

## Stakkr's Slog.

June 22<sup>nd</sup>, around about 07:30 the lines went off, and away we went, 10kts and the sun shining, on our way up to Wick. The full plan was to travel up to Shetland for a family wedding on the 6<sup>th</sup> & 7<sup>th</sup> of July; (surely having a wedding on just one day is stress enough, but over two days??!), then along to Torshavn, before 'cruising' down to the Western Isles.

The journey up to Wick went from a gentle run, to a 25kt fetch for the last 12 miles, a couple of reefs in, thinking "This is great; why am I doing this?!", all of the usual yottie mindset really.

A day in Wick followed, relaxing and repairing the various bits that had loosened, or broken after the vigorous shakedown from Fortrose. The major failing had been the boom gooseneck slider, where the screws into the wooden mast had 'distorted'. The simple remedy was to fasten the item with jubilee clips around the mast, as well as upgrading the screws into the mast. This gave me the opportunity of giving money to Mackay Underwater Technology, the chandler in Wick. Simple enough, but with the owner being a fellow ROV pilot, it took over an hour of gossiping for a 1 minute purchase; ho-hum!

After Wick, it was the cruise up to Orkney, specifically Holm, by the Italian Chapel within a very sheltered anchorage. The wind that day was 5kts Westerly, OK for crossing the Pentland Firth, with the caveat that one keeps to the East of the Skerries, an Orcadian word for "Very Scary" by the way. I gave a wide berth of about 10 miles, having had experience of an engine failure, and being much closer on a previous trip. As the crossing was completed, and we were level with the Skerries, the wind picked up, for a glorious sail all the way to Holm, and anchoring. It was easy to relax, cook a meal with a glass of wine after this, but for the discomfort from my shoulder, which was feeling somewhat rubbish.

Early next morning, no wind at all and a totally flat sea, we motored from there along the South of Mainland and the side of Deerness to Copinsay; stemming the current through the pass at 1/2kt, up to Mull Head. The weather immediately changed, to a 20kts Westerly; bang on the nose for sailing to Kirkwall. This is typical, but it was a beautifully brisk day, so I managed to convince my inner self, that this was what it's meant to be like; "It's sunny, warmish and we're sailing. This is what owning a sailing boat's meant to be!!" Repeating 5 times helped.

From Kirkwall up towards Pierowall was a very gentle coast, with a light breeze throughout. I'd rung Tommy, the harbour master in Pierowall the day before to check that the pontoons had space for me. He'd told me that the pontoons weren't actually in at the moment, but I could tie up to his blue fishing boat, on the West wall.

I potted into the harbour at about low water, and saw 3 or 4 blue fishing boats on the West wall, none of them in enough water to tie up to, so reversed back out, and anchored. Tommy came on past in his grey fishing boat and greeted me, saying nice things about Stakkr, and apologised for not having the pontoons in, but they'd be ready in a week or so. This was fine in fact, as it was a beautiful evening.

Away from there at about 04:30, we set out for Fair Isle in a light North Easterly, catching the tide past North Ronaldsay which threw us into the North Sea at nearly 8kts. After about a mile, the visibility closed in to under a 100 metres with fog, and the world become translucent and damp, everything cloaked in a fine mist. This was good news for me. On the insistence of my wife, I'd invested in an active radar

reflector; when pinged by radar, this pings back that “We’re a 100 metre long, big steel thing and you don’t want to mess with us” Without this, the small wooden Folkboat Stakkr’s best radar reflections come from my fillings, or the kettle! We’ve also got an AIS transponder, and the radio has a simple AIS plotter incorporated into it. It was fascinating seeing 1<sup>st</sup>, an AIS target appearing, then seeing the radar reflector activate, and ping back. I don’t believe that any vessel had to alter course to avoid us, nor we them, but it took doubt out of the trip. If there’d been anything out there not pinging, it’d probably be another small yacht, or a large black thing that had temporarily surfaced for some reason!

After 20 miles or so, the fog lifted and Fair Isle became visible, dramatically appearing with the sun shining on it, as we left the murk.

Coming alongside in North Haven was easy as 2 chaps from a beautiful Ferro ketch took my lines. Over a beer at the observatory later on, they told me that they’d both been submariners, and that ‘Chris’, was the skipper of the Lord Horatio Nelson sail training ship! What ever sailing story one might’ve wanted to tell, his would’ve been better! Good company and after a couple of pints we parted.

Next day they sailed, and I wandered the Island. That’s an hour, maybe two. I found that the Island folk tolerate the yottie. The bird spotter’s are embraced as they’re paying to come here, and being delighted by what they find. Conversely, the yottie will come by here purely as a rest stop, without necessarily any particular curiosity about their ‘home’, and wonder why there’s not a pontoon.

