

Bill's
Round the World Cruise
of the
Outer Hebrides and St Kilda

July, 2018

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.....somehow gained access up these terrifying cliffs to gather birds and eggs as an essential part of their diet

Forward

This is the second trip on the Seahorse 11 within a month in an effort to know more about the 'West Coast' of Scotland and the Hebridean islands, and which until this time, sadly, I had little knowledge. The first trip was the shores of the west coast of the Highlands, Sky and the inner islands.

This second trip, across the Minches, explored the outer islands of the Hebrides.

Hebridean Cruise, July 2018 . Seahorse 11

Skipper : Charlie

Bos'n/engineer : Roy

Chef/housekeeping : Jo



Seahorse II

2nd July 2018 at The Wide Mouth Frog, Dunstaffnage, 12.30, and met by the Skipper.

1515 hrs. Seven passengers, three crew, settled in. Seahorse II left Dunstaffnage

1830 hrs. Located our mooring in Tobermory Bay after a three hour passage up the Sound of Mull. I counted 51 boats already on moorings in the bay; mostly yachts, but also some pretty impressive power boats.

3rd July. Tobermory. A beautiful morning; almost too hot to sit outside at 07.30. Not a breath of wind.

Mirror images of vessels in Tobermory harbour at 7 in the morning, the sea being so calm.



All ashore by dingy for walkabout in Tobermory. Nothing open till 10.00am, but I found an excellent wee museum where much was made of a 'treasure ship' from the time of the Spanish armada that foundered in the area. Despite the best efforts by several recovery expeditions over the years, the exact location of the wreck has not been located.

I could easily have spent a few hours in that museum; but it was back to the ship at 11.00.

Departed Tobermory, and a 9-hour haul up to of the Sound of Harris in the Outer Hebrides. Anchored behind the small island of Dun Arran at 20.15hrs. Good job the skipper knew these waters; small islands and reefs all over the place,

4th July. An early start for the skipper and crew. Picked up, and left Dun Aarin just after 3 in the morning, just getting light. Although quite choppy when going north-west through the Sound of Harris, the weather died down as we made our passage into the Atlantic, and once clear of the Outer Hebrides. It was mill-pond flat, without a breath of wind.

On the way up, going north-west, the sea was a pale leaden/blue colour, disappearing into a pale heat-haze. It wasn't possible to distinguish the horizon; the sky taking on the same pale colour of the sea. St Kilda was barely discernible at first, eventually becoming a slightly stronger smudge. The whole scene; sea, horizon, and sky were almost in monochrome. Quite weird, really. And unusual.



The modern buildings near the shore were built by the military. Presently being demolished, and a new complex of buildings are being built as part of a defence early-warning system. But they spoil landscape as viewed from the sea, somewhat.

Hirta is the main island. The circle of islands which make up the St Kilda group are the remains of a huge volcano crater; these other islands are all-but inaccessible. It is difficult to describe my emotions and thoughts when I walked down 'The Street', there being so much stark history staring me in the face. There is significant information on the internet, but it is only when you are on the island does this history become alive, or meaningful.

I've highlighted only small aspects of what I saw in my 3 of 4 hours ashore.



Remains of The Street



'Cleits', hundreds of them, all over the island

Some houses have been re-roofed by the National Trust as accommodation for volunteers acting as guides, administering the island, the shop, or carrying out archaeological work.



Slates outside empty cottages; poignant reminders not only of those who lived there, but also of the dwelling places that seemed to die when these people left the island.



One cannot but wonder how the community of those that lived here could face up to the isolation and harshness of St Kilda for countless generations.



Awesome cliffs surrounding the relatively more gentle valley where the population of St Kilda had their settlement.

The fertile area around the Village sloping to the higher ground belies the ferocious cliffs on the other side of Hirta. It's said that the hills have no back to them, and that if you were to take another step once you were on the tops, you would be faced with a drop of 1,000 feet. Similarly the rocky nearby islands of Soay and Dun have these massive cliffs.

