

## From Troon to Loch Melford via a Wedding

“Craobh Haven, we have a problem ...” I unconsciously said in my best Astronaut American

It was only afterwards that I realised how absolutely Apollo 13ish it had been! After all, Loch Melford, our destination, was about as different to the moon as Craobh Haven Marina was to mission control in Houston. No doubt some psychiatrist would say that I’ve secretly harboured a hidden wish to say the words for years, but he would have been wrong. The words I would have really liked to say was “beam me up Scottie and get me out of here.”

Thankfully, unlike Apollo 13, when the world was listening, the exchange on channel 37 on a Saturday afternoon probably went unmonitored, except for the manager at Craobh Haven marina. We did, however, have a problem of sufficient magnitude to terminate our first serious cruise and to put the boat out of commission for 6 weeks.

The main objective of our first cruise had been to get the boat from Troon Marina, where we had bought it, to a mooring in Loch Melford, which we hoped to use as a base for summer cruising. However, when our niece invited us to her wedding on Easter Monday in Northern Ireland, we decided to make a slight detour to our planned excursion round the Mull of Kintyre to take in Belfast Lough on route.

For those who have never been in the area it’s worth noting the tidal variances between Greenock, Belfast and Oban, the three cruise areas, are quite significant, yet distances between them short. Belfast tide times are virtually the same as Dover; Greenock is of the order of 0130 hrs later with Oban a massive 0530 hrs earlier. With such variances it is hardly surprising that there are some pretty fierce tides around and passage planning can often be quite tough. Luckily for us, our passage plan was easy – we had only one option apart from the back-up P&O ferry.

It was only one option because the tidal problems were minor compared to a number of other constraints. Of greater importance was the crew, (Mary) who was not due back from Romania until midday on Saturday, the 26<sup>th</sup> March; if we were going it had to be the following day, Easter Sunday. As we did not know the boat we wanted to make the 65 NM passage to Carrickfergus Marina (on the north shore of Belfast Lough) in as much daylight as possible, though the spring tide would be foul most of the way. Whilst this was not a significant problem in the Clyde (0.4 knots) the North Channel was a different prospect (4 knots in places). Our original plan, to take the boat to Loch Melford via Carrickfergus and the Mull of Kintyre was tidally insane so the best (and possibly only) option was a return trip to Troon. This would at least give us the advantage of being able to dump our wedding gear in the car before resuming our cruise. But by far the biggest constraint on our passage plan was getting to Mary’s Mum’s house by 2000 on Easter Sunday for a roast beef dinner, and with the clocks going forward that morning it meant a very early start!

With the rough passage plan sorting itself, the next thing was to commit this to a real route, and here the laptop with charting software was invaluable. We decided to go offshore of Ailsa Craig and avoid the entrance to Loch Ryan as we didn’t want to test the HSS ferry collision avoidance procedures or experience its horrendous wake. The software predicted that, as we were crossing the N. Channel tides, their impact on us would be marginal, and although I didn’t believe it, in practice the tides were not as severe as I’d imagined, but not as optimistic as the software calculated ones either.

Although the laptop and route planning software was running all the passage, we never really used it in earnest, instead relying on downloaded waypoints manually loaded into the boats GPS and large scale Imray charts of the area. This gave us three completely independent systems and I had my hand held GPS if things went seriously AWOL. I had also invested in a NASA Clipper GPS cockpit repeater connected to the boats Garmin GPS, and it was invaluable particularly after Mary stood on the autohelm early on the first day and broke the mounting bracket, rendering the system useless. As a penance she had to steer the boat manually for the rest of the trip.

However, all this planning would have been in vain if the weather wasn’t with us, so we avidly accessed any form of broadcast and web based forecast available and were more than pleased with fair weather and E to SE 2-4 winds predicted for the first few days. In my experience such forecasts have meant that the Met Office are hedging their bets as they really haven’t a clue as to what the winds are going to be but the weather is going to be reasonably OK. The patchy wind experienced during the cruise confirmed this viewpoint as there was rarely sufficient wind to meet our passage needs, but the forecast was sufficiently positive for us to decide to make the trip as soon as we got to Troon.

For those interested in the actual log it is printed as follows, with the **Log** being the mechanical propellor driven log readings, the **Compass** being the magnetic heading we followed, with Speed Over The Ground (**SOG**) coming from the GPS. As you can see, we had to rely heavily on our Iron Sail to maintain the SOG, which took a hard knock against the tides in the North Passage. If you plot it you can also see the northerly tidal influence in the North Channel. By the way, with the weather settled we did not consider taking pressure readings.

