

Donegal West & South.

Wild Cats Summer Cruise 2015

Or

Close Encounters of the Clutch Kind

20 -26 June 2015

*Fahan- Tory Is - Teelin - Killybegs - Portnoo – Burtonport –
(Fahan)*



The 2015 summer cruise was planned as an exploration of my local waters. Despite over 14 years in the northwest of Ireland, I had not ventured much beyond the Northern coast of Donegal. Although the Donegal coast had been calling for some time, other coasts had won over and our own home waters had been somewhat neglected. So 2015 was time to put it right and we would gain Donegal bay.

It was also to be a "back to basics" or "Riddle of the Sands" adventure. The mast on my Westerly Falcon, Viking Lord, had been damaged so she was out of commission for 2015. Wild cat is an International H boat which is normally raced on Lough Swilly. Based on the folk boat design & with a 50% ballast ratio she is a capable sea boat but boasts few, if any, home comforts. Still with a couple of snug bunks, a single stove, a selection of buckets and a credible drinks locker what more would one need. Auxiliary power was via a 4HP outboard and is not much use in a sea. Basically we would be sailing wherever we wanted to go. Another novel experience on a cruise !



Wild Cat under the Torrs of Tory

Sat 20 June

Mid summers day

Myself and Eimile, my eldest daughter returned from uni, slipped our lines in Fahan and set off for Tory. Very soon we had a following breeze. The spinnaker had been included in the sail wardrobe and was retrieved from the jumble in the fore peak. A fine start to the cruise - spinnaker reaching with a wind behind.

It was not too last. The Southwesterly dropped before Dunree Head and veered northwest. We were beating the rest of the way to Tory. Our long tacks brought us close under the steep cliffs of Horn Head and the imposing Torrs at the east end of Tory. The cliffs brimmed with squawking sea birds and Puffins were in abundance. They are clumsy flyers and often struggled to airborne ahead of our approaching vessel. Even though we offered no threat and did not mean to disturb.

We made Canusmore bay just before 21:00 and found a berth in the harbour. Midsummer was quiet on Tory. There were few visitors and the King, Patsy Dan did not appear to be in residence. We are regular visitors to Tory Island and look forward to a warm welcome and a bit of banter with Patsy Dan. Dinner was steak a la mode with fried onions & crispy cheese & onion cakes. Quite delicious. We took refreshment in the Hotel but forwent the bawdy late night pleasures of "An Club". Late nights in the social club are legendary and a fine venue to herald the descent into winter.

Sunday 21 June

Tied up Tory Harbour

Midsummer past and Day 2 of the cruise was cool, wet & breezy. With a F6 from SW we decided to stay put. No visit to Tory is complete without a walk to the Derek Hill hut. The view from here of NW Donegal is quite simply unique and captivating. It compelled the artist Derek Hill and is a near obsession with local artists. There is something about the quality of the light and the wide vista of coast & majestic mountains that is spell bounding. The front passed in late afternoon and we were rewarded with fresh clean air, clearing skies and frisky birdsong to add to the Derek Hill experience. Highly recommended.

We dined in the Hotel. Service was friendly and the salmon steaks were simply cooked but easily the tastiest we had both had in some time.

Monday June 22

Tory to Teelin

A dull and dreary dawn but the wind had eased and promised to veer in our favour. Time to press on and make for Donegal Bay. An unsettled sea was still running and the motion was uncomfortable. Cloud was low and visibility poor. I must have forgotten to pack the sea-legs. The going was tough. Cooking on the hoof usually presents little problem but this morning the smell of bacon was not helping. Eimile, at the helm, was revived by a bacon butty but I wasn't enjoying this particular stage of the summer cruise.

With a moderate westerly breeze and the tide in our favour we made great progress on a beam reach through the chop. The northern chain of islands, Inishirrer, Inishmeane & Gola were hard to identify but by mid-morning we had Aranmore lighthouse on our beam.

The afternoon brought clearing skies and a moderate breeze. Wild cat under sail was in her element and the mood on board lightened with the improving conditions. Sea legs reporting for duty at last. Rathlin O'Birne was sighted. We transited Rathlin O'Birne Sound in fine goose-wing style and made our entry into Donegal Bay. A first for boat, skipper and crew.

In Donegal Bay the Sun shone, the sea eased and the magnificence of the mountain-rimmed horseshoe was clear to be appreciated- Slieve League, Benbulbin & Knochmaree. Eimile, who is studying geophysics, was enthralled by the twists, bends and turns of the rock making up Slieve League. I was fascinated by the remnants of watch towers on Glen Head, Malin Beg head and heads. They were not from the age of Anglo-Irish chieftains but of a similar vintage to the telegraph tower on Malin Head and indicated a political era which has since passed. These towers which are square in outline and unlike the round Martello towers of a similar period, were built in the early 19th century in response to the threat of

a Napoleonic invasion. The attempted landings by the French in 1798 must have seriously spooked the authorities and the Donegal coast warranted special attention.