We sailed round the base of these cliffs, they are jaw-dropping awesome. In a bygone age, however, the men of St Kilda somehow gained access up these terrifying cliffs to gather birds and eggs as an essential part of their diet. It is said they even collected eggs and slaughtered birds taken from the outlying rock of Boreray. The bird meat was stored in the cleits along with oil from fulmars used for lamps, and feathers for pillows and the like. Hitherto, I knew nothing about cleits. Although they're mainly located in the land behind The Street, cleits have been built throughout the island, and astonishingly, there are around 1,200 cleits on St Kilda; built over many generations.

There is evidence to suggest that prehistoric people were on the island, and the existing remains of one of these houses has been identified as being built 1,000 years ago. A so-called 'House of the Fairies', an underground store, dates between 500BC to AD300.

During a gale in 1860 there was extensive damage to the buildings, and 16 new houses were built. The old blackhouses became byres and stores.

St Kilda is the only location in the UK to have 'dual' World Heritage Status, for both 'natural' and 'cultural' significance. Boreray, and its surrounding stacs, has the world's largest colony of gannets, the largest colony of fulmars in Britain, and an estimated 140,000 pairs of puffins.



This small group of islands, really enormous rocks, are part of St Kilda; it's fearsome the way they rise out of the sea bed, almost in defiance of the awesome Atlantic weather. One cannot help wondering at the forces of nature when these rocks were created. But I understand they are remains of the outer ring of a volcanic eruption on a massive scale.

Stac an Armin is the highest sea stac in the British isles, at 191metres.

The St Kilda islanders are said to have scaled these outlying rocks to gather birds, and their eggs. To my mind, another miracle of the lengths the islanders went to survive, clawing up these fearsome crags to maintain their subsistence diet.

In the 1800's, missionaries started coming to the island, and introduced the islanders to aspects of the accepted religion. As far back as 1697 a certain Martin Martin recorded that they loved music and games, but by the late nineteenth century their adherence to the Free Church of Scotland led to a less joyful life. The islanders adopted these new teachings. Singing was not permitted, and their own way of life which had developed through the generations, and appropriate to their location, was eroded away. Today, little remains of their earlier traditions and music.

With the advent of organised tourism in the latter part of the 19th century and communication with the 'outside world' developing, islanders could see there was life outside of St Kilda.

The population had slowly been reduced in size due to different circumstances; getting older and so on, and it was inevitable that the dwindling population was becoming unsustainable. And the quality of life as we know it was just hellish. No running water in the houses, younger men leaving the island, no medical facilities, cruel weather, a subsistence diet, and so on. There was a devastating 'flu epidemic. Perhaps they were quite happy, perhaps not, but it was the only lifestyle they knew. Eventually, the whole population of St Kilda was evacuated in 1930. And I imagine there would be a sense of sadness and foreboding when they eventually turned their back on the island for the last time, knowing they would probably never see it again, and which their forbearers had inhabited for countless generations.

We were at St Kilda less than 24 hours. In the morning, 5th July, Seahorse picked up anchor from Village Bay and did a tour round the cliffs of the St Kilda islands. From the village, the hills rise up to

some 300 metres, and higher in some places, but it is said these hills have no 'back' to them. As if the hills have been 'chopped' off, forming sea cliffs - and in stark defiance of extreme Atlantic wind and weather. These cliffs are spellbinding impressive. One of these cliffs on Hirta boasts as being the highest in the United Kingdom, with a sheer drop to the sea of 376 metres – over 1,200 ft – and the sea stack, *Stac an Armin*, of 191 metres, is the highest stac in Europe, sticking up from the sea like a massive and immovable tooth.

The passage back to Harris was pretty bumpy, the weather being on our port quarter, but we got perfect shelter in Loch Tarancy, West Harris. Anchored in a quiet sandy bay, late in the afternoon. Some of the passengers were taken ashore with the 'rubber duck', and nothing feared, the three ladies went for a swim off the beach. A fine sight, indeed, and all to their credit as was somewhat less than just 'chilly'. The canoe was launched, and did I my thing, paddling ashore. I thoroughly enjoyed it, albeit with the sudden realisation I'd forgotten to change into swimming shorts and had myself a wet pair of breeks.

