

GATEWAY TO ST KILDA – TARANSAY – THE DOOK'S CASTLE

Loch Maddy (Loch nam Madadh – the loch of the dogs) got its name from two dog-shaped rocks, Madadh Beag and Madadh Mor, at the entrance to the loch, and they were a welcome sight to the crew when I worked on the fishing boats in my youth. It meant a few hours undisturbed sleep, and eating a meal without being thrown all over the boat by the sea. The locals liked to tell that Loch Maddy was once the haunt of pirates who preyed on shipping, but in more settled times the many islands scattered around the loch have become the breeding ground of hundreds of seabirds and wildfowl, and a paradise for bird watchers.

Its reputation as a sheltered anchorage for yachts was tested during the night, when the wind the weather lady said had gone to the Northern Isles had obviously decided it liked the Hebrides better, and returned with a vengeance to rock *Halcyon* with some hefty gusts and batter the coach roof with bursts of heavy rain. By morning it was still quite fresh from the south and raining steadily, and outside the loch I could see white-capped waves rolling up the Minch.

With the entrance to the Sound of Harris, 'the Gateway to St Kilda', only nine miles up the coast, I would soon have to decide whether it was feasible to enter the Sound and commit myself to a single-handed forty-mile thrash out into the unpredictable Atlantic, to a group of islands where there was absolutely no shelter. It was not a decision to be taken lightly, and I ducked out of making it by opting to anchor for the night in Loch Rodel at the entrance to the Sound and hope that the evening forecast would provide some encouraging news.

Hoisting the mizzen and jib and leaving the main lashed down, I let go the mooring and scudded out of Loch Maddy, passing Madadh Beag to port in a flurry

of spray as waves broke against *Halcyon's* side. Once clear of the loch, the wind was gusting at the top end of force six (twenty-five knots) and the sea was rough, but wind and tide were in my favour and, with a couple of rolls in the jib and the mizzen eased out, *Halcyon* rode the following seas very comfortably. Occasionally an extra-violent rain squall dipped the port side deck into the water, and hanging on to the tiller with my feet braced against the cockpit seat was like sailing a racing dinghy, but thanks to the buoyancy of *Halcyon's* wide beam she soon righted herself.

A large rusty freighter, flying the flag of Panama, came up astern and kept me company as I surfed across the mouth of the Sound of Harris, and then it forged ahead and disappeared very quickly in the direction of the Shiant Isles, leaving me crashing through breaking seas off Renish Point when I turned into Loch Rodel. I had reached the island of Harris (Na Hearadh – the High Land), and with rain clouds hanging low over the hills it was a darker and more forbidding landscape than the Uists, though with its own particular character and charm.

The passage through the Sound of Harris, which separates North Uist from Harris, can be a nightmare or an exciting navigational challenge, depending on how confident you are about venturing into a vast maze of islands, islets, rocks and shallow passages swept by erratic tidal streams that constantly change direction and play havoc with even the most carefully prepared route plan.

About ten miles long by roughly eight wide, the Sound has two main navigable channels, the Stanton Channel on the Harris side and the Cope Channel on the North Uist side. The passage through the Stanton Channel is in deep water, but relies on being able to identify sometimes difficult to see transits and is at the mercy of strong cross-tides. The Cope Channel threads through a labyrinth of small islets and drying rocks, and would have been impossible without local knowledge had it not been for the Army, who made it safer for their landing craft carrying stores to the radar station at St Kilda by laying a line of port and starboard buoys from the Minch on the east side to the Atlantic on the west.

It earned them the undying gratitude of fishing boat skippers and visiting yacht crews; though, having cleared the channel, the navigator still has a final obstacle. A notorious sandbank, hidden under shallow water that has been known to dry out, bars the way to the ocean, and if any wind is opposed to the tide it can kick up a wicked sea.

Despite its evil reputation, many cruising yacht skippers are discovering that, in settled weather, the Sound of Harris is no more hazardous than many other passages in the Hebrides; and for those with St Kilda and the seldom-visited west side of the Hebrides on their 'must see' list there are few alternatives. And so it was towards the bright green number one buoy at the start of the channel that I steered *Halcyon*, under engine, the following morning to catch the flood, after a quiet night anchored in Loch Rodel.

The wind had dropped to a mere murmur of a breeze, and though Stornoway Coastguard's early morning bulletin indicated that the weather was not to be as settled as I had hoped for, it had at least given me the confidence to go through the Sound and spend a few days exploring the islands and anchorages on the west coast of Harris. From there I could assess the weather prospects and decide whether I dared to risk the exposed eighty-mile round trip into the capricious Atlantic.

