikes out of my bunk to go and visit Cubbie Roo but he wisna in. Cubbie Roo was Orkney's mythical giant who was obsessed with bridge building but he dropped all the stones which now form the various skerries around the Islands. He was so big that he used the Islands as stepping stones, therefore the question is why did he bother trying to bridge build. But the castle named Cubbie Roo's castle on Wyre was built by Kolbien Hruga around 1145 and is one of Scotland's oldest stone castles. After a spot of lunch we nipped over to Egilsay where I was caught up in a little maintenance but Steve and Jill managed to check out St Magnus's Kirk and had a look for the spot where Lifolf, Earl Hakon's cook slew the soon to be St Magnus. With the tide ebbing, a breeze getting up and the water below the keel disappearing we didn't stay too long at Egilsay. Apparently

there is more water on the shore side of the inner pier but it looked as though local fishing boats were using that so there was nothing else for it but to motor back around the corner to tie up for the night on Rousay pier at Trumland.

We had hoped to take a bike ride to the south side of Rousay where there are many Broch sites but the Saturday morning weather forecast was favourable for North Ronaldsay which was one of our targets for the trip. Milk was low so a wee bike ride to the shoppie was called for before departure. After around 2 ½ miles to the North the answer to my question as to where the shop was, the kind gentleman pointed to a clump of trees up on yonder hill, nearly called for binoculars to see it and he said Marion should be in. On arriving she did come out to open up especially for us and a great wee shop it was. They practically had a market garden in their poly tunnels. After the 6 mile round trip for the milk, we used cushions in the cockpit for our sail up through the Sound of Eday on route to North Ron as the locals call it. It was a good sailing day and although we were fairly close with our timings for tides, the use of the engine to round Little Green Holm Island against the tide showed what a fickle, tidal, dangerous place the Orkneys could be.

We crossed from Rousay to the south side of Eday and then altered north through Eday sound with a wee detour through the Calf Sound. Fish was on the menu for supper but they were still swimming and playing with their mates as we made north. An hour with the rods off the north point of the calf of Eday and we had a large Codling and a large Pollock with many Saithe. Steve was on galley duty and 'T' was absolutely delicious.

Passing North of Sanday we made across North Ronaldsay Firth towards South Bay North Ron. In the middle of the firth we came upon a large shoal of Dogfish on the surface. I was sure they were on a mating ritual like the Playing Stones Banff on a Saturday night as they certainly weren't too interested in us or my lure which I cast. At one point I reversed towards a group and they were bumping off the stern of the boat with that look of, "Where did that big white thing come from". We also noticed what looked like purple spawn. On return to Banff Ian from North 58 gave the best guess of mini jellyfish and although we couldn't see a feeding frenzy it appears that that may well have been the doggies attraction and not the seductive snake of a dog girl's tail. Anyway onwards to South Bay and a pier to moor on to with an audience of seals to mark our tie up performance. The morning brought the most surreal sight of the North Ron sheep grazing at the low tide mark amongst the seals with neither party being too concerned about the other's presence.

Having arrived on the Saturday night, Sunday was the day a special ferry was running for inter island tourists/visitors. As we intended going ashore and the dingy was yet to be inflated we opted for a Mediterranean moor to the pier end as the ferry was to occupy the wall where we had tied up. The moor was successful and allowed us to leave the boat and cycle the length of the island visiting Dennis Head Lighthouse where the guided tour to the top of the 179 steps, I think, and with breath returned we got a history lesson from the lighthouse keeper, a view of Foula, Shetland, Fair Isle and Islands to the South. We speak of the clean fresh air we find on the water and some of these places we visit but did you know that a past activity was the burning of kelp and they believe that unknowingly at the time they were releasing arsenic into the air and this was blamed for the high incidence of miscarriages which happened on the island during that period. On Sunday night we joined the residents of the bird observatory for refreshments and evening meal of North Ronaldsay Mutton, twas delicious, and as we headed to retire for the night we decided in the freshening Easterly breeze and the lee side rocks close to hand that anchoring would be the better option.



