

Wild Cat Heads West

We had bought Wild Cat, a fin keeled Sabre 27, in November, and after many cold weekends commuting up to Inverness, we had worked through the items raised on the surveyor's list plus all the extra bits you always seem to find when you start a job. At last we were ready to leave. Our test sail had been cancelled, when, whilst trying to extricate ourselves from the inside of 3 boats, our gear linkage had failed in-gear and we had rammed another boat. Fortunately it was a massive old wooden fishing boat, the owners had been too stoned to care, and our massive bronze stem-head fitting and anchor had absorbed the blow with no damage to ourselves.

We didn't fancy the long exposed trip down the East coast in a new boat, and with the Forth and Clyde canal now well and truly tested, we could explore the much more interesting West coast without the need to go the long way round. So after much planning, on the Thursday before Easter, Kathy and I set off, with our crew Karin, on the train for our trip down the Caledonian Canal. With the two bank-holidays, this would give us plenty of time to enjoy the scenery, and the weather forecast was for fine spring weather. Having stocked up on food, fuel and water, we set off around lunch time bound for our first overnight stop at Drumnadrochit, half way down Loch Ness, closely followed by a flotilla of Cabin Cruisers on hire for the week. The trip was un-eventful, with the engine working flawlessly. We even had a short trial sail on the Loch, where we found a few niggling things with the set-up, but she was otherwise fun to sail and light on the helm. On arrival, we worked our way down the narrow entrance channel and finding no easy berth we came alongside a good looking long keel boat. About ten minutes later, as we were contemplating a beer to celebrate our first days sailing the owners appeared from no-where and started berating us, telling us in no uncertain terms that we could not stay there and must move. We thought this rather odd behaviour as yachties are generally a friendly bunch, but not wanting a fight we cast off our lines and moved to a very narrow spot right in the entrance to the harbour. As soon as we had moved they disappeared, and were not seen again. They certainly weren't staying on the boat. Shortly after, a flotilla of charter boats arrived who all seemed to have been trained by the dodgems school of sailing, and we spent an anxious half an hour while they bumped and shunted past us and around the harbour, until

they were all wedged in like sardines, at one end.

In the morning, we took our time and were careful to avoid the cruisers. We sailed most of the way up to Foyers, where we moored up and took a stroll up the hillside enjoying the warm spring weather and the beautiful scenery. After lunch we then headed up to Fort Augustus, where we discovered that the promised shower block had not yet been finished, so we all washed in cold water on the pontoon. We also encountered a second flotilla of charter cruisers, whose Tennents consumption far exceeded their fuel consumption, and who hadn't quite grasped the idea that boats don't have brakes. Their idea of mooring up was to approach the pontoon, or preferably another boat, at 90 degrees and at full speed, then run onto the foredeck and hope for the best. How the boats and pontoon survived is a mystery to me. Unfortunately, now being in the canals proper we ended up in a convoy with these boats for most of the remaining trip. On a number of occasions we thought we would be sunk without trace, only to be saved at the last moment by a daring lock keeper, who would wrap 6 turns around a cleat, at lightning speed, then hang on for grim death in order to stop them ploughing through the other ten boats in the lock like a bowling ball at a skittle alley. Whilst moored up at Laggan locks, the highest point of the trip, we were to discover another of their nasty habits. We had stopped well away from the other boats and were enjoying a pleasant evening when a large cruiser came in and moored about 10 yards in front of us, then proceeded to leave his engines running, destroying the peaceful evening and filling our fore-cabin with fumes. By ten o'clock we were getting decidedly fed up with this, so Kathy headed over to ask them if they would turn them off. "We have fridges you know" was all they said before turning around and ignoring us. They didn't turn them off until 10:30 and they were going again by 7:00 in the morning. We were furious! The next day however, we were relieved to see that the Tennents swilling cruisers returned to their base and we were left to ourselves for the remaining few miles along the foot of Ben Nevis, which stood majestic against a clear blue sky, and up to Banavie at the top of Neptune's staircase. Wild Cat was to be left here for two weeks until we returned for our two week holiday to complete the rest of the journey back to the Forth. An hour after we arrived, the skies which had been clear since February, clouded over, and the rain started to fall. It was excellent timing, but our luck with the weather was about to run out.