We overnighted in this tranquil and peaceful place,

The following day, 6th July, we had a lunchtime stopover in Rodel at the southernmost point of Harris. The harbour was built of 'dry stane' in the 18th century to enable the Harris ferry put passengers ashore by tender, before the new ferry terminal was built at Tarbert. Although the harbour is in disrepair, the wee slip at the entrance was quite serviceable for our dingy. A hotel and bar is immediately adjacent to the harbour, but we found the building was boarded up, and had been for about a year. The expression on a couple of faces when it was discovered the pub was shut cannot be adequately or politely described.

The closure of the hotel wouldn't do much to generate interest or enthusiasm in keeping the harbour in good repair, especially as the hotel was almost the only building in the area.

One of our party met an old guy shearing sheep, and in conversation it transpired he had an MBE. Not what you might expect to meet in a pretty remote part of the Outer Hebrides, but he took time to show our chap the intricacies of sheep shearing.

Nevertheless, Rodel is 'on the map' for a couple of reasons. Around the back of a wee hillock stands the church of St Clement built by a by a McLeod chief in 1520.





St Clement's Church, or the Church of Rodel as it is sometimes known, was built from about 1520 by Alexander MacLeod of Dunvegan and Harris. Rodel church is generally thought to be the grandest medieval building anywhere in the Western Isles. McLeod's tomb, carved in stone and various wall friezes have survived the years; it has been restored a couple of times, and is still a very fine building. Guidebooks, however, generally make no mention of a 'sheela na gig' carving in the church.

It's most pleasant to record that weddings frequently take place in this church.

The other aspect of interest at Rodel was a plaque stating that the present Queen stepped ashore from the wee harbour some years ago, presumably from Britannia during her annual cruise around the Western Isles. I said 'was' because someone has since nicked this commemorative plaque; it was there when I visited the harbour from a yacht around five years ago.

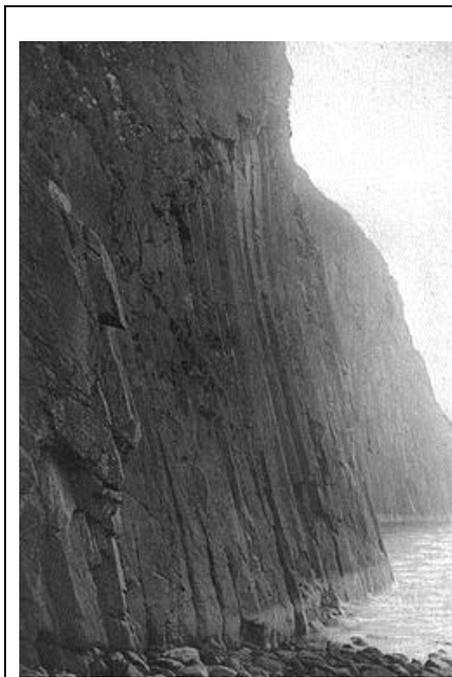
We carried on to Tarbert, Harris East Loch, for the night, alongside and close to the CalMac ferry terminal, and to the new Harris Distillery. Presently selling gin. Most of Seahorse's passengers wandered along the road, like a bit of an extended crocodile, but another guy and myself snuck into the hotel for a sly slurp in the bar. It being around six in the evening, the place was going like a fair with bar meals and a merry throng around the bar. A good pub.

Then in the morning it was out into the Little Minch, to the Shiant Isles about 4 miles east of Harris ; the northern tip of Sky being almost due south. We anchored overnight in the sheltered bay between the two biggest islands. And true to form some of the intrepid passengers went ashore and tramped around the more accessible of the two islands.



The two biggest islands in the Shiant group are joined by an isthmus, covered only at the height of a spring tide.

Apart from the narrow strip of rocky beach between the two largest islands, there is virtually no landing anywhere else on these islands, even by dingy. In approaching the anchorage, the skipper was able to take Seahorse reasonably close to the remarkable cliffs, but keeping a close eye on the serious upwelling and ferocious tides which have been reported. The cliffs themselves are collimated in a similar manner to those in Fingal's cave; the difference being that whilst the columns in Staffa are - without question – dramatic, the dolerite columns forming the cliffs of the Shiant islands are significantly taller, rising to around 120metres.



An old map of the Shiant Islands

You run out of superlatives when trying to get your head round these 120m collimated cliffs on the Shiant islands.

