

Wildcat Heads around Scotland via the 3 canals 2019



Thursday 30th May Brucehaven to Port Edgar

With a month off it was time to move Wildcat to Port Edgar to ensure we could leave on trip with a favourable tide. David was single handing her but got a rope around the prop when attempting to leave Limekilns on the way to Port Edgar. Pud came to the rescue; towing D back into the harbour and we went on our trip on the next tide in the dark. Oh well at least we had got our bad luck out of the way hopefully!

Saturday 1st June – Port Edgar to Anstruther 28Nm

An uneventful motor to Anstruther, tying up in the outer harbour (next to a friendly fisherman) ready for an early start to head around Fife Ness as soon as the tide lifted us.



Sunday 2nd June – Anstruther to Stonehaven 50Nm

Our body clock is amazing as K woke up minutes before the 0330 alarm! We departed at 0415 and there was just enough light to pot spot the numerous pots around Fife Ness. We motor sailed and then sailed in a SW F4/5 but the visibility was poor meaning all we saw after Fife Ness was a single fishing boat and Bell Rock lighthouse (a mere 2 ft of foundations and still standing 200 years later (well done Robert Stevenson)). Kathy was feeling cold and a bit sick so disappeared below for a 'short break' after the Bell Rock, only



to reappear 4 hours later when the seas got rough as we approached Todd Head with the tide changing south against the wind and waves. She had no wellies, so had been wearing sandals which were no help for keeping warm as the seas regularly dumped over our rear quarter with water repeatedly swilled around the cockpit. This was to become a standing joke throughout the trip with the weather only improving once when she bought some in Largs at the end of our trip. We were glad of the AIS



transmit function on our new chart plotter, but our ever reliable autopilot was playing up in quartering seas and would periodically send us hurtling sideways across the waves so I had to resort to hand steering. We were quite relieved when Dunnottar Castle finally appeared followed shortly after by the shelter of Stonehaven harbour. The

sun than came out on our arrival at 1315, with the breeze freshening further; a sign of the gales that were to follow overnight and the following day. We tied up in the outer harbour (doesn't dry) and had a snooze then later enjoyed a lovely fish meal at the Tollbooth restaurant on the quayside. We doubled our mooring lines up ready for the



forecasted gale and planned a day off to walk the dogs. Good shelter was afforded. NB Investigation of the autopilot issue later in the trip revealed that in placing the AIS aerial on the pushpit it was too close to the autopilot and its broadcasts were causing interference. Some further investigation and a pole for the aerial will be required in the future.

Tuesday 4th June – Stonehaven to Whitehills 70 Nm

We departed in the dark at 0215 having sussed the local pots out in the daylight. We were planning to go to Peterhead, however knowing we had a break in the incessant rainy weather we hoped we perhaps might push on around Rattray head to Whitehills which is what we did (our longest passage to date)! The wind was SW / SE 3/4, not enough to push us along at a reasonable speed, so we motorsailed passing busy shipping and the windfarm at Aberdeen. The sea state eased and the sun came out as we rounded Rattray head and we were glad of the friendly Whitehills HM shifting a wee fishing boat in the outer harbour to squeeze us onto the pontoon when we arrived at 15.15 (nice for the dogs so they didn't have to be hauled up long ladders using their lifejackets and a rope!). The harbour was packed full of local and visiting yachts with good facilities and the village is quaint with a lovely pottery housed in an old chapel.



Wednesday 5th June – Whitehills to Lossiemouth 22Nm

A relaxed morning after the previous day's long sail. We watched a couple of large boats leave and come back in saying that it was too rough. We had a chat with them and then decided to give it a go as Kathy needed to get to Inverness for a work trip to Shetland! We headed out at 1215 with the other boat owners coming to watch on the pier head! As we left the very sheltered harbour we motored into very rough seas – Wildcat (and us) were thrown around but the new engine pushed her through. We motorsailed into a NE 4/5 averaging 6 knots and arrived at 16.15. It had been a sea sickness inducing wet trip with water regularly coming into the cockpit to soak us yet again. From the leeward cockpit seat the waves were higher than Kathy's head as they rolled in on our beam. Lossiemouth is a large marina but lacks depth particularly at the entrance which, when the swell is up, which is worrying.