I had a couple of wines at the Observatory on my 2<sup>nd</sup> evening, and discovered that most people on the Island don’t find humour in an enquiry about ‘The Glorious 12<sup>th</sup>’

I left next morning, probably by mutual consent, and had a fabulous sail up to Scalloway. Previously, my intention was to go to Lerwick, which was where my wife and I’d hired an apartment for the week, however the 2 ex-RN guy’s had convinced me that Scalloway was far better.

The sail up had been a very fine reach, in 15kts of Easterly, and bright sunshine. Entry into Scalloway is easy, and the pontoon is obvious; by that I mean it’s massive in comparison to the usual marina pontoons. Quite seriously, the RN minesweeper fleet could hold a regatta on it!

I moored alongside, being watched from the Scalloway Boating Club smoking area by a couple of blokes who declined to offer assistance, which is unusual in marina life. Secured, I went up towards the club, and was told that “...done a fine job”, by both of them; praise indeed!

In the quite busy clubhouse, it being a Saturday afternoon, there was plenty of comment about the boat, and queries about staying, and services offered here. All in all, an extremely pleasant and embracing welcome. My relatives from the Island also arrived, and it developed into a mini party, people happily buying rounds for folks that they’d never met, even though they’re all from the same place! The fee for the pontoon was very reasonable, and the area safe enough for leaving the boat, once I moved to Lerwick.

After spending some time with the club members a couple of things became apparent. Firstly, no club member owned a boat. The club was a social club by the sea, where (perhaps fuelled by grog), an idea had been hatched to get a pontoon funded from any source, which would then attract yotties, who’d spend dosh in their club giving it revenue. All of this, by some means, had actually occurred, money presumably diverted from other social projects, hospitals and schools, to this pontoon!

The second thing that I noticed was that teeth were an optional accessory, indeed it was possible that some teeth never left the premises, and were shared on a rota basis between the senior members.

Prior to my wife arriving, I was treated to an evening sail in a 'Sixteen', a dipping lugger, which was something of a confusing privilege. I was accompanying Brian Wishart, who kindly gave me this experience, but I never really came to terms with the 'how or the why' one would have persisted with this method of sailing?

The wedding was a great week of memories, aided by some superb Shetland weather, and a full family gathering. Unusually for these celebrations, no blood was spilt!

We were now at the point of the trip where the next planned destination was the Faeroe Islands, I had to make a decision that given my shoulder wasn't in good shape, 2 days sailing there, and then 2-3 days down to Stornoway, it really wasn't going to be very wise to continue with that, so we left to get back to Orkney.

After a mile of the trip, the fog appeared, and for the next 12 hours of motoring, nothing was seen apart from a Fleetwood fishing boat. It didn't bother to acknowledge me; possibly they were as bored as I was. I spent the time reading 'Fire & Fury', the Trump biography. This was research for the Isle of Lewis of course, but the reading of it did make me feel smug within myself; I'm not 'him'!

North Ronaldsay became the destination due to the slow progress, and we anchored there in the late evening. Next morning was the short hop to Pierowall. This was a bit of a slow trip, motor sailing in calm conditions all of the way, but this time being able to use a pontoon in the harbour. This was great as I wanted a day to have a look around. There's not a lot of nightlife in Pierowall, the chip shop's very good though, and I had enough wine to survive. Next day, I went up to 'Weeling Steen Gallery', which was a gallery of fantastic quality, with a diversity of style by the owner whose work's were mostly shown.

After this, and through clouds of midge, I walked back to the boat and found a large, freshly cooked lobster on the coachroof! Tommy felt that he owed me an apology concerning my previous visit, and the fact he hadn't recognised Stakkr. The lobster went to a good home, and was gratefully received!

Out of Pierowall, up and around past Papa Westray, and then down to Stromness through Hoy Sound. The whole sail was totally fine, light winds and warm enough. The marina there is pretty good, in the centre of town with a good run of pubs and food places.

A couple of days later, we left aiming for Loch Eribol, or rather Rispond Bay as an anchorage. The weather was pretty windless, the tide was ebbing when we left at 03:00hrs with sails up and all seemed well, in the dark anyway. Turning West along Hoy Sound, the world went mad; as we were making 11kts with the ebb we hit a Hollywood film set of rough water, slewing the boat in every possible manner imaginable. I've sailed for 60 years and been a professional on ships for 45 years, and have never encountered motion like those. The seas were 5 metres high perhaps, maybe 10 metres apart, and coming irregularly and swiftly from every direction! Given that we were motor sailing, the only thing to do was to hang on, I was kneeling in the cockpit with the tiller above my head trying to keep the heading vaguely Westwards out of the maelstrom. One thing that I've since thought about, was that at no point did it cross my mind that the boat was going to fail, in fact I was apologetic to the boat for having put her in this position; akin to going to a dinner party, and

seeing your wife being given a seat next to your ex-wife.....? Not blameless, but not your fault.