The tidal stream seemed determined to push *Halcyon* across the channel and onto the rocks, but it was no match for the power of the engine and I made steady progress, ticking off the buoys as I passed until, leaving the island of Berneray to port, I cleared a large yellow buoy marking the end of the Cope Channel and set a course for the tiny island of Coppay, a lone sentinel at the north-west corner of the Sound.

The sky was grey and overcast, and I was pleased that there was only a light wind behind a long swell rolling in from the west, though *Halcyon* thudded heavily into the troughs, sending spray flying into the air and rattling the pans in the galley. From leaving the Cope Channel it took two hours to reach Coppay, and after being thrown about violently it was a relief to round the formidable cliffs of Toe Head on Harris and escape the swell in the sheltered bay of Camus nam Borgh.

Switching the engine off I let *Halcyon* drift while I went below, made a mug of coffee and sat in the cockpit admiring the lovely island of Taransay close to the shore. It still had the air of detached serenity I remembered from the time I landed on it from a fishing boat in 1950 and strolled among the abandoned houses and the school. I felt very sad when it was pitched into the glare of publicity while being invaded by a group of people chosen by a television company to play a survival game.

I watched a few of the episodes of the TV series out of curiosity and to see Taransay again, but the 'castaways' were horribly ill-prepared for a world beyond their normal, mundane, urban life. The ghosts of Saint Taran and the hardy men and women who had survived on Taransay for centuries must have watched their antics with considerable bewilderment, and been appalled by the bickering of the 'new islanders' as they struggled to live together.

The tide was just right for going through Taransay Sound into West Loch Tarbert, and I was keen to reach the small but sheltered and picturesque anchorage of Loch Leosavay on its north side, where I intended to anchor. Starting the engine I lined up the transits that would take me clear of submerged rocks between Taransay and Harris, and a touch over an hour later, having gone through the Sound and rounded the islands of Soay Mor and Soay Beag that straddle the seaward entrance to West Loch Tarbert, *Halcyon* was swinging to her anchor in Loch Leosavay.

I hung a fishing line over the side and boiled a few potatoes and carrots for dinner, which to my delight were soon joined by a big fat mackerel. The evening weather bulletins of Stornoway Coastguard and the BBC, if not gloomy, were not encouraging, with a forecast of unsettled conditions in the west of Scotland and the

possibility of strengthening wind accompanied by rain. Any hopes I had of sailing to St Kilda were fading fast, but for the present I was in a perfect anchorage and it was blissfully peaceful. I had enjoyed a good meal and a good read, and when it had become dark I climbed into my sleeping bag and slept through the night completely undisturbed.

A peculiar hissing noise and repeated thumps against the hull had me leaping out of my bunk and into the cockpit at 7 a.m., just in time to see the tails of two otters diving under *Halcyon* after fish. I dashed below to get my camera but they had gone when I got back on deck, so I inflated the dinghy and, when breakfast was over, rowed ashore, hoping to stock up with fresh food at a small shop I had noticed on the edge of the loch.

Two friendly American ladies busy writing postcards outside the shop asked if I was 'the guy from the sailboat in the bay', and when I said 'yes' the elder of the two reached in her handbag and produced a wad of photographs of a boat very similar to *Halcyon*, and said that she and her late husband had built it in Florida and sailed it up and down the east coast of America and out to the Bahamas. 'Charlie and me worked our butts off for over two years buildin' that sailboat,' she declared proudly. 'We sailed it thousands of miles and had us a great time till he got sick and died. Ah sure do miss the sonofabitch!'

It had started to rain steadily and I stood under a nearby lean-to, leafing slowly through the photographs of a wooden boat in various stages of construction; the launch day when the boat and everything around it seemed to be festooned with the American flag, and shots of her husband and herself in shorts and T-shirts relaxing on deck in the sun, eating ice cream. 'It's not a day for eating ice cream on my boat,' I laughed, handing her the photographs back, 'and it would be hard work trying to build a wooden boat outdoors in Scotland. We could do with some of your Florida weather!'

'I guess so,' she smiled, 'but if you had the weather you wouldn't have the unique atmosphere of the islands and the hills, with the mist and the deer and all. We ain't got nothing like it in the States. We ain't got no castles either.' Gesturing towards the gaunt bulk of Amhuinnsuidhe (Avan-soo-ee) Castle, a large stone-built house with a turret that dominated the landscape above the loch, she went on, 'My friend here discovered that even this goddam hotel we're staying in is a castle a dook built for his lady.'

'Sure did,' her friend agreed, 'and it's so romantic I can hardly wait to tell the folks back home.'

The rain began to pour in torrents and, suddenly remembering they had booked a car to take them on a tour of Harris, they thrust their postcards into the mail box and set off towards the castle. 'Have a nice day,' they called. 'Hope this lousy weather clears up for you.'

‘And for you,’ I shouted back.