**Thursday 6th June – Lossiemouth to Clachnaharry sea lock, Caledonian Canal
37 Nm**

We weren't looking forward to leaving Lossiemouth harbour entrance as the waves were still coming in, the entrance is shallow and you need to leave around low water to allow time to sail up to Inverness and ensure that you arrive before it turns in the narrows there. We decided to leave at 0610. We waited for a lull in the 1m swell and then shot out as fast as possible, thankfully not hitting the hard sand bottom! The sea state steadily improved in the NE 3/4 as we sailed West and sea was flat calm by the time we arrived at the narrows at Fort George. We were overtaken by a couple of larger boats who had been berthed alongside us in Lossie but we all locked in together @1210. We stopped at Caley Marina for fuel, bringing



back memories as we had bought Wildcat from there in 2002 and spent much of our first winter on her there working through the list of jobs from the survey. We stopped again after the swing bridge so that we could walk in to Inverness to get some shopping and grab some dinner, then carried on to

Dochgarroch where we stopped for the night, a beautiful spot with wisps of mist on the water.

Friday 7th – Dochgarroch to Laggan Locks

We departed at 8am, in time for first locking and were soon motorsailing down Loch Ness in beautiful sunshine, eating breakfast. We arrived at Fort Augustus around lunchtime and added our name to the queue for locking up straight after lunch. Whilst we waited we hinted for a tour around a Victoria 34 which was up for sail, but were ignored – clearly we were not the right sort of buyer for a blue ensign flagged boat! Kathy nearly got the barrier on her head at the road bridge when the lock keeper started playing Guns and Roses at full blast. There were hordes of gongoozlers at the lower end of the flight, but these thinned out as we climbed higher and by the top Loch Oich was quiet. The bar on the Eagle barge at Laggan made a relaxing stop for a drink before dinner - the food also looked lovely but we had already lit the barbeque.

Saturday 8th – Laggan Locks to top of Banavie

The week was starting to catch up on us so we had a lazy start, not leaving until lunch time. The weather was stunning and a gentle breeze wafted down the Great Glen from the North East. Having locked through, now heading down hill at last, we were able to pole out the genoa and enjoy a stunning run almost the entire length of Loch Lochy, for the first time in the whole trip we no longer needed to hurry. Somehow we managed to outpace the Victoria, which had started out just behind us. The surrounding hills swathed in purple heather. We arrived at the top of Neptune's Staircase by 4pm with 2 days to spare on when Kathy needed to be in Inverness; amazing considering the weather. The top of Ben Nevis was unusually clear of cloud and provided stunning backdrop to our pontoon berth.

Sunday 9th to Thursday 13th – Neptune's staircase

David stocked up on supplies, worked, serviced the engine and finally managed to find spanners big enough to tighten the leaking stern gland which had been filling our shallow bilges with water for the whole trip so far, whilst Kathy travelled to Shetland to work for a couple of days. The wind was blowing hard from the North East with rain and showers. We learnt later that there had been gales around Oban for much of the time that we were stopped so our break had been well timed.



Thursday 13th – Banavie to Dunstaffnage 28nM

Kathy arrived back in the early afternoon on the Thursday. Traffic on the Canal was quiet, so the lock keepers agreed to take us down the staircase with another beamy metal hulled yacht flying the Stars and Stripes. Chatting to them on the way down it turned out that they kept the boat in Anstruther. As the tide had recently turned south in the Loch Linnhe we decided to carry straight on out to sea, despite locking out at 5pm. We had a relaxing and uneventful sail down to Dunstaffnage, arriving at 9.30pm. So much more pleasant than our first trip through here 16 years before, when we had had to battle down in a force 6 in our 'new' boat; the only 'calm' day after a long period of gales followed by a force 10 the next day.