After a quiet night at anchor in the middle of the bay, "Red Admiral" with Tom and his pal from Findhorn had bagged the only visitors mooring, we upped early and set off for Papa Westray. Early

was 0700 as I could tell there might be a mutiny if I suggested 0400 again but 7 was good for the tide and in proper rain we crossed to the west and had a peek into the old pier on the East coast of Papa Westray. It is a well sheltered although shallow bay except from the South East with 1 visitors mooring in a 3.5 metre deep hollow. Bay access would have been restricted by tide, for our 1.8 metre draft, but with the rain and grey day we decided to opt for Pierowall on Westray. The remainder of Monday we took stock and looked at our plans for puffin hunting and going to Papa Westray or Papay as its known.

So with our homework done we opted to take our bikes on the small ferry across to Papay and do the whole island which could've easily been done on foot. There was another museum at Holland farm, the Knap o' Hower possibly older than Scara Brae, the RSPB site on the North of the island also including the place where the last Auk was shot making them extinct and another wee community shoppie with a help yourself 'T' room where you just leave your money in the plastic box. As I said to the lady, "Isn't trust a wonderful thing". The evening and low tide offered the opportunity to go Queenie hunting. I gave up when trench foot started to set in but in any case I didn't have the knack of the other two. When the harvest hit the plate and belly the following night done with onion and garlic in butter and white wine, they were delicious.



Tuesday and with a hire car from Dorothy we headed in the search of puffin and find them at Castle o' Burrian we did. They really are well worth searching out and plain to see why they have star status in the sights to see around our coast. Beaches, tracks and Noup Head light house were all seen with the use of Dorothy's car. The car even allowed us to get fish and chips for supper from the new fish place. As twilight started to descend and the car only in use until the morning I decided another visit to the puffin's to see them coming home from a day's fishing had to be done. I was on my own on this one. Early mornings and late nights didn't seem popular. So back to the Castle o' Burrian and it was well worth the trip. I was amazed how unafraid the little fellows were even in the glare of flash from my camera. Steve claims that I probably blinded them and they couldn't see me.



Dorothy's car was re-delivered unscathed and we departed Pierowall sailing in a stiff breeze back to the Calf of Eday. We cut through the sound and crossed to Kettletoft on the south side of Sanday. Steve and Jill checked out the charred remains of the torched shop but we opted for the night in Whitehall, Stronsay. Depth of water and fishing boats at night meant space would have been limited in Kettletoft for a deeper keeled boat. Tom and pal were there but with a bilge keel were fine further up the pier. Whitehall was just for the night and we took off again the next morning in glorious sunshine and motor sailed to Kirkwall.

As we had already been in Kirkwall a couple of times we just took it easy although the fitting of a new engine start battery almost tested the folding bike to destruction. "Dil Se" the local curry restaurant and carry out was one of our reasons for return and they duly delivered that evening. Saturday was easy and with the forecast for the coming week not being conducive to holidays or a return trip south we decided that it was time to go and 0600 Sunday we cast off from Kirkwall and started a 14 hour trip back to Whitehills. It would have been 13 but we stopped and caught mackerel and a haddock for our lunch somewhere east of Wick. Again the culinary king came up trumps with mackerel rubbed with a curry paste, drizzled with lemon juice and tin foiled in the oven.

The weather was good for our sail south with the altostratus of the coming low pressure high up to the west heralding the reason why we came home on the Sunday. James Cowie came north to meet us which was a nice touch to sail the last few miles home in local company.

Locations visited:

Wick, Stromness/Mainland, Graemsay, Wyre, Egilsay, Trumland/Rousay, South Bay/North Ronaldsay, Pierowall/Westray, Ferry to Papa Westray, Kettletoft/Sanday, Whitehall/Stronsay, Kirkwall/Mainland

Distance GPS 307 miles

Distance through water 289

Time at sea not including anchor 56 hours

Engine Hours 41 hours

George Craigen "ABOUT TIME"