As I sheltered from the rain and watched them go, I felt I should have told them that the real history of the castle is far from being a romantic story; but it would have tarnished the starry-eyed image they had of the ‘dook’ and his lady. I had read a lot about Amhuinnsuidhe and the ladies would have been very disappointed to learn that it was built not by a Duke but by an Earl, a title several notches below a Duke in the British aristocratic pecking order.

The location of Loch Leosavay is so breathtakingly spectacular it is the perfect setting for a house, and Charles, 7th Earl of Dunmore, who owned Harris in 1867, thought so too, and ploughed a fortune into building a country retreat for his wife Gertrude, the daughter of the Earl of Leicester. Unhappily for the Earl, she was a lady with expensive tastes who preferred the social life of London and was not very enamoured with her husband’s passion for spending time in his Hebridean wilderness. Desperate to prove to his lady that the Harris rain, the lively ferry crossing from the mainland, the gales, the appalling roads of the time and the midges could be just as endearing as the continual round of parties, gossip, intrigue and fashionable balls that were the London season, he poured his heart and his cash into a flamboyant castle and gave it the rather lovely name of Amhuinnsuidhe which, in Gaelic, means ‘Sitting by the River’.

The American ladies might have been won over by the story so far and thrilled by the Earl’s devotion to his wife, but it would have ruined their holiday to hear that, when the hard-hearted Gertrude was taken to see the finished castle, she shattered her husband’s dream by scathingly dismissing his token of affection for her, saying ‘it wasn’t as big as a hen house or a stable at her father’s house’. Poor Charles must have despaired of his demanding wife but, still frantic to please her, he had an extra wing built on the castle. Alas, she was still unimpressed; worse, the castle drained away all his cash and he went bust. Huge amounts of money had been lavished on Amhuinnsuidhe, yet no member of the Dunmore family ever enjoyed the pleasure of living in it.

The Earl’s bankers sold the castle and numerous notable people have since owned it, including Sir Tom Sopwith, the flying ace. In 1913 James Barrie, the author of *Peter Pan*, stayed there and was inspired to write his play *Mary Rose*. In 2003, the 55,000 acre North Harris estate, which included the castle, was bought in a joint bid of over £4 million by the residents of North Harris and a businessman, Ian Scarr-Hall. The shooting rights were leased back to Mr Scarr-Hall, who also bought the castle and the fishing rights. The castle is now an exclusive and superbly appointed country hotel.

Donald Angus, my old shipmate on the fishing boats, used to say there were three things a visitor to Harris should not miss, Amhuinnsuidhe Castle, the island of Scarp, and the Norwegian whaling station in Loch Bunavoneadar at the head of

West Loch Tarbert. A study of the chart showed that Bunavoneadar was only five miles away and, preferring to be on the move in pouring rain rather than be cooped up in the cabin, I pulled on my oilies, started the engine, heaved up the anchor, and towing the dinghy astern ploughed a furrow through the grey water of the loch.

There was no wind and the rain had pushed the cloud down low on the hills, making visibility patchy. The chunky islands of Soay Mor and Soay Beg in the middle of the loch were easy to identify, but I stared ahead trying in vain to spot a group of four islets called Duisker that were mere pinpricks on the chart. My Gaelic dictionary was little help with the meaning of Duisker but I found that *duis* (*doosh*) meant mist. About a mile further up the loch the Gaels must have baffled the Admiralty chart-makers by calling another prominent rock Duisker, but I never saw either of them and if there is a Gaelic word that means Lost in the Mist it would suit them better.

Despite the restricted visibility there were no hazards entering Loch Bunavoneadar. A conspicuous chimney mentioned in the Pilot Book was an ideal beacon and easy to see in the torrential rain, and I dropped anchor close to an old slipway and rowed ashore. It was a dismal day and hopeless for photography, but there was little left to photograph anyway. Donald Angus had told me that the whaling station had been established by the Norwegians before the 1914–18 war, and was bought by Lord Leverhulme, the soap magnate, in 1920.

He saw it as a useful addition to a fish-processing enterprise he had built in the Sound of Harris, and chartered three Norwegian whaling ships to keep the plant supplied. His intention was to transport the extracted oil to his soap-manufacturing empire at Port Sunlight, near Liverpool, and use the whale meat to make sausages for exporting to Africa. There was no limit to Leverhulme's enthusiasm and determination to create industry and employment for the islanders; but, although over 6,000 tons of meat were processed, the venture never caught on and in 1930 the station closed down. It was re-opened by the Norwegians in 1950 and Donald Angus was hoping to give up the hard life on the fishing boats and get a permanent job with them; but before he was taken on the venture was declared uneconomical and the buildings and plant abandoned to plunderers and the ravages of the weather.