Two weeks later we arrived back at Banavie. Back at home we had been anxiously watching the weather forecast as low after low hurtled in off the Atlantic, and we hoped for a break in the weather that would get us down to Crinan. The lock keeper helped us down Neptune's staircase, but would not allow us into the sea-lock basin, as he had a large number of fishing boats heading in from the Atlantic due to the bad weather. Things did not look good. Our 30 day canal license was rapidly ticking away and we were stuck in a decidedly damp Fort William. VHF reception is non-existent here, so every morning we would get up for the 5:30 weather forecast on radio 4, then go gloomily back to bed. At 8:00 we would then ring the Coast Guard for a longer range forecast. By the fourth day we were starting to give up. The latest gale had blown through but the forecast was still SW5-6, which would be dead on the nose for the next 30 miles, and we had yet to sail Wild Cat on the sea. We rang the Coast Guard and after giving the forecast she asked where we were headed for, as she was getting used to us ringing in. When we said Dunstaffnage, she said "Well, it's now or never, there are storm force winds due tomorrow evening". On those words we sprang into life. If we left now we would make it to the Corran narrows for high water, so Kathy ran down to the lock keepers cottage, who rushed us down the last two locks and out onto the sea.

It was rather daunting to leave the shelter of the canals, but it also felt good to be on our way again. We had planned the route over and over again during the winter months, but our vision of blue skies and fair winds, which would allow us to enjoy the scenery and explore, had been replaced by menacing skies and strong winds. It was now definitely a delivery trip not a holiday. The first stage down Loch Linnhe was uneventful and after 2 hours of motoring we approached the Corran Narrows. The tide had just turned in our favour and looking through the binoculars the sea looked rough with white horses beyond, however, as we approached we realised it was no worse than the Forth on a breezy day and we passed through with no problems. Wild Cat seemed to be enjoying the salt water. As we crossed Ballachulish bay we picked out our first foul weather opt out of Kentallen Bay, which looked very enticing, but we were making good progress so we pressed on. Shortly after we managed to get a radio check from the Coast Guard, which made us feel a lot happier, as there were no other boats in sight.

As we pressed on down the Loch things were starting to get a little bumpy. Past Rubha Mor and Eilean Balnagowan the Loch opened out, with the wind increasing to SW5/6 and the waves increased to about 4/5 feet high, but by staying in close to the shore and steering round the worst of the waves we were able to keep our speed above 4 knots. Shuna, our second opt-out option was soon in sight, however we were still making good progress and spurred on by the weather forecast, which was still predicting storm force winds for the following day, we pressed on. We were also hopeful that once past Port Appin and into the Lynn of Lorne, Lismore would give us some shelter from the strong winds. So far the days navigation had been easy, just a matter of watching the log and ticking of the bays, but the next bit was a little more challenging. When you sit in the comfort of your own home during the winter, planning your route it is very difficult to visualise what it will look like, and the black and white photographs of the pilot book did little to help. In reality though our planning paid off. Despite the leaden skies and rough seas, the rain held off and Sgeir Bhuide light was easily discernable from the shore behind, followed by the jetty at Port Appin, then the green buoy off Appin rocks. We were glad of this though. Instead of the winds easing they were now being funnelled down between Lismore and the mainland and had increased to a good force 6. The seas became confused and steep, where the South going tide, accelerated through the gap, met the North going waves. We looked longingly at the white painted houses on the shore and wondered what the people inside would think of us if they looked out of their windows. Despite having the engine on full throttle our progress had now slowed to a snails pace. We would heave ourselves up and down two waves then slam into the trough at the bottom of the third, throwing an icy wall of water right over the spray hood and into the cockpit. Alton Towers had nothing on this.

It took us the best part of an hour to claw our way past Branra Rock, our next waypoint, barely one mile past Appin rocks, and although the seas were less confused we were now getting late on the tide and were starting to lose the small advantage it had given us. We kept plugging on and shortly after were passed by the first boat we had seen that day. It was a local fishing boat or ferry and despite being several times larger than us, and hugging the coast, was making heavy going. Half an hour later, as I emerged from below with more chocolate to keep us going I asked Kathy if she had noticed the boat that was a short distance

ahead of us. In her tiredness she had thought it was the boat that had passed us earlier, but in reality it was a completely different boat and it was heading straight for us!

It felt like Rubha Fion-aird would never come but it eventually did, and once clear of the rocks we turned the corner and headed for Dunstaffnage. Free from head winds for the first time in 6 hours we accelerated forwards and despite an awkward quartering sea we were soon ushered in by the friendly staff and tucked up safely on a pontoon. It had been one of the hardest days sailing of our lives, but Wild Cat had not let us down and we were on our way at last. The sailing was to be short lived though, for as forecast the following evening we were hit by storm force winds, which tried to sail Wild Cat off the pontoon under bare poles. We were well tied on and came through the night OK, but others were less fortunate. We awoke the following morning to find one boat sunk and several others with considerable damage. With the gales set to continue for the next few days, and the section of our journey including a passage of the Dorus Mor, which by all accounts would make the trip past Port Appin look easy we decided to head home and wait for good weather.

