

## After Kirkwall

Ron and I had decided, after sitting for 3 days in Kirkwall drinking and getting ripped off by an Indian restaurant, to go home on the Bus-John O'Groat Ferry-Bus and return when the wind was in a more favourable direction.

So, after locking up the boat and making our farewells, we took the bus from Kirkwall to This is a desolate place with only one boarded up house and the modern ferry terminal. The ferry to John O'Groats was not in sight and as the wind was getting up to near gale force, we were wondering if it was still running. After 15 minutes the ferry appeared through the mist and spray, battling its way across boiling seas. Passing the treacherous Lowther Rock, it slipped calmly alongside the jetty, using a bow-spring to stay tight to the wall. There were only half a dozen passengers and the same number of crew but no-one was allowed outside on the upper deck.

We set off and headed due west for what seemed to be a very long time before turning south. The tide was ripping east at full flood so we made a diagonal course across the Pentland Firth to arrive at John O'Groats. The skipper was very good as the boat did not wallow very much although the waves were sometimes breaking right over the top of the boat.

This was a very different Pentland Firth from the one we had crossed 10 days earlier and showed we were very lucky in our earlier passage.

Arriving safe and sound, Ron and I boarded the bus and had an uneventful journey down to Inverness.

Planning the return to Orkney was then a matter of watching the weather charts and waiting for a favourable wind.

I was pleased to hear that Fat Sam, Tunnag, Kismet and Norseman had arrived back safely via Wick and met with them to get the benefit of their experience on the passage past the Pentland Skerries. I managed to persuade Bill, without too much arm bending, to help me crew.

At last the wind turned from the south west and was forecast from the south east. I contacted Bill and Ron and we arranged to return to Kirkwall by the same route, which this time was a much more pleasant journey. The plan was to sail through the day and night to make the journey from Kirkwall to Cromarty in one go.

After advising the coastguard of our plan, we set off from Kirkwall the next morning an hour and a half before the tide was due to turn and motored through the String on the last of the foul tide. There was hardly any wind at all and the tide turned, exactly as predicted, when we half way to ?????.

Still motoring, we rounded Mull Head and headed for Copinsay. On the shore just south of Mull Head, Ron pointed out a large abandoned yacht that was lying on a rocky beach at the bottom of steep cliffs. Just after that, Ron said excitedly that he had spotted a whale but on closer inspection it turned out to be a porpoise. Needless to say, after that every other small object floating in the water became a whale. After passing the magnificent cliffs of Copinsay, the wind started to pick up the predicted south east wind and put up some sail. I then noticed that the water temperature was at the top of the gauge and stopped the engine. We took off the engine cover to find steam and Bill pointed that the header tank cap was loose. We continued sailing south south east and passed the Pentland Skerries at the recommended distance of 6 miles and with very little disturbance. The tide was favourable giving us a good speed over the ground.

Just south of the Skerries, Ron popped his head out from the cabin and spotted a pod of killer whales about half a mile of our stern.

We were about a mile north east of Wick harbour when the wind started to die. So, off came the engine cover and we filled up the fresh water system now that the engine had cooled. Fingers crossed, I started the engine and settled down to watch the temperature gauge.

All too soon it reached maximum again so the engine went off before any more damage could be done. After losing the engine, we realised that the wind had also disappeared completely and so we were drifting with no means of propulsion just as the tide turned to flow north again. Thank goodness I had fitted the new VHF radio in Kirkwall before we set out.

A decision had to be made. Should we wait for the wind to return and drift north on the tide, hoping it would take us no closer to the shore or call for assistance to be towed into Wick. Always believing discretion is the better part of valour, I swallowed my pride and made the radio call. In hindsight, I suppose I should have issued a PanPan call but I contacted the coastguard and requested a working channel. After switching to channel 67, I made a request for assistance and gave all the normal information for a Mayday or PanPan, plus my sail number. After clarifying my position, which I did from the GPS, I was asked to stand by while the Wick lifeboat was contacted. The coastguard called back to say the lifeboat was on its way and to go to channel 12. We switched and waited. Before long the lifeboat was spotted leaving the harbour and we heard the coastguard tell him we were a mile north east of the Wick. I radioed to tell the coxswain that we were by that time 1 mile south east of the harbour entrance. We were spotted and identified very quickly as I had left the main sail up.

The lifeboat came alongside and threw a heaving line to Bill on the foredeck, who then pulled across a good length of stout towing rope.

This was made fast and we were towed astern towards the harbour, taking down the mainsail as we went. Two hundred yards off the harbour entrance the lifeboat took us alongside for the final part of the passage to a berth at the old fish market. After thanking the lifeboat crew they left immediately and we were greeted onshore by 4 people from the MCA. I told them our story, which made it into the Press and Journal a couple of days later, and they confirmed my identity on the small boat scheme database.

A week later I returned to the boat with Bill where we took off the heat exchanger and exhaust manifold. I had them pressure tested and a new inlet welded onto the heat exchanger. We also fitted an outboard bracket to the stern for just such an emergency, something which I had been meaning to do for 5 years.

The end of the saga came two weeks later when Bill and I went back to Wick and refitted the parts. We set off from Wick early morning as the tide turned and motored to Clyth where the wind backed sufficiently to enable us to sail home to Cromarty without further incident.

Any lessons learned? I was glad to have the VHF working properly. I suppose that I could have waited a bit longer before calling the coastguard to see if we were in imminent danger but how close to the rocks do you have to be before you do? On balance, I do not regret my decision, even though many people have pointed out my new notoriety. At least the boat has grown from 25ft to 30ft, according to the papers.

Gwyn Phillips