The enormity of these cliffs is mind-boggling, with OMG being an appropriate comment as Seahorse sailed past them as slow speed.

In the summer months there is a huge and concentrated population of sea birds, the density of birds rivalling that of St Kilda. There had been a steady decline on the seabird population over some years, largely caused by black rats; eating birds eggs. These rats were not native to the islands, but probably swam ashore from ships which foundered on rocks. A rat eradication project was funded

by interested parties and commenced in 2014. As recently as March of this year (2018) the Shiant islands were declared free of rats, and there is an expectation that some seabirds which had previously left the islands will return.

The islands are uninhabited, a shepherd and his wife being the last. A major archaeological 'dig' started in 2000 for several years during summer months, and it established evidence of habitation from at least as far back as 500 BC. Again, the hardship and the determination of those who lived out an existence can hardly be fully comprehended.

Sunday 8th July Lochmaddy, South Harris. Alongside a pontoon, for the night. A walk up the village, but somewhat unsatisfactory, this being a Sunday. The chef had planned to 'top up' her stores for the galley, but everything was closed, except the pub attached to the hotel. The Seahorse's other passengers went walkabout in the all-but deserted 'Sunday' town. I sat in the aforementioned hotel bar, and watched Lewis Hamilton doing his F1 thing at Silverstone. Back on board we celebrated one of the passenger's birthday and our chef made a magnificent chocolate cake for afternoon tea. Later that evening the lot of us pretty well took over the lounge bar of the hotel in further celebration of the German lady's birthday.

At this stage in the cruise, no small amount of time was spent by passengers pouring over maps in the saloon; establishing where we had been and where we were going. The issue being 'the Gaelic'. Some lochs had similar names, which is bad enough, but one map might give the name for a loch in Gaelic, whilst another might give a different name for the same loch. Furthermore, other maps might give an English 'slant' on the Gaelic name, and then it gets seriously confusing..... Therefore, I cannot be certain that the order I've followed in our progress during the cruise may, or may not, be strictly correct. Perhaps it doesn't matter too much. Because Charlie, the Skipper, certainly knew.

On leaving Lochmaddy in the morning, a lunchtime stop was at anchor in Loch Erisort, North Uist. The Skipper indicated that from the top of a nearby 900ft hill one would get an unobstructed panoramic view of the outer and inner Hebrides. There was no easy dingy landing anywhere near this hill, and the four who elected to go ashore had an difficult clamber over seaweed-covered rocks before they were properly 'ashore'. The skipper recommended the best way to climb over these rocks – it being low water at the time – was to crawl up in bare feet on hands and knees. And on return, slide down over the seaweed on one's backside. Three of the mature passengers – myself included – who chose not to go ashore but were watching from Seahorse's bridge deck, felt we were somewhat akin to 'The Last of the Summer Wine'. But it was a great pity that when the 'hill-climbers' managed to get ashore, it was quite misty, more so at the tops. So they didn't see too much. When they managed back they were pretty muddy, wet, and with the odd wee scrape from the rocks.

Underway again in the afternoon, and whilst sailing south down the eastern shores of Harris en route to Locheport (??) – and the next overnigher - a clam diver's boat was intercepted, and a 'deal' was made for a bag of clams, or scallops. Locheport is another skinny but long loch, well sheltered with several mussel farms. But most attractive shoreline, and we anchored, close-ish, to an abandoned wooden inter-island ferry pier. Most of the passengers were dropped-off for a walk about; up an overgrown narrow road. The canoe was launched. I was well on my way up this

beautiful loch when I glanced behind to look at Seahorse, and I up popped a curious seal, only a few feet behind me. And it followed me up the loch.

The evening was of scallops; *coquille-san-Jacque* as a starter, followed by scallops gently poached in a sauce. Pud was crêpes suzette. An epicurean delight.

The plan was to go into Eriskay – of Whiskey Galore fame - on the way south, but a wee glance at the sailing instructions showed the entrance channel to be only one-and-a-half metres. Seahorse draws three metres. No go. Activate plan 'B' - carry on further south, to Mingulay.