After a busy 20 minutes, we came out of the madness and were able to put things back together. The anchor had been thrown out of its rest, and had deployed over the Starboard side, banging against the hull. This meant a quick run forward to haul the anchor up and secure it, wondering how much damage had it had time to do whilst deployed; plenty.

The shear pin on the outboard had also gone, not by hitting anything, but by water force only, which I find remarkable. In the cabin, it reminded me of a student flat at the end of term, but being small, was easily sortable. The trip from there to Rispond Bay was really dull thereon, with no wind, and an annoyingly sloppy swell rolling the boat. The only interest was the frequency of how often the automatic pump was discharging. Prior to leaving Stromness the pump had activated itself infrequently, a few times a week. After the event it was every 20 minutes, not a disaster, but a massive change.

Rispond Bay was crowded with an unmanned fishing boat! It's a very comfortable anchorage, and whilst dinner was baking, I had a tried to locate the leak, which was from around about keel bolt 2, quite inaccessible at sea. After a bit of food and a glass of wine it all felt a bit better actually!

Sailing around Cape Wrath has an aura of excitement, after all it's not 'Cape Warm and Fluffy' for good reason! There was a good SW wind, but annoyingly I'd mistimed the tides around it, and was almost stationary for a time, but plugged on, there not really being any alternative. After an hour or so of fairly boring sailing, making painfully slow progress, I began to imagine that I was seeing parachutes on the horizon, coming from the West. This alarmed me, and I did think back over recent wine consumption, making a small (easily broken pledge), but the parachutes came ever closer. The 2 'chutes were powering a pair of foiling kite surfers along; at around about 30kts I'd say. They altered course and flew past me, obviously British because of the madness of what they were doing, and also because here, off of Cape Wrath, the verbal exchange was; "Lovely Day!", "Yes, maybe rain later?"

Nothing else was said, and I've no idea what it was all about, but they soon were out of sight in the general direction of Orkney.

Late afternoon saw us arrive in KLB, which doesn't really have a great deal going for it, except the shop. The shop's got small amounts of a lot of things, and topped up my supplies of essential goods.

KLB to Lochinver was next, with a stiff breeze bang on the nose again, which meant that we (again!) missed the tide around a headland, and wasted hours to get around. In part this was due to the swell, which was a bit too long for the boat, but not long enough. We were slamming on many waves, not being able to maintain speed. A lot of time was wasted, before heading inshore to more sheltered water, but losing some wind. As we were entering Lochinver harbour, a very large 'Gin Palace' was departing. The 'Archimedes' is enormous, and outwardly faultless. It's privately owned by the guy who invented an algorithm that allows share transactions by computer. I later heard that she'd had to leave, as there wasn't an airfield nearby that was large enough for the family jet to land, so they were forced to go to Stornoway. I thought that I'd had it tough until then.

As an aside, I did have to ask them to move slightly West in the channel; they were crowding me!

Lochinver is a cracking run ashore. The marina's good, the showers are OK, the village is quaint. They've a secret weapon though, the 'Pie shop'. These are proper pies, where pie people, eat pies!

A couple of days there, and we set off to Tarbert. My arrangement with my wife was that we'd meet in either Tarbert or Stornoway, and spend the week in a house that she and her sisters own in Tarbert. This would give me a chance to use the new Tarbert marina, which had been talked about endlessly and is now built. Sailing from Lochinver was a beat again, the wind from the SW again. I know that this is what the wind does here, but it's still boring! The wind headed us a bit, so with a quick change of plan, we diverted to Stornoway, which is a good marina also. I've plenty of relatives here, so it's a fun place to come and see folks. My wife's niece is married to the RNLI coxswain, which meant a fine brew of coffee every morning, as well as a list of really helpful contacts, who are happy to help.

Once my wife arrived, we did many of the usual tours up and down between Harris and Lewis, as well as having my 62<sup>nd</sup> birthday in the Scalpay Bistro, which serves the best food that I've ever eaten anywhere. Mainly seafood of course, the décor's somewhat underwhelming, it doesn't have a drinks licence, so one must BYOG, and they don't take cards; cash only. Given all that, and it's a 20 minute drive from the metropolis of Tarbert (?), it's a bit of a surprise that it's booked for months in advance, 12 months a year. The food is astounding.