Passage log – Troon Marina to Carrickfergus Marina					
27/03/05 Tides: Spring tide, HW Greenock 1427 BST HW Belfast 1247, HW Dover 1256					
Time	Comments	Wind	Comp	Log	SOG
0620	Slipped moorings Troon Marina	E1	-	22.4	5.2
0630	Left Harbour 55° 32.720 4°40.573	E1	260	22.8	6
0655	Off Lady Isle	E1	230	25.4	6
0720	Autohelm damaged – manual steering				
0730	Lights off, 55° 30.320 4°48.257	E1	230	28	6
0830	Set Genoa 55° 26.105 4°55.329	NE2/3	230	33.3	5.7
0930	55° 22.204 5° 02.000	NE2/3	232	38.4	5.7
1030	55° 17.883 5° 08.200	NE3	231	43.8	6.1
1045	Engine Off!! Course change, N. Ailsa Craig	NE3	211	44.9	5.6
1135	55° 12.322 5° 012.335	ENE3	211	49	5.6
1145	Engine on				
1230	55° 07.900 5° 16.699	NE2/3	211	53.7	6
1305	Engine off				
1330	55° 02.532 5° 22.74	NE2/3	211	59.4	5.6
1345	Engine on				
1432	54° 58.733 5° 27.196	NE2/3	211	64.5	5.6
1530	54° 55.212 5° 33.408	NE2	211	69.7	4.5
1630	54° 50.499 5° 37.408	E1	211	75.5	4.8
1725	54° 46.482 5° 39.997 Course change – Belfast Lough	0	201	81.1	5.8
1810	Course change	0	215	85.8	6
1835	Course change 54° 42.204 5° 48.029	0	310	87.9	5
1850	Secure, Carrick Marina				

Our return to Troon was on Wednesday, 30<sup>th</sup> March, with another early start. We made some subtle changes to our route, which included passing within a mile of the entrance to Loch Ryan running east of Ailsa Craig. This, we thought, reduced our exposure to the tides in the North Channel but the worst of the foul tides was surprisingly just off Loch Ryan. The wind, which was supposed to be SE 2/3 never really materialised except for the last 6 miles, when it was a good NE4 on the nose. We passed a Sadler 34 that was sailing well, and we were tempted to follow suit to rid ourselves of the incessant thump of the engine but we were cold and hungry and kept going under power for the last hour arriving 90 minutes before the Sadler. Our log is as follows:

Passage log – Carrickfergus Marina to Troon Marina					
30/03/05 Tides: HW Greenock 1618 BST Belfast HW 1448, HW Dover 1432					
Time	Comments	Wind	Comp	Log	SOG
0620	Slipped moorings Carrick Marina	0	143	88.1	5
0630	Changed Course, Marina outer mark	0	57	89.4	6.1
0720	54° 44.831 5° 41.357 Off White Head	E1	031	93.6	5.8
0820	54° 50.111 5° 36.276	0	031	97.7	6
0920	54° 54.481 5° 29.027	0	051	103	5.8
1030	54° 58.340 5° 22.642	0	051	108.1	5.1
1120	55° 01.700 5° 16.450 Off Loch Ryan	0	051	113.5	4.5
1220	55° 05.780 5° 10.960	N1	036	119.2	5.3
1320	55° 10.383 5° 06.521	N1	035	124.2	5.6
1430	55° 15.104 5° 01.818 Past Ailsa Craig at last!	N1	036	129.3	5.8
1525	55° 20.672 4° 56.737	N2	035	135	6
1620	55° 25.322 4° 52.406	ENE2/3	036	140.1	5.8
1720	55° 29.781 4° 47.747	ENE4	036	144.8	5.8
1745	Off Lady Isle	ENE3	065	147.1	5.8
1838	Engine off, secure Troon Marina. Get the drinks in!!	NE2/3	211	150.3	5.6

The next morning we got off to a lazy start, leaving the pontoon at 0955 for Ardrishaig and the Crinan Canal with the visibility very variable. The winds were light but with no real hard schedule to meet we determined to sail as much of the trip as possible, and with our laid back day the log is equally laid back. We eventually arrived under power at Ardrishaig at 1740, having run out of wind a couple of hours earlier.

Passage log – Troon Marina to Ardrishaig (Crinan Canal sea pontoon)						
31/03/05 Tides: HW Greenock 1657 BST HW Dover 1515						
Time	Comments	Wind	Comp	Log	SOG	
0955	Left Pontoon	S3	-	150.3	-	
1015	Sails up!!		307			
1055	Engine on – to avoid tanker.					
1108	Engine off					
1110	55° 35.035 4° 59.788 Sunny!! Vis 10 M	E1/2	307	154.5	4.4	
1250	55° 39.842 4° 47.097 Engine on, Vis. 0.4 M	S1	325	162.0	6.2	
1355	55° 44.951 5° 08.082 Vis 1 M	S1	320	168.0	5.1	
1510	Engine Off Vis 1.5 M	E2/3	321	-	5.1	
1540	Engine on	SE1				
1600	55° 52.880 5° 21.931 Vis. 1.5M	SE1	350	177.7	6.2	
1740	Secure Ardrishaig pontoon outside first lock gates					