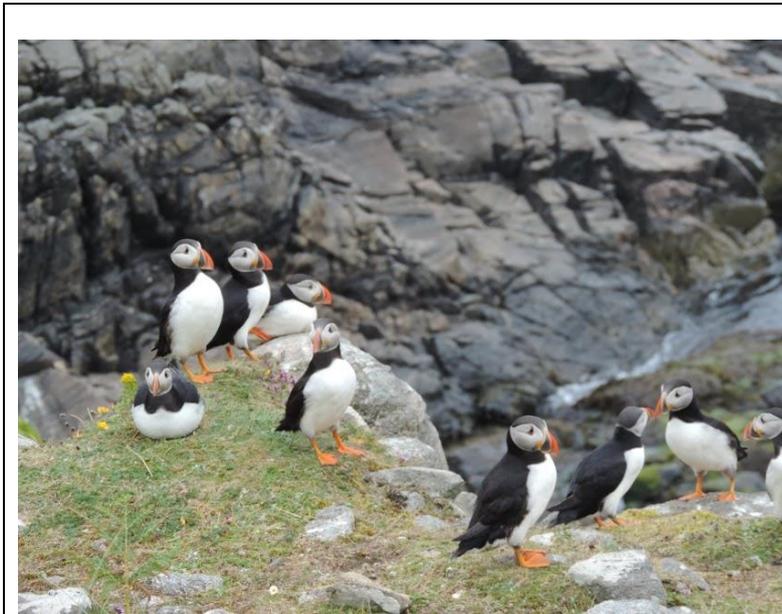
10th July, Mingulay. The most southerly of the chain of one-time inhabited islands making up the Outer Hebrides. But not any more. Simply the scattered remains of deserted houses, and in some aspects the bay was similar to that at St Kilda with the houses in Mingulay located in a wide fertile-looking valley.



All that's left of habitation on Mingulay are the scattered remains of dry-stane houses, and in some aspects the bay was similar to that at St Kilda with the houses in Mingulay located in a wide fertile-looking valley.

It is difficult describing one's emotions seeing these remains, which had been the home for families for so many generations. As if the island had somehow lost its mind and had nothing left to give. A great sadness. But will there ever be a future? Will there be new life breathed into the island? Will there ever be families who would venture into this isolation and this way of life.

The others scrambled up a steep hillside from the beach, and I gamely followed, but only for a while. I was really puffing and blowing, I gave up, and got myself escorted back down, but not until I got off a couple of photos of puffins.



I managed to get a shot of a bunch of puffins before I chickened out from climbing further up the steep bank. Some of the others showed an intention to get closer to the birds, not realising the wee chaps, who seemed quite unafraid, were standing right on the edge of a cliff. I managed to persuade a couple of 'keen' photogs it was not really a good idea to get closer, before they found out - the hard way - the danger.

But I then had a couple of hours wait till the Seahorse's dingy came back in to collect everyone. Fortunately, I was wearing hefty bad-weather clothing; I got myself fully zipped up, hood and all, lay down on the sand and had myself a pretty decent afternoon kip - with my hat over my face.



Mingulay.

Being picked up by dingy from Seahorse.

'had myself a pretty decent kip'.

Those on board Seahorse had me in the binoculars, these outer clothes being a strong orange colour.

For the remainder of the trip the Bos'n would enquire if I was to be wearing my Iron Man suit.

11th July. Anchored at the south end of Coll, Crossapol Bay for the night, after a rather uncomfortable 4- hour passage with the weather on the stern quarter of the boat. However, It was peacefully quiet in the bay; beautiful beaches, and some big sand-dunes. The guide book indicated Coll is pretty sparsely populated, but some of our gallant 'walkers' found themselves invited into someone's house, where they were regaled with stories of local history, daring-do and the like; the story-telling dramatics aided with a couple of fair-sized drams which was thrust on them.

