

## Merganser in the Inner Hebrides, 2019

....and here we go again!

Unlike last year when we had to follow the boat up the A1, all we had to do was drive to Creran marine, on Loch Creran and about 20 minutes north of Oban. We arrived to find the boat launched and ready but, on closer inspection, not quite so ready: she was damp and wee bit smelly! It turned out that a power surge or similar had done for the 240v system and the battery charger some time before we arrived which meant that the de-humidifier had most definitely not been doing its job for a while.

Despite the technical problems which were not fixable at Creran, we opted for some elbow grease and then a quick departure to head south in the direction of Ardfern marina where we were assured technical assistance was available! Anyway, who needs 240v when out in the islands!



So off south we went in cold, calm conditions, on April 20<sup>th</sup>. It was noticeably colder than last year's kick-off in Mid May. Next stop a lovely anchorage called



Puilladobrain near Clachan Sound, location of the famous 'Bridge across the Atlantic' (pictured) between the mainland and the island of Seil. After a lovely walk and explore we realised that vital diabetic equipment had been left in the car at Creran so we headed North back to Oban where Liz summoned a Taxi to complete the balance of the return

journey to Creran for a successful retrieval operation!!

Next day was a clear, cold and foggy start as we headed south once again. We motored past the old slate-mining town of Easdale and then south down the sound of Luing and on through a quiet Corryvreckan at almost slack tide. Even

on a calm day there is a feeling of uneasiness here given all the stories of death and disaster and the way the water boils and heaves unpredictably as it bounces off the rocky bottom and the canyon walls of Scarba and Jura.

By this stage a brisk Southerly was building and we kept in close as we headed south along the west coast of Jura. This is a wild, wild coast with long stony beaches covered in plastic waste from fisherman and commercial traffic. No houses to be seen at all and few features or viable landing spaces until we reached Loch Tarbert (yes, another one!) which almost splits the island in two about half-way down, just a few miles from the famous Paps of Jura. Plenty of seals everywhere though!



Outer Loch Tarbert is about 4 miles long and has good anchorages North and South with reefs here and there. With the wind picking up we headed up to the narrows at Cumhann Mor and entered inner Loch Tarbert where we turned hard to starboard and anchored in sheltered bay called Caridh Mhor. By this point the trusty seadog was desperate for a run ashore so we had a good walk across the headland back to the magnificent raised beaches we passed on the way through the narrows. There are raised beaches all over this coast, caused



when the ice melted and the land, relieved of the weight, sprang back up and left the beaches high and dry. This amazing example seems to remain as it was 1m years ago. To remind us of the wild nature of this

coastline a large black adder, basking amongst the pebbles, warned us off with some fearsome hissing!



Having waited for the tide to build we carried on up inner Loch Tarbert and entered the narrows at Cumhann Beag where the tide boils through at many knots. The channel is so narrow and winding that things happen very fast as



the leading stones in the form of banded pillars appear and disappear. This is a spectacular 'gorge' following ancient fault lines and it is all well worth the nail-biting! The CCC guide quietly says: "yachtsmen must be warned that there are spring rates of more than 8 knots throughout the channel". So we breathed a sigh of relief as we dropped anchor at the

Halfway Anchorage. With steep banks and cliffs all around we had peace...and a chance for a well-deserved beer after a long day.

But boy, was it worth it! We woke to sunny weather and an even better forecast. Over the next 2 days we explored the 'Top Pool' and walked right across to the East coast of Jura. We also walked up into the hills to the North of us and did a wonderful circular walk, passing by a 'Bothy' set up for (very



infrequent according to the guest book) walkers doing the round Jura walk. We were mostly in shorts and a light

jumper despite it being April 22<sup>nd</sup> and made the most of 2 miraculous days of spring weather. Interestingly there is no bracken growth at this time of year so walking across the moors was easy and the display of wildflowers simply amazing. Tics galore too..we had to clear ourselves and the dog after every expedition in the wilds.

We would have loved to stay longer but the wind was gradually getting up and the forecast deteriorating so we left loch Tarbert on the 24<sup>th</sup> in a building NE

and headed south for the shelter of the Sound of Islay. The venturi effect of the Paps of Jura meant that the wind gradually built to 45knots so we anchored close in on the Jura shore in the most sheltered spot we could find. Our first otters of the season hunting along the rocks by the shore kept us amused for a while, as did lunch and a book as we waited for the white horses in the channel to abate and tell us that slack tide approached. This was

important because our selected stopover to sit out the coming bad weather was Port Askaig on Islay (pictured right with Paps behind) where the fishing harbour is tiny with a very narrow entrance...the type



that gives you 'one chance'! Once in out of the wind we tucked in alongside a local fishing boat and within 50m of the Pub...perfect!