My wife then became unwell with a pre-existing illness, and had to spend a couple of days in Stornoway Hospital, before flying back to the mainland to see her 'usual' consultant. This left me on the Island without too much to do, except for sailing home.

We left Stornoway under motor, but something wasn't right, there was a bit of an electrical burn smell, so of course we turned back. As I began the return, I saw that another yacht, a bit larger than us, was also on its way in. No time to waste here then, I called the marina up and regained my berth; they'd not even noticed that I'd left! The other yacht called them up 2 minutes later, and had to tie up at the fuelling berth, as there were no pontoon berth's remaining.

I love sailing!

Back alongside again, I found that the starter motor had shorted itself to an early grave. This wasn't good, however a brother in law owns a motor garage in Stornoway, with all the contacts needed for this. As is often the case at this time of year, the local starter motor 'go-to' man was on holiday. Not to worry, I've a spare at home, and by chance, another brother in law coming over on the ferry the very next day, who was delighted to help, and pick up the spare! What could go wrong?

I motorsailed the boat down to Tarbert, bearing in mind that this is motorsailing with a Honda 2.3hp outboard, it was pleasantly boring trip.

Tarbert marina is very good, with ambitious plans of expansion, taking advantage of a ferry enlargement, and tourism expansion. The starter motor arrived and was fitted OK, it turned the engine over before sacrificing itself as the casting showed its weakness, and separated from the body. That was an annoyance, and not insurmountable, however the priority had changed now to aiding my wife at home. Whilst back at home, I bought a new motor from 'the' chap in France, it's an old French engine and parts are tricky to find. I sent him the old motor in exchange, plus too much money, and he sent me the refurbished/new spare. Easy peasy, what could go wrong?

The spare arrived and my wife's getting better. Happy day, so happy that when I open the box with the spare in it, it all goes bad. The motor had been poorly packaged and the solenoid insulation had been shattered in a drop.

This narrowed my range of opportunities somewhat, so it became obvious that the only thing to do was to get on with it, and sail back; it's a sailing boat after all.

During the time in Tarbert, I had the pleasure of being invited onto 'Monkey Business' by David Findlayson, and helped to lighten his cellar somewhat!

We left Tarbert aiming for Canna, which took 13 hours of a tight fetch, an exciting sail that was fun. Canna was crowded, with the only remaining mooring not having a pick up buoy, which is a rubbish thing to find. If you've a harbour, keep it maintained! A quick start in the morning saw us by Tobermory at 13:00hrs, broad reaching on flat water in 25kts of warm(ish) wind! A terrific sail all of the way to Loch Aline. Confusion reigned slightly in the Loch, as I saw my own boat there? Hang on; you're on your own boat? I saw a Folkboat from the same yard as mine for the 1<sup>st</sup> time. Without getting sniffy, I must say that I preferred mine! The marina there is a very nice haven, with great facilities. The owner of the other Folkboat did come to visit, and was reassuringly envious of some details. I steered him away from engine talk of course.

To get a beer there, one has to join the local social club, which cost 50 pence for the week, allowing one to drink in a clean and friendly bar, overlooking the CalMac ferry pier, along with some really interesting, local types. I was on the receiving end of a chat with a local guy, whom had surely ceased being thirsty some hours before, with some fascinating stories to tell, if only I could've understood what he was saying. If ever there was a case for 'sub-titles' in the real world, it was made then!

Up to Fort William was a bit of a tough beat at first with a lot of wind, which then became a full on race against time, just getting into the basin before they shut for the night. The trip along the canal was interesting enough. The very fast run along Loch Lochy, with both sails up was good fun, as was meeting the Loch Keeperess at Kyltra, a lady not to be trifled with; and Fort Augustus. They've a problem with a broken gate, which means that service is extremely hampered. It took us from 09:00hrs to 16:00hrs to get down the locks. Not good, but if a gate has started to crack, what can they do.

One moment of levity here was having a Caley Cruiser, quite a large and expensive thing, come alongside the pontoon ahead of me. The husband was sort of 'steering', with the wife sort of trying to understand what to do. The wife asked, "Shall I put the fenders out?" The response being "No, they're shiny; we don't want to scratch them!" Quite.

I had the pleasure of relating this to Jamie Hogan soon after, and he just shook his head!

After that, it was a very speedy run through Loch Ness, avoiding the canal boats weaving out of Lochend, then sort of home.

A long slog, but good fun.