Square Tower on Carrigan Hd

We tied up in the serene & picturesque Teelin Harbour. The skipper of the fishing charter "Nuala Star" welcomed us in and took us alongside. He had time for a bit of light banter despite suffering the ill effects of a dodgy oyster from the previous evening. A warm reception to top off a fine days sail.

We took the short dander to the Rusty Mackerel for refreshment. Custom was quiet on a Monday evening but the episode of Coronation Street on the telly was complimented by a soap opera taking place on the very premises. The landlord & landlady got into exchanging a few unpleasantries which culminated in a walk out with a pack of fags and a slammed door. Difficult to know which way to look but I would trust it's not a regular occurrence. A good pub with a great name and an acceptable stroll from the pier.

Tues 23 June

Teelin to Killybegs

Awoke to a fine morning and a burst of activity in the harbour. A fuel tanker arrived and suddenly boats were seeking refilling. I went to assist a brand new Beneteau motor cruiser with his lines and found myself at the helm instead. Charlie said he had just got the boat and I looked like somebody who knew what they were doing. Nice to get a compliment but a little bit daunting taking on somebody else's new pride and joy. I managed to manoeuvre her alongside for refuelling without distorting the gelcoat. The skipper of the Nuala Star then arrived with RTE on tow to make a documentary. Wild Cats lines were cast, Charlie was seen back to his mooring, and we were adrift, heading further into Donegal Bay. Teelin- an enchanting stopover and never a dull moment.

*10:47. 117 Sailing 2kn,
SE F2, calm, vis -excellent, cloud 2/8. 1017 ↑*

Tuesday was an airless day and we drifted slowly eastward. A chance for spot of fishing, sun-bathing and a dip in the tide while going nowhere quickly. Late afternoon we had St. John's Point lighthouse abeam 1/4 nm off. A large dark gray whale surfaced between us and the point heading westward. We turned and sailed after it, watching it on its journey. I estimated it to be about 10m long. The dorsal fin was too far forward for a minke, but other than that I could not be certain of the species. My best guess was a juvenile humpback. A rewarding end to a day's drift.



Adrift in Donegal Bay

*17:55. Tied up Killybegs west pier. 11.5nm run
SW 1-2 calm, cloud 7/8, 1015 ↓*

We decided on Killybegs for the evening and the helpful harbourmaster quickly found us a berth alongside the fishing boat "Eucaci" on the west pier. The Guinness was good and the seafood even better in the Fleet Inn. Delicious monkfish & scallops complimented with a delicate Italian Pinot Grigio/Chardonnay.

Wed 24 June
Killybegs to Portnoo

09:10. Motoring 4kn
F0, calm, 1015 steady

The morning is still and heavy. There is little moving in Killybegs - neither wind, waves nor fishing boats. A worrying amount of ocean-going fishing vessels are tied up in the harbour and are not out catching fish. It may be the off season or possibly an indication of the state of fishing. A marina is under construction and promises to be open for next season, which will be an added inducement for the cruisers on this coast.

11:07 259° motor- sailing 3.5 kts. Muckcross Hd 280° 0.5nm
SW 0-2 calm, vis – fair, 8/8. 1014

Plans to penetrate deeper into Donegal Bay are put on hold for another year. It is an unsettled season and the outlook for end of week is sounding decidedly ominous. Met Eireann alludes to “ a complex series of depressions in mid- Atlantic with embedded frontal systems”. It could go any way, but most likely down hill and a seafood platter in The Lobster Pot, Burtonport is calling out. A good combination for turning round and heading to West Donegal.

14:00 Sailing 4.5kts Malinmore Hd 0.5nm to Sbd.
SSE 3, slight, vis good, 7/8

Wild Cat is singing along again under sail. A warm front has descended and visibility is much reduced on this imposing section of coast. My faithful Garmin handheld has gone on the blink and the free chart plotter on my smart phone has just expired today. So it's back to basics on the navigation front as well. Cliffs are high and steep and there is no welcome refuge from Malin Beg cove until you are past Dawros head. Port beach is guarded by a selection of mean and jagged rocks. It is a spectacular rocky beach, but one best approached from the land rather than by sea.



We passed as close to Roannish as we dared with a depthsounder that was reading "OUT" more often than it was giving meaningful depths. Then we gybed through a series of broad reaches to reach Church Pool off Portnoo. We had this picture postcard anchorage to ourselves and dropped the hook in 5m. There were 2 visitors moorings in place marked with a 15T limit, but I did not wish to chance their providence.

It was a dull evening with a light breeze, but we were cosy and secure, and worries tend to ebb away when you ride on the chain between sand and sea on your own little spot on the Wild Atlantic Way. Dinner was another one pot wonder - chorizo sausage, lentils & veg, liberally seasoned with Fish sauce. Fish sauce must be the discovery of the trip. A galley essential to sit next to the curry powder,

it packs powerful depth into any dish. It's culinary limits are yet undefined and I vowed never to voyage without it again.

18:00 at anchor, Church Pool (N54 50.822 W08 26.844)

SW 3-4, no swell, 8/8. 1015

Thursday 25 June

Portnoo to Burtonport – *The Riddle of the Beacons*

10:10 005° sailing under jib 3kn

ESE 3, Vis good, dull & drizzly, 8/8, <0.5m. 1013

Our plans made and homework done, we weighed anchor and set off to Burtonport for a seafood platter and the chance of a shower. Our intention was to take the South Sound of Aran approach. The chart indicates least depths of 0.3m SE of Aran so we could expect shallow soundings. We timed our passage to transit the Sound in the last 2 hours of the rising tide and still have a fair tide to carry us down Rutland North Channel into Burtonport harbour. We set only the jib and made a steady 3kn towards Crohy Head. Conditions were good for a first attempt- sea was slight and visibility was sufficient to pick out the marks. The wind was moderate, although it was forecast to freshen and turn duller in the later morning. We made good progress, and picked off the marks in sequence. Ilancrone and Wyon point beacons marked the entrance to the South Sound. There was Turk rock beacon to starboard and the low lying Inishkeeragh Islet on port.

Our pilotage plan was line of sight. The ICC guide warns that GPS plotters cannot be relied upon in narrow channels in this area and recommends good visual pilotage and continuous use of the echo sounder. Back to basics, the way I like it. For the shallow bit we needed to identify Clutch beacon and keep it close to port. Three beacons in line – Carrickbealatroha Upper, Carrickbealatroha Lower & Ballagh Rock- would provide the transit through this shallow patch. The latest edition (2013) of the ICC Guide shows a photograph of Clutch Beacon. A diamond mounted on a steel frame, leaning somewhat off the vertical. There was a hint of decay and I had a passing thought that it looked like a beacon with a limited lifespan! Still the guide was quite recent and we hadn't picked up any navigation warnings. So we kept a close look-out for our next mark –Clutch Beacon.

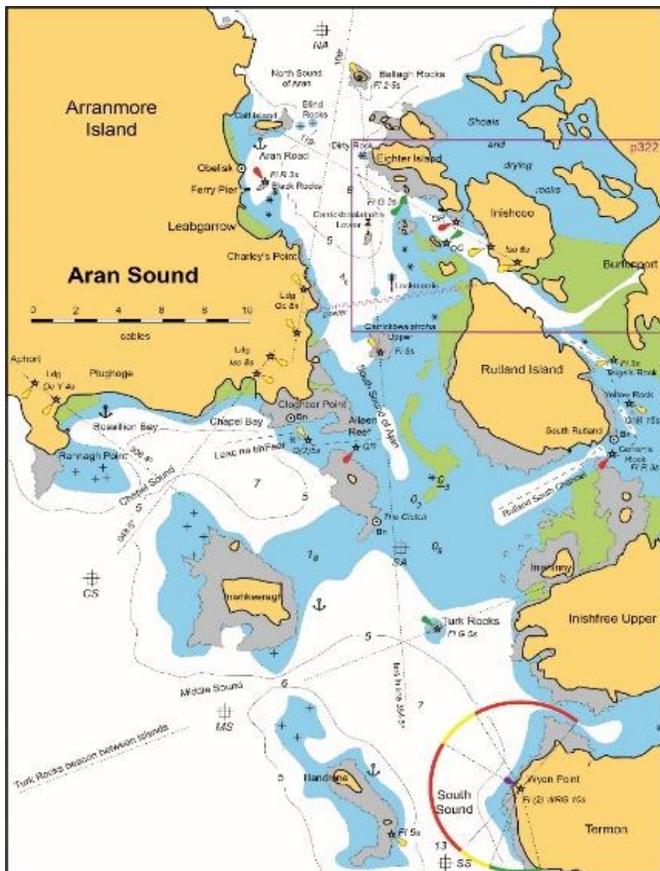
Three beacons in the distance were lined up. We had the pleasant isle of Inishkeeragh on our port, Turk rock on our starboard aft quarter. Depths were as expected but the wind had freshened and our speed had increased. We dropped the jib and started the outboard to keep speed at 3 knots. The anchor was on the foredeck and ready to deploy. And then, breaking the surface a magnificent pod of large dark gray dolphins. They came up alongside and swam with us. A heartwarming sight. There was nothing in their behaviour to suggest anything was amiss but on deck all was not right. We had Inishkeeragh past the beam, the depths were dropping dramatically and I could see the bottom through crystal clear blue water. A bit too close. There was no sign of clutch but I had 3 beacons in line as I should.