It should be noted that, almost a week into our trip, we had come across just one other cruising boat – a single handed French multi-hull sailor who had sailed non-stop from Brittany to Loch Tarbert, Jura. So, we had Port Askaig to ourselves, together with a few fishermen, which was just as well as there was no space left if anyone else turned up!

For the next couple of days the weather broke down and wind and rain came in from the West. This gave an excellent opportunity to hire a car and explore Islay. When the weather cleared we walked some of the coast paths in the far



north around Loch Gruinart where



zillions of Barnacle Geese over-winter, on the West coast at Machir bay near the deserted chapel at Kilchoman and in the South West at Portnahaven, which has the tiniest pub imaginable and a picture on the wall of 100 foot Atlantic waves coming straight over Orsay Island and its lighthouse. Of course we visited distilleries: Ardbeg and Bruichladdich for the full tour and a quick look at Lagavulin and Laphroaig as well, along the famous 'Whisky mile'.

Strangely enough, after hours spent on research in the local pub in Askaig we decided that the less known Bunnahabhain was our favourite! Sadly, after 2 days looking across the sound of Islay towards the Paps we never actually saw them and were not able to 'bag' these famous hills.



On the evening of Day 3 the wind died away and we carefully

reversed out of our haven and set off around the Southern end of Jura and across the Sound of Jura, rounding the Southern end of Gigha, anchoring in a perfect spot at Gighalum. This little island is a one-house place and was the summer holiday home for many years to Mersea friends Mark and Sarah Barry. A truly idyllic getaway, it is tucked behind the much larger Gigha away from the weather. We proved that there are fish around its shores and the birdlife was spectacular, including a large number of very angry Pink Foot Geese taking the opportunity to nest pre-season while it is deserted.

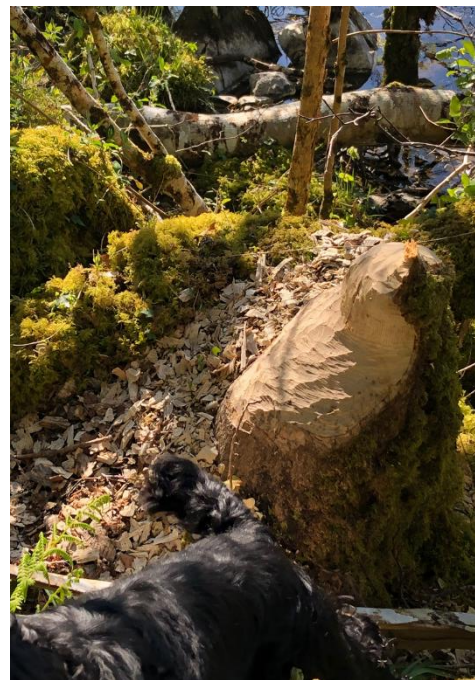
Having 'done' Gigalum we moved to Ardminish Bay on Gigha where we took the bikes ashore and explored the Island. The geology here is fascinating because the glaciers never covered this island and there are odd lumps and bumps everywhere. Some great beaches, the famous Achamore house and gardens (sadly getting neglected) and a Halibut farm! We had an expensive fish



meal at the Boathouse Bistro (Halibut of course) and after another morning ashore on the bicycles we decided that Gigha was 'done' and packed up to head north.

On a spectacularly clear evening on April 29<sup>th</sup> we left West Loch

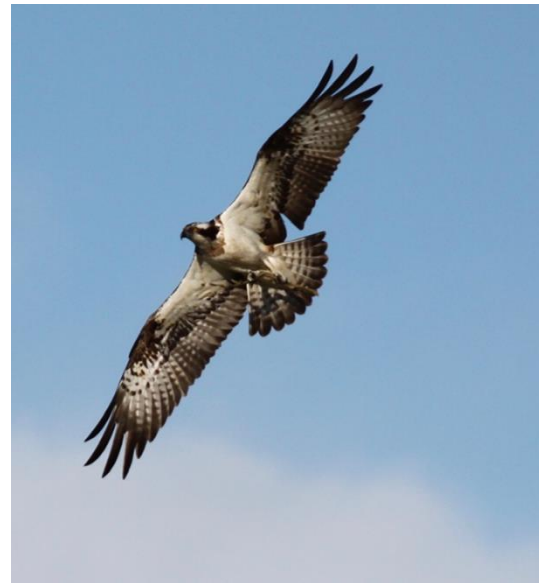
Tarbert and Callisport on the Mull of Kyntyre close to Starboard, the Paps of Jura far to Port and then trundled up Loch Sween, past the impressive castle Sween, and arrived at Tayvallich at dusk. Tayvallich has to be one of the prettiest and most protected harbours in the NW and with indifferent weather we stayed for a few days. The walk through the ancient oak forest park was memorable, