

Shannon and South West Ireland

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I was with my Margaret and John Brown in Solace a "swing keel" Southerly 33. We had traversed the Barrow Navigation and were now travelling west on the Grand Canal in Eire through The Bog of Alan and on to Shannon Harbour. This upper part of the Shannon was divorced from the sea in 1929 when a barrage was created near Limerick.

Initially we turned right, crossed Lough Ree and visited the upper reaches. It was almost bucolic but with John picking the blackberries for Margaret to make crumble I thought it time to turn and head seaward. At Athlone Margaret and I were invited aboard a big plush motorboat by its German owner and English wife. Those who new John would not be surprised by his disdain for such social carrying ons. It transpired that this was just the owners small boat he kept on the Shannon, he had his proper one closer to home. We were amused by his disdain for his fellow countrymen, who it seemed, mostly peopled the many hire boats. Refusing apparently to talk to them in their own language

A gale arrived so we retreated into a rather primitive marina cut into the river bank. Boats were merely arranged bow on to the bank and we squeezed into a gap and there we were a row of us side by side. Standing in the cockpit we watched a sizeable, lofty, hire boat which when broadside to the wind drifted sideways and impaled itself across the sterns of several boats adjacent to us. Our previous acquaintance was right the German boat handling was not up to much. I surmised that if his bow thruster had any effect, all that would happen was that he would smash our mast, which projected over our stern. Margaret admonished me but nevertheless I set off in an attempt to affect the situation.

Clambering over a raft of dinghies, I scaled the rear of the offending boat. In case there was a language difficulty I addressed a young lady there slowly but with authority, asking for a long rope. This she provided. I passed it round a strong point ashore and cleated each end aboard. I then shouted firm orders to the helmsman up aloft to put power on ahead. He did and the boat slowly pivoted round, tethered as it was at its starboard quarter. As we came up into the wind I slipped the line and ordered the helmsman to head straight out through the entrance. As we did so I heard John's stentorian call " don't be long Ken your cocoa is getting cold". I climbed up to the helmsman's lofty eyrie. Allowing for possible language difficulty I gave instructions slowly but firmly with helpful gesticulation. " Make a big loop". " Enter at speed". "Hard right". "Hard astern". We "clewed up". I was aware of my presumption but nevertheless stony faced silence seemed a bit much. However it was at this moment that realisation slowly dawned, the crew were Irish not German. I mumbled a few words and nipped

ashore. As I walked back to Solace, with I sensed, a lot of eyes watching me, the probability dawned on me, the helmsman possibly did not appreciate that it was my trick with the rope that saved the situation. He thought he had done it himself with his puny bow thruster.

Margaret was embarrassed by my actions, "how could you be so arrogant". " Agreed, but I need that mast to get back home". My cocoa was cold.

I hired a car and took John to Dun Laoghaire for the ferry to England and swapped him for son Howard and a fellow university student. We set off south and then crossed Lough Derg to arrive at Killaloe where the headrace canal leads to the main Shannon dam itself. This is the location of what was the largest hydro-electric scheme in the world when it was commissioned soon after Ireland obtained its independence in 1922. It was at the time, apparently, capable of supplying the country's total electricity needs. Locking down into the tidal river below was in two stages each with a fall of about fifty feet. There were two points of interest, firstly that there be sufficient rise of water in the tidal river below, but not too much, to allow clearance under a bridge and secondly, stories were told that if the Ardnacrusha power station should commence generation, then" riding the rapids" would be experienced. No excitements occurred.

We locked into Limerick harbour which was empty apart from us. Google Earth shows it still to be so. Margaret left for home from nearby Shannon Airport. The three of us remaining, set about raising the forty feet mast in its tabernacle using the anchor windlass. I carried out this process many times in different places. I had confidence in my temporary rigging arrangement but nevertheless it was never possible to entirely erase from the mind that mental picture of it crashing back down and destroying itself. It never did. Solace was reborn, no more a dishevelled floating caravan but now ready for the challenge of her intended habitat.

We dropped downriver to Kilrush and stayed the night in the newly built marina which had been funded by the EU. There were few boats then and again, looking on Google Earth, it appears, twenty six years later, to be still only half full.

Exiting the Shannon , excitement, " Dolphins". We rushed to the bow and lay flat. I had been lucky enough to see the show a few times before but it was still thrilling. A dolphin appears on one side passes close under the forefoot to the opposite side and then leaps out of the water, immediately followed by one going in the other direction. The whole pod continues this game for about twenty minutes, presumably become bored, and disappear. Here with the water so clear, it was possible to

recognise individuals, mainly by scarring on their "faces". We passed Kerry Head, entered Tralee bay and anchored in lee of the harbour at Fenit. Next we made the long haul round to Castletown Bearhaven in Bantry Bay. There was little to say that this had once been an important British naval base. The Irish independence agreement left the base in UK hands until in 1938, deeming it no longer useful it was relinquished. In twenty years its value in combatting Germany's U boats apparently already forgotten. So egregious was its loss to the navy that Churchill even considered a "coup de main" to retake it early in the war.