After almost a week of weather watching, it finally looked like the ridge of high pressure we had been watching would make it all the way across the Atlantic, and give us favourable winds for the leg down past the Dorus Mor and into Crinan, so on Tuesday afternoon we met our crew Andrew 'Lardy Arse' at Glasgow Queen Street station and caught the train up to Oban. We had hoped that we might be able to get off early that evening and spend the night anchored at Puilladobhrain, which would break the trip up and make our arrival at the Dorus Mor a little easier to predict. As it was, we stepped off the train to find a good force 6 blowing a sea of white crests. Andrew was losing confidence in our abilities fast! After stocking up at the supermarket we headed back to Dunstaffnage and decided to run the engine to make sure things were still OK. After a few minutes everything seemed fine so we wandered down to the end of the pier to see if the sea had eased any. As we turned around to head back we suddenly noticed white smoke pouring out of the exhaust. Something was wrong with the engine. If we couldn't get it fixed we would miss the weather window and be stuck there for who knows how long. A quick check of the cooling system showed it to be fine, but turning the engine over by hand there was no water coming out the sea water

inlet pipe. Removing the pipe from the sea cock I found a plug of weed, but still no water came out so we tried scrubbing the outside of the boat with a broom but to no avail. Our next attempt was to ring up the dinghy pump and try blowing it out with compressed air. This helped slightly but the sea-cock would block up again almost instantly. It was gone 8 o'clock by now and any chance of making an early start had disappeared, so Andrew headed off to the pub to eat while Kathy went in search of a bigger pump. A few minutes later she reappeared with the owner of a very large and fast Catamaran who had sailed up from the South coast for the Islands peaks race, however even his enormous barrel pump could make no impression on the blockage. There was nothing for it but to remove the sea cock valve. Our engine water sea cock is a large version of the conical type you normally find on toilets, so it was with some trepidation that I removed the screws and withdrew the valve. I needn't have worried because nothing came out! After poking round with a screwdriver for several minutes and removing small quantities of weed our new found friend asked if we had a piece of wire that we could bend to hook the weed out. We had just the thing in the shape of a piece of welding rod that the paraffin lamp hangs from and this fitted down the hole perfectly... until I found that it had passed through the grill on the outside and I now couldn't get it back out again. We were floating in 7 meters of water had an open hole in our boat and couldn't put a bung in it even if we did clear the weed! Just at this moment Andrew reappeared to find the boat in complete turmoil and me quietly having a nervous breakdown, so he rapidly retreated to the pub, vowing never to go sailing with us again. Fortunately our new found friend calmly stepped in and using brute force and a pair of pliers managed to prise the wire out, but we were back to square one and resigned to having to be craned out the following morning, miss the weather window, sell the boat and give up sailing forever. Fortunately Kathy decided to have one more go with the broom and with a Herculean effort, practically immersing her whole body from the waist upwards into the icy water, she managed to clear the weed and I hurriedly put the valve back in. It was 9:30 at night and the inside of the boat looked like a disaster area, but all of a sudden the trip was back on!

The following morning dawned fine and clear with a perfect NW4/5 blowing. We were all too exhausted to rise early and head off, but the weather was set fair all day so we had a

leisurely breakfast and headed off at 9:30 with the intention of having a easy trip down to Puilladobhrain on the last of the ebb, where we planned to relax until the afternoon ebb, which would take us down to Crinan. We motored down through the sound of Kerrera enjoying the sunshine and scenery for the first time. Once out of the narrows we hoisted sails and decided to really try the boat out. We tacked, gybed and heaved-too, doing all the things you read about in the boating magazines, and for the first time really appreciated how good a boat we had bought. She was no longer a boat to motor from A to B. She was a proper sailing boat.

Our stomachs were now telling us it was time for lunch, so we crossed the bay and motored into Puilladobhrain. The narrow anchorage was very quiet with only a handful of boats but they were all very much larger than us. This was to be a regular theme during our time on the West coast, however on this occasion at least we were to have the last laugh. After a leisurely lunch of home made spaghetti Bolognese with the odd glass or two of red wine, we calmly pressed the button on our windlass to raise our anchor, while they sweated away on the foredeck, heaving theirs up.

The trip South from Puilladobhrain passed largely without incident. Having motored out into the Sound of Insh we hoisted sail and were once more flying along on a broad reach. The weather report indicated more bad weather was due over the next few days, so we opted for the direct route past Fladda and down the sound of Luing. With clear blue skies and fair winds it was easy to see why some people call this the most beautiful cruising grounds in the world, but then thinking back to our earlier experiences, you can understand why few people sail here. With full main and 6 turns in the jib, we were soon past Easdale Island, Bono Rock buoy, then Fladda light and into the sound of Luing. As we passed Ardluing point we were all very keen to look across at the Gulf of Corryvreckan, that source of so many sea-faring stories, but our thoughts were soon turned back to the route in hand. Looking forward towards the Dorus Mor with the binoculars, the sea was boiling in a great wall of white water, forming a barrier right across our route. We had left the anchorage slightly earlier than planned to make sure we did not miss the tidal gate, but now we were starting to regret that decision. The GPS was saying that we had 6 knots of tide under our keel, so we couldn't turn around even if we wanted to, especially with the following wind. There was nothing for it but to press on. As we

