

Kirkwall to Inverness

Tom contacted me because he had trouble getting crew to bring back Baccarat to her home berth in Inverness Marina. We had originally planned to fly to Kirkwall in late October but the very active weather systems, large areas of low pressure with high winds and driving rain, had delayed departure until mid November.

Eventually, a window of forty eight hours appeared in the three day weather forecasts so the tickets were rebooked for the next Tuesday morning. Inverness Airport was almost deserted when we arrived and after a wait of an hour we boarded the small aeroplane with a handful of other passengers. The flight to Kirkwall was short and uneventful with the airport being even quieter than Inverness.

There was not a taxi for hire outside but a call saw one arriving within ten minutes and then a short ride through town to the marina where Baccarat was tied up at the farthest pontoon. The first task was to tidy up the boat and make ready for sea, after which we walked towards town and ate some lunch in the first café. Back aboard, it just remained to wait until 5pm for the tide to turn in the Spring, a narrow passage through which it was difficult to make passage if the tide was against you.

Becoming restless, we decided to leave an hour earlier and fight the last of the tide. So Tom fired up the engine and we motored out of the harbour into a north easterly wind. We put up both main sail and genoa before rounding Thieves Holm, into the String, and, although we slowed down, still made reasonable progress on the last of the ebb tide. Night fell as we passed Rerwick Head, and turning further south, we were able to sail and switch off the engine.

The sailing improved as the the wind freshened, first on the beam, between Rerwick Head and Mull Head, and later on the quarter, as far as Copinsay. Steering slightly west of south, known technically as west by south, it became more difficult, with the wind almost dead astern and no spinnaker, for the long leg towards Wick. Half way down South Ronaldsay, the wind started to back into the north which forced us to veer towards the island until we were too far off the planned track and had to gybe. Now heading south east, the Pentland Firth came into view and I spotted what I thought to be the Skerries, although the light on it seemed to be flashing four times irregularly whereas the chart said it flashed three times. Confused for a while, it eventually became clear that the Duncansby Head light, with one flash, had been directly behind the Skerries.

Not wishing to head too far offshore, we gybed again and headed straight towards the bright red lights on the aerial masts near Wick. Luckily, as we neared the coast, the wind backed further into the north west and freed up the boat to sail straight down the coast, aiming for Tarbet Ness. Unfortunately the wind kept slowly backing so that by the time we had reached half way across the mouth of the Dornoch Firth, we were beating into it. The boat became very heavy to handle so, while I steered, Tom put a reef in the main and everything became much easier.

Sailing fast and well, the Sutors came near but by this time, the wind had come round onto the nose and after two tacks, the only sensible option was to turn on the engine and motor the rest of the way. We had made perfect time as the tide was with us rounding Chanonry Ness and under the Kessock Bridge, We tied up in Inverness Marina around 2pm, tired and cold but happy it had been such a good trip.

Gwyn Phillips
14 November 2010