Saturday 15th – Dunstaffnage to Loch Aline – 15nM

We had planned to carry on south to Ardfern but changed plans when we remembered regretting not visiting Loch Aline on our first trip up the Sound of Mull



two years previously (when we had found Tobermory to be overcrowded and rather spoilt by the hoards from the cruise ship anchored in the bay). Loch Aline turned out to be the complete opposite; great facilities with peace and quiet... (Editors note: we are writing this now staying in an Ardtornosh Estate cottage at the head of the Loch which we had found on an evening walk from the pontoons).

Sunday 16th – Loch Aline to Salen, Loch Sunart – 22nM

In the morning we decided to keep moving north just a little bit more to explore Loch Sunart, but the tide wasn't turning north in the sound until the afternoon so we motored to the north end of the loch and dropped anchor so that we could have a wander around the estate.

Sailing out of Loch Aline against the tide was not difficult. Unfortunately, heading up the Mull the wind was once again too close to our nose to be able to sail so we motor sailed up and around the corner into Loch Sunart where we were able to turn off the engine and sail properly for the first time on our holiday. The scenery was wild and beautiful, reminding me of photos that I have seen of the Norwegian coast. There is quite a bit of rock dodging here but it is well worth it. We took the passage north of Risga, which is narrow but easy to navigate. We were flying along in the NE 3/4 and

were reluctant to stop by the time we arrived at Salen. You can book a space on the pontoons there, a good job given how remote they are. They even came out to take our lines. We exchanged some of our veggie curry for some mackerel with a father and son who had a bucket full after a day out fishing on their boat. They had rung their other halves back in Fort William claiming that they had missed the last ferry, so they had an excuse to stay for another day! If you want a drink at the hotel there don't arrive at 8.55pm. They will have already closed for the evening.



Monday 17th – Salen to Loch Aline – 22nM

It was time to start heading south. The wind was increasing again and was back up to SE 4/5. It was a lumpy motorsail back to Loch Aline. We had planned to anchor and go to a classical music concert at Ardtornish House in the evening but we were wet and tired by the time we arrived so opted for the easier option of the pontoons.

Tuesday 18th – Loch Aline to Kerrera – 14nM

The weather for the coming days was looking unsettled so instead of a trip back to the Clyde via Gigha, Rathlin and the Mull of Kintyre we decided that the holiday element of our trip was more important and opted for the easier Crinan Canal route. We managed to sail most of the way in a steady S 4/5, which made for a lumpy sea around Lady's Rock at the south end of the sound. We arrived just after 11am as the Lord Nelson tall ship was leaving. We took a



wander along the island and discovered a new farm shop selling their own meat eggs and veg.

Wednesday 19th June - Kerrera to Ardfarn - 25 nM

Despite wanting an easy life we decided to a bit more exploring on this passage. We left just after 6 and headed down the Sound of Kerrera and through Easedale Sound, a narrow rocky passage. Clyde Cruising Club have improved the marks here making life rather easier than the pilot book suggested. From here we headed for the Cuan Sound; an excellent dogleg short cut which avoids a potentially rough passage through the Sound Of Luining but which itself has a strong tidal flow. The pilot book is full of warnings and shows pictures of a rapid change in water level around the rock



at the turning point. We found 5 kn to flow with us at mid tide, but the surface was flat and we had no trouble navigating through. We were really grateful that we had relented and fitted a chart plotter as it gave us a bit more confidence that our eyeball navigation was correct and we were able to visit places that we had previously avoided. It was a bit

lumpy between Shuna and Luining, but we were safely tucked up in a berth by 11am – it turned out next to James Allen (CEO of RYA Scotland).