Something was amiss. Time for a quick about turn and review of the situation. I put the tiller hard over and got Eimile to give us a bit more from the outboard. It was then we encountered the remnants of Clutch Beacon – a concrete mound sitting just below the waterline and completely

unmarked. The tiller was hard over and we were abeam to the fresh southeasterly breeze and it's chop. Wild Cat wasn't going around fast enough. We hit first on the midships below the waterline. A nasty thud followed by relief. No mercy was shown, the next wave took us onto the mound by the rudder. Another nasty thud and then we were past it.

Assess the damage. Eimile went below, no water in the bilges. We had propulsion but the tiller was locked to port and would not go past the centreline. In this position we were going around again and in danger of having another encounter with the Clutch remnant. Time for a knife. I cut the elastic restraints on the outboard and we had steerage. Where on South Sound were we and how to get out of it? The pieces came together. Clutch Beacon had given up the ghost but the concrete base was still in place. We had managed to find it. Of the 3 beacons in line I had mistaken Aileen beacon for Carrickbealatraha Upper. Both were of a similar construction and not far distant from each other. The result was that I was further west than I should have been and closer to Clutch than was necessary. Pilotage rectified and with steerage of a sort we pressed on through the Sound. It was all quite clear now and the bilges remained dry.

First option was to pick up a buoy of Arranmore and look below to assess damage. But we had steerage and there was no ingress of water into the bilges. We took passage down Rutland North Channel, dodged a few ferries and entered Burtonport Harbour. Despite the limited steerage and the outboard cutting out in the harbour, we managed to get alongside without too much fuss. Time for a well-earned pint and a seafood chowder lunch. Our cruise had come to an abrupt end.



Clockwise. i) Southern Approach to Aran Sound. ii) Clutch beacon as it used to be iii) The mound on which clutch beacon used to stand, uncovered at LW. Aranmore behind with Aileen reef beacon visible in distance to right. (Photos reproduced, with permission, from ICC Cruising Guide to South & west Ireland)



A dive below confirmed that the leading edge of the rudder had split. The rudder remained firmly attached but it had been dislodged and wouldn't cross from port to starboard. Handy if you wanted to go in circles but not for much else. Nothing else for it but make alternative plans and tuck into one of the finest seafood platters to be served on these shores.

All fittings can be fixed. With the assistance of the Harbourmaster, Manus, Wild Cat was lifted out and Timmy Boyle from Atlantic Composites did a fine job repairing the rudder. I returned 3 weeks later to relaunch and return to Fahan. The summer of 2015 will be long remembered for unseasonal unsettled weather and the weekend of 18-19 July was no difference. Any plans for restful night at anchor of Inishboffin were quashed by another aggressive frontal system over the horizon. We made our dash for Fahan before conditions deteriorated.

After passing Dunree Head in Lough Swilly, we were joined by a pod of large dark grey dolphins. The pod bore a striking similarity to the pod we had encountered just before our close encounter of the third kind with Clutch beacon. On this occasion we were in familiar waters and Saltpans buoy was clear ahead. No worries and a chance to enjoy the company of these marvellous creatures. No hard feelings.

Donegal West and South was over for a year. We had seen some outstanding marine life & dramatic scenery, met new and helpful folk, and learned some hard lessons on our "Riddle of the Beacons" adventure. It is a challenging and unforgiving coast, but one with many rewards and simple pleasures. Wild Cat will return to Donegal West & South.



Paul & Eimile McSorley, Teelin

[Post script - Clutch beacon has been absent since last season and the coastguard advised that it was included in their navigation warnings. We had kept a listening watch on Ch16 when on passage and tuned into all weather and navigation bulletins. I knew that the NW coast often features with notification of lights out of action. We had not picked up any notification about Clutch but we did find that picking up traffic on the working channels was intermittent and variable along the coast. There is a salutatory lesson to be had in updating charts and picking up notices to mariners before embarking on a trip. Hand up to that ! However my searches have not found it listed in chart corrections to date. More surprisingly coastguard bulletins are not yet available online, on social media or by smartphone app. So a sailor will set off dependent on local knowledge, receiving VHF bulletins or navtex for essential pilotage and safety information. I receive regular tweets from Irish Light Buoys around the coast, so surely it would cost little and protect many if coastguard bulletins were broadcast via modern media. There is a gap that needs to be closed.]