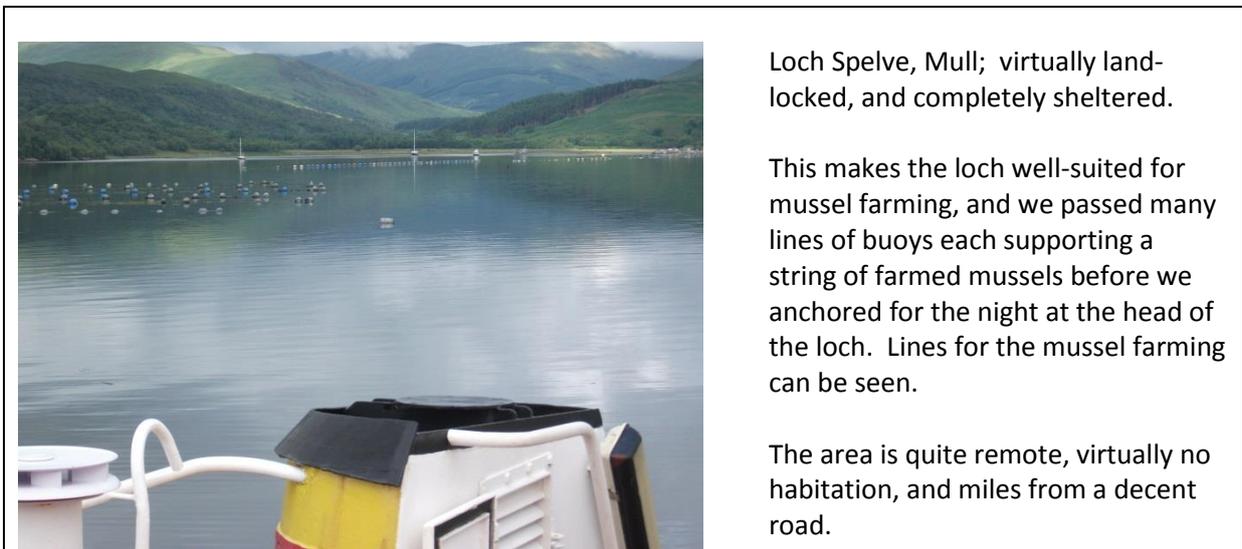
12th July. Departed Coll approximately 0900hrs, and made for a lunch-time stop at Iona. All ashore by dingy, but not without a bit of polite jostling at the slip to enable Roy to get the dingy tied up for a couple of hours. A CalMac car ferry crosses the Sound of Iona on a frequent basis; what with the ferry's cars and passengers, tour companies with their sleek RIBs, and dinghies from anchored yachts, the slipway is a busy place. The village was bigger than I remembered it, although it was nearer forty years than not when I last was ashore on the island. I had a look in the so-called 'general store', but didn't feel inclined to buy, apart from a bagful of scones for afternoon tea when we got back on board.

It's easy to spot 'locals' coming ashore up the slipway, knowing what they're about, as opposed to tourists in their motley groups who seem to have a rather aimless idea of where they are. It does, indeed, take all sorts.

Nevertheless, I had a worthwhile hour in one of the Iona museums which had excellent pictorial representation of the history of both the island and its people; several of the families go back several generations. A serious visitor could easily spend a full two or three days exploring the well-documented and sometimes turbulent history of the island with its deep-seated religious background.

We only had a couple of hours on Iona, although it was time enough for me to manage a quick ten minutes in the pub. A chap has to make balanced use of his time.

Next morning we 'picked up' and had a kinder passage along the southerly coast of Mull. Which is virtually devoid of any habitation; uninviting, with dark satanic mountains as a backdrop. Late in the afternoon we passed through the narrow entrance into Loch Spelve which opens out into a banana-shaped inland loch, offering complete shelter regardless of the direction of the wind.



Loch Spelve, Mull; virtually land-locked, and completely sheltered.

This makes the loch well-suited for mussel farming, and we passed many lines of buoys each supporting a string of farmed mussels before we anchored for the night at the head of the loch. Lines for the mussel farming can be seen.

The area is quite remote, virtually no habitation, and miles from a decent road.

The following morning we were up and away by 9.00 o'clock for an easy couple of hours back to the Dunstaffnage base. We were all tied up and luggage ashore before lunch. There only remained for the passengers to thank Charlie, Ron and Jo for looking after us; they were really superb, and

couldn't do enough for us. With hand-shaking or kisses - as the case may be – it was good-bye to the Seahorse.

We had been aboard Seahorse II for eleven nights and I felt I had made a significant contribution to my own 'bucket list'. That particular box had been ticked, and a worthwhile chapter in my own World Tour of the Outer Hebrides has now been written.

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