We spent two nights here walking the dogs. The Crafty Café had been recently demolished (soon to be rebuilt) but the lovely village shop is great for re-provisioning. Our time was spent guiltily planning our move to a bigger boat; after 17 years of sailing Wildcat we were starting to find our ever expanding cruising grounds incompatible with spending several weeks in a relatively small space.

Friday 21st June – Ardfarn to E.L.Tarbert via Crinan canal 27nM

The new system of passing through the Crinan Canal requires a booking to be made 24 hours in advance. In reality when we arrived at 0830 the sea lock keepers really didn't seem to be bothered. We were glad to transit with 2 other boats who had paid for assisted passage. D helped with the locks leaving K to skipper and throw the ropes up – crew required next time as this proved hard work especially with tennis elbow! We departed Ardrishaig at 1530 for a lovely sail down Loch Fyne and ended up berthed next to one of the boats who had nervously waved us out of Whitehills in stormy seas which they had turned back from. They were glad to see we had made it in one piece! The new showers are very posh compared to the old portacabins.

From there we hopped our way across the Clyde to our new mooring for the remainder of the season at Cardwell Bay Sailing Club in Gourock, calling at Port Banatyne and Largs (to see a Nic 35).

From the end of June to September we sailed almost every weekend meeting many cruisers with the aid of the Facebook Sailing and Cruising Scotland group and Cardwell Bay sailing club. We enjoyed exploring the North Clyde's long lochs (Loch Goil is stunning and well worth a visit despite being shadowed by the police launch around the submarine base) and bought a new larger boat (Nic 35) to be based in Tignabruich to enable us to explore the South Clyde next year. We now need to sadly come to terms with selling Wildcat which has been such a sea kindly boat enabling our family to explore Scotland and Ireland and their wildlife over the last 17 years. One last trip to get her home; through the Forth & Clyde canal.....

Saturday 21st – Sunday 22nd September Gourock to Kirkintilloch via Forth & Clyde canal 36 nM

We departed our Gourock mooring with sadness having met lovely people in the club and with trepidation about the potential limited depth and weed problems looming in the Forth & Clyde canal due to its lack of maintenance and its closure last season. We lowered our mast at Bowling and set off with 2 helpful crew early on Sunday morning. The journey went surprisingly well – there were areas where we bumped over shallows proving that 1.5m draft is as deep as you'd want to try and push through this canal. Weed problems caused the water intake to block and the prop to foul requiring the use of the outboard we always brought for this trip (having transited on 7 previous occasions with similar problems!). We were then trapped in the Dalmuir drop lock due to weed confusing the complex system of sensors but were released after a couple of hours! We tied up at the Stables pub, Kirkintilloch ready for a hearty pub meal and relieved that the journey had gone quite well feeling more positive about the onward journey to the Forth next weekend. The Scottish Canal staff and volunteers couldn't have been more helpful.

Friday 27th – Sunday 29th September Kirkintilloch to Limekilns via the Kelpies 35 nM



The 20 locks from Kirkintilloch to the Kelpies are easier than the 20 locks we had done from Bowling because you are locking down so the water is calm. The journey went well and we enjoyed overnighting beneath the lit Kelpies. On Sunday morning we went down the new Elizabeth canal to the sea lock to step the mast. Maintenance issues in the canal had to remind us one last time that proactive maintenance is so much needed as the sea lock sensors failed preventing us from entering. This was eventually fixed when yet again a Supervisor had to drive over and deal with the issue. The mast was stepped and we left the sea lock into the Carron which was very high due to a big spring tide. We left with sadness as the canal is an interesting and great asset to Scotland but we will not be transiting again due to the new boat being too deep a draft. We had a lovely sail down the upper Forth back home to Brucehaven and watched the club boats setting off to return from the Blackness dash. We tied Wildcat up for the last time having completed a circumnavigation of 540nM – she'll get some TLC this winter readying her for a new owner and another 50 years. So deserved!