I wandered round what I thought would have been the processing site, but the only trace left was the crumbling slipway, some steps and the chimney. Given that the world has at last developed a conscience about the destruction of whales, it was not a place to be glorified but, if the chimney was the original one built before the 1914–18 war, it was a monument to its builders and seemed worthy of listed building status.

Back on board, I made a lunch of hot soup and coffee and unfolded an Ordnance Survey map of the area. Loch Bunavoneadar was well sheltered and lay at the foot of Clisham, at 799 metres the highest mountain in Harris, and had it been a fine,



*Clisham, Harris
stands at
799 metres*

clear day it would have been a perfect opportunity to leave *Halcyon* safely at anchor and climb it. But the low cloud hung like a thick curtain over the landscape and the rain showed no sign of easing. Clisham would have to wait for another day.

The cloud was still low and the visibility poor when I dropped anchor off Amhuinnsuidhe again and the damp, humid conditions were perfect for that scourge of all Scottish Tourist Boards, *Culicoides impunctatus*, the Scottish midge. One of the species of biting midges, biting is their speciality, and with gnashing teeth, they swarmed in millions through every door and ventilator on *Halcyon*, and life in the cabin was miserable. They devoured the midge repellent on my face and arms as though it was chocolate fudge and, desperately searching through lockers for anything that would relieve the burning pain, I discovered a box of mosquito coils.

The instructions promised that, once ignited, the contents would protect the user from all biting insects, and though it was alarming to read that they were for outdoor use only and I should not breathe the smoke, I had reached the stage where I would rather die of asphyxiation than be eaten alive by these flying carnivores. Desperate for rapid results, I lit two coils instead of the recommended one, and within minutes thick, acrid smoke spiralled upwards and the interior of the cabin was like a kippering plant. I was choking for breath, but so were the midges, and in a flash they stampeded for the fresh air and were gone.

When I covered the coils and opened all the hatches I half expected the onslaught to return, but word must have got around and I was left in peace. I spent an uncomfortable night though, gingerly dabbing painful flesh with anti-histamine cream and vigorously scratching parts of me where no self-respecting midge ought to have ventured.

Unable to sleep, I crawled on deck draped in my sleeping bag like a duvet quilt, and at first light watched the newborn Hebridean day emerge from the night. The clouds had lifted and were spread across the hilltops like a gigantic grey blanket, and a pale sun was doing its best to climb over it into the sky. It was low tide, and on the shore a large red deer stag and a group of hinds nibbled cautiously at seaweed, and there was not a sound save for the occasional squabbling oystercatcher and the cry of a lapwing. The American lady was right. The vagaries of Scotland's weather had lots of compensations.

Splashes in the water and a thump against *Halcyon's* hull were signs that the otters were harassing the mackerel again, and when I hung a line over the side I was quickly rewarded with a couple of fish for breakfast. When the sun had warmed the air I ate them in the cockpit, freshly grilled, with buttered toast and fresh coffee. Basking in the sun and feeling *Halcyon* rock gently with the movement of the tide was idyllic, but Stornoway Coastguard's morning weather bulletin spoilt it by revealing that the low-pressure system they had been warning about, but which had remained stationary out in the Atlantic, was now on the move again. It seemed I had but a few days more to see as much of the west coast of Harris and Lewis as I could, and I spread out the charts to plan a route.

The third of Donald Angus's trio of 'must see' places in Harris was the island of Scarp and, by good fortune, the island and Caolas an Scarp, the narrow stretch of water that separated it from Harris and provided access to lochs beyond, was barely five miles away, close to the entrance to West Loch Tarbert. Caolas an Scarp was shallow, and to safely cross a sandbar at its narrowest point I would have to be there about half flood. There was a light wind from the south-west that would take me through very nicely.

The only real problems were three extensive patches of rocks to steer clear of before I reached Caolas an Scarp: Taransay Glorigs and Huisinis Glorigs, with a channel about two miles wide between them, and a nasty group called Old Rocks further to the west. My Gaelic dictionary offered no help with the meaning of 'glorig,' but they were dangerous hazards and might be difficult to see if there was any swell running, so I sailed from Loch Leosavay with a line of plots on the chart that would keep me well away from them.

There was a moderate swell, probably caused by the forecasted approaching low-pressure area out in the Atlantic but, despite a roller-coaster ride, I made good time under all sail. The seas were breaking with tremendous force on Huisinis Glorigs and on Old Rocks, sending spray high into the air, and I was glad when I rounded the cliffs of Huisinis Point; but even in the entrance to Caolas an Scarp the sea was white and confused so, to prevent a gybe at the wrong time, I hove to and dropped the mainsail. Steering was much easier under mizzen and jib, and in the lee of Scarp I was able to drop anchor off an old stone jetty and row ashore.



Above: Butt of Lewis lighthouse

Below: 'Can't let that fish go to waste' – a seal in Stornoway harbour

Opposite page: Port of Ness harbour