Our next foray took us to Kinsale. We made fast in the Marina and my crew departed. I contemplated continuing homeward single handed but the prospect had no appeal. I made the boat secure, caught a bus to Cork and then the overnight coach which dumped me at the Victoria coach station in London. Then, clean sheets, soft bed, the delights of home, why rough it on that boat? But after a few days feet started to itch. I rang Ray, he was free. It was then that I changed my mind. Why bring Solace home when it was in some of the best cruising grounds around these shores? I decided to take her back to Kilrush and lay up there. Our trip out was on a nascent Ryanair flight. Who's fault it was that we arrived at Shannon airport instead of Cork I'm not sure. Some country bus trips erased the error.

We set off to the west and had passed Baltimore when listening to the shipping forecast, force ten was heard. Our attention level rose sharply when area Fastnet was mentioned, after all the said rock was actually in view. Better look for cover. I rejected Clear Island which was close too. Perhaps because of a general aversion to small harbours close to deep water, even though the entrance may be well baffled and can protect from waves it might not dampen a surge.

We entered Crookhaven. There was one yacht anchored off the village but I did not fancy it, too long a fetch down the harbour I thought. Was there a strong vacant mooring anywhere? No. What was it like in the unused part up harbour? Soft said the fisherman. So there we went. I had a one hundred metre length of heavy warp on board, so we dragged the hefty CQR from below, put it on the end and paid out quite a bit of it from the expected direction of the blow. We put the bower anchor on its chain down to leeward, backed up, joined the warp to chain, lowered it to the bottom and there we were, well moored. We both turned in and slept soundly. If it did blow hard in the night we didn't observe it. By the morn it was strong but not fierce. Over the years force ten was suggested for the sea area I was in on two occasions, this one and a few years earlier, when coincidentally, we were at Schull, just next door.

We went ashore, walked to a headland, peered towards Mizen Head and mustered just enough conviction to

give it a go. It was a hard grind to windward initially but we soon turned the corner to sail free the full length of Bantry Bay to Glengarriff. Then next day back the way we came, to cut through inside Dursey Island, under the cable car which joins it to the Bear peninsular and so on to Sneem in the Kenmare river. Kenmare is not a river or a bay, more a loch (or lough). When General de Gaulle abdicated he came to Sneem to hide from the Press and Paparazzi.

The next day found us close hauled, Greater and Lesser Skelligs to windward, on port tack, in a strongish westerly, sun shining, a sizeable sea running in from the Atlantic, spray coming aboard and us hoping to clear the outliers without tacking. I clamped on two spokes of helm and we two hid under the sprayhood, alternating book reading and lookout, while Solace shouldered her way to windward without aid of human hand or autopilot. She did this for best part of two hours unattended and laid the imaginary mark. It was one of those sailing experiences that stay in the memory. One regret, I never did get to visit Derrynane which we passed to leeward.

I saw that Valentia Island was joined to the mainland by a lifting bridge, so in one way, out the other, thought I. When we tried to anchor off Portmagee, was when I finally gave up on my Bruce pattern bower anchor. It may have been poor holding but when, exasperated, we humped the big CQR up, attached a length of chain, then my hefty warp, it bit straight away. Paddling back in the dark Solace was not where left. We tracked her down, went aboard and turned in. Sleep was not likely as she continued to gallop round the anchorage, doubtless due to vagaries of wind and current but also the result of riding to a warp rather than chain. We decamped to a friendly mooring buoy we had noticed in daylight. Sleep occurred.

It turned out that opening the bridge was a major undertaking so we left the way we came and headed across the bay to Dingle. Dingle harbour has a narrow entrance but then widens out. We were motoring towards the marina when suddenly, something close beside the cockpit." Did you see that Ray". "See what". Then, watching we saw it clearly, a large dolphin leapt half out of the water immediately beside and almost touching the hull. We looked at each other in amazement. Then it happened again, then again and several times more. Excitement indeed. In the strong crosswind we were crabbing badly as we were making for the marina. A small welcome party caught us and made us secure. We told them of our dolphin experience. Oh that's just Fungie they said. Indeed ashore we found that you could buy Fungie postcards. Now, looking on the internet it seems he is still in residence.

We enquired after showers. We were directed to a pink fronted B and B. We completed our ablutions followed by a "Full English", well an "Irish Full English". Of course

it might have been just a "Full Irish". Whatever, it was the same as an English "Full English".

When we left, Fungie accompanied us back across the harbour, but of course this was now just routine.

We continued between the Dingle peninsula and Great Blasket being wary of the submerged rock that apparently accounted for one of the Spanish Armada. Sailing close under tall cliffs we made our way to Fenit again, where we were made welcome in the Tralee Bay Sailing Club. I see that a marina was subsequently built there with EU money.

We passed into the Shannon estuary, experienced another meeting with dolphins and locked into the Kilrush marina. Solace was supported, keel housed, on two baulks of timber for the winter.



I presume that, exiting from the stygian gloom, we have just passed under a portcullis type gate and are readying for a second fifty feet drop at Ardnacrusha.

In Limerick harbour we appear to be nearly fit for seagoing. Just above the spreaders you may see an ill shaped blob which is in fact the radar reflector. This originally as you might expect was in a plastic housing. The housing disintegrated after about three years use. I remember taking a piece of the casing in my pocket onto the London boat show stand of the manufacturer's. They were unsympathetic to my complaint. I produced the piece, dropped it on to their carpet and crushed it to dust. My demonstration brought no benefit