approached Coiresa rock we found the source of our concern. The sea was boiling in 3 foot high spouts of water and there was a decidedly eerie feeling about the place which showed the power of the sea, however the underlying surface was flat, and with the engine on idle, just in case, we coasted through. The Dorus Mor was now dead ahead. The currents there were powerful and even appeared to be flowing in the opposite direction very close to the shore, but after the previous panic this held no fears and we even gybed half way through. After that it was just a short sail across the bay to Crinan where we picked up a visitors mooring and headed ashore to the boat yard for showers and a wander around the yard, which was full of beautiful old wooden boats in various states of renovation, each no doubt with many tales to tell. Once clean we headed down to the hotel for some liquid refreshment and a wonderful dinner of fish stew.

The next day of our trip was spent traversing the Crinan Canal and heading down to East loch Tarbet. We rose early and made sure we were tied up in the lock in time for first locking at 8:00. The night before we had contemplated spending the night tied up in the lock, which was left open to the sea over night, but were glad we hadn't as the air was damp and the guy in the boat next to us complained that the noise from the water spilling over the top of the gates had kept him awake most of the night. There was a short delay due to hydraulic problems with the gates, but we were soon under way again. After a short break at Bellanoch Marina for showers we were just preparing to head off when a yacht came flying round the corner and started waving and shouting Wild Cat at us, then headed off. We caught them up at the next lock, where they explained that they were from Port Edgar and knew our boat when it had been moored there. They had brought their boat Silver Darling over from the East coast and were heading for the Clyde for a few days before heading south for Palma. They had six crew and we were very pleased to be able to share the work of operating the locks. This was our first experience of manual locks.

We were soon to regret this as in the first lock. They failed to tie their boat up properly and we were lucky to get away with no damage when their aft line came free and the stern of their boat shot violently across the lock missing us by inches. After that, despite being little more than half their size, some devious manoeuvring on their part meant we were forced to the front of the lock each time and we re-named them the WIMPS! Despite a large crew they also did little to help with the

locks and even made us wait while they had lunch in one lock, so we were very glad to arrive at the sea lock at the other end before last locking. After that it was just a short 10 mile sail down to East Loch Tarbet. The weather was starting to deteriorate, but it was great to be back on the waters we had sailed during our Day Skipper course back in '98, and we arrived tired but happy at 18:00

The following day the gales returned but we were happy to take it easy, and spent most of the afternoon avoiding the rain and playing pool in the Victoria Inn. Our holiday was drawing rapidly to a close just as we were starting to enjoy it, so we decided to see if we could find a berth in the Clyde for a while. They had a spare pontoon at East Loch Tarbet, but the travelling for a weekends sailing would have been too much, so after some more ringing around we found that the visitors moorings at Rothesay were only £80/month. It was an offer too good to refuse.

The following morning dawned dull and windy but we had arranged to drop Lardy Arse in Rothesay to catch the ferry home, so we left the pontoon at 9:00 and motored down Loch Fyne with the visibility varying between several miles and 100 metres. As we rounded Ardlamont Point the visibility improved and we saw, in the distance, a fleet of dinghies racing off Tignabruaich. As we ran down the West Kyle however, we suddenly realised that it was in fact a fleet of at least 50 racing yachts beating towards us. There then followed almost half an hour of none-stop collision avoidance and it felt more like chess than sailing, trying to work our way through the boats and having to plan our route several boats in advance. We had barely made it past the last boat when it was time to kiss the three old ladies good luck, then head off between the Burnt Islands and into the East Kyle.

On my last trip through the Kyles, playing at skipper for the day during our Day Skipper course, we had hit strong head winds on entering the East Kyle and I had had a bruising time at the chart table as we tacked our way up the narrow loch with two slabs in the main. As a result I felt rather nervous as the wind came round onto our nose as it whistled through the narrows. In our old Snapdragon we would have been in for a testing time, so we started the engine and pulled in first reef while we worked our way past the ferry. Once clear of the dangers we cut the engine and with first reef in the main, three turns on the Jib and a balanced helm we were flying. It seemed a fitting end to 2 weeks of triumph plucked from the jaws of defeat.

In Rothesay we dropped 'Lardy Arse' off to catch the ferry home, found ourselves a mooring and tidied up to head home. We had said before we started this trip that if we made it home we would be able to call ourselves proper sailors. We hadn't quite made it home yet, but it was near enough. It was sad to be leaving Wild Cat for a while, but we now had a summer of sailing in the Clyde to look forward to, before heading home.

And what a summer it turned out to be. There were certainly many more adventures to be had, but that's another story...