Friday, 1<sup>st</sup> April was seriously no joke – we rose at 0700 with force 6 winds and light and persistent rain, gradually changing during the day as the wind decreased and the rain got heavier. Our task for the day was to attempt to clear the Crinan Canal by 1600 hours for the start of the North bound tides through the Dorus Mor, the tide ripped channel to the west of Loch Crinan. We started early, as soon as the canal staff was available but it was not to be. Pre-season maintenance, slippery patches around the locks dumping us on our oilies as we tried to push open the gates and one stubborn sluice put paid to all our efforts; we therefore had a leisurely 22 hours waiting for the tide, eventually leaving the Crinan canal basin and into the wonderful west coast cruising grounds at 1520 on Saturday 2<sup>nd</sup> April - a day later than planned.

With no wind we motored through the Dorus Mor, which ran foul even close to slack water at about 1.4 knots, and out through the rocky islets aiming for the channel between Luing and Shuna, marvelling at the wonderful scenery. We had just passed north of Toberonochy when a welcome F3 southerly came out of nowhere. Fantastic, I thought, a decent sail before we moor the boat for a while, and we hurriedly unrolled the Genoa, but as I put the engine remote into neutral prior to shutting down there was a strange clunk from below. Stupidly, I re-engaged forward gear, and from below came a mechanical clunking of a severity that I have never experienced before and never want to do so again. I seriously thought that the gearbox had disintegrated and at any moment flying bits of metal would materialise at great speed through the cockpit floor. I hastily disengaged and shut the engine down, put Mary on the helm and left the boat to sail gently while I investigated.

Surprisingly, there seemed to be little wrong when I uncovered the engine and gearbox, but on further inspection 5 of the 6 bolts securing the prop shaft to the gearbox had come loose and dropped out, leaving just one bolt in place. When I had engaged forward gear the two flanges had shook violently together, and the ensuing damage, although not immediately evident, was extensive. In a short few seconds the drive shaft had bent, taking the cutlass bearings with it, the P bracket was loosened and the engine mount adjusters bent.

The violent and extensive motion of the shaft in the stern tube was, however, the main problem as the sideways motion was sufficient to crack the moulding securing the tube in place and we had a leak. Not an extensive, mindbogglingly worrying, call the coastguard, launch the liferaft leak but nevertheless one that would sink the boat if left unattended. We therefore had to get to a place where I could get the boat lifted out as soon as possible and thereafter fixed, and this had to be available that weekend. I could not think of anywhere other than Craobh Haven, just 3-4 miles away, hence my call.

After putting the loose bolts back into the connecting flange and testing that we had some engine drive I went and joined Mary for the best sail of the cruise across the north of Shuna and to the outer mark of Craobh Haven, racing and beating a Sadler 26 in the process. Our patched up drive was sufficient to get us into a visitor berth, and over the next hour, under the supervision of the yard engineer, we monitored the leak. We worked it out that if we pumped the bilges every hour we could keep the boat afloat, and this is what we did overnight, until the boat was lifted out the next morning.

The repairs took about 6 weeks to complete, and it felt like the longest 6 weeks of my life. Since the incident I have heard of several other shafts separating from the gearbox problems, including one where the whole lot disappeared through the stern tube. It's therefore wise to check the tightness of these bolts now and again, but a word of caution. In the case of the Volvo Penta 2003 couplings the bolts are secured in place with Locktite, never a practice I promote, and tightening them could break the seal.

In terms of lessons learned, we learned that we can never have a big enough bilge pump, and most of those fitted to boats today are just about enough to pump out small spillages and will not do anything for a serious leak. We also failed to

record our position so that if we did need to call the rescue services we would have had to stick to “about a half mile NE of Toberonochy,” or, of course, “Beam me up Scottie!” The log for the day is short and reflects this:

<b>3/04/05 Tides: HW Oban 1453 BST HW Dover 1928 BST</b>					
<b>Time</b>	<b>Comments</b>	<b>Wind</b>	<b>Comp</b>	<b>Log</b>	<b>SOG</b>
1520	Exited Sea lock into Loch Crinan	0	320	191.7	5
1540	Engine off	SE2	320	192.7	3.8
1610	Engine on	0	320	193.9	5.8
1615	Dorus Mor	0	320	194.4	4.3
1630	56° 08.761 5° 38.137 Course Change	0	342	195.5	6
1645	Course Change	0	10	197.2	5.8
	Approximate situation				
1725	56° 13.2 5° 37.3 Engine incident - sailing	S3			
1830	Secure – Craobh Haven				

**Good sailing**

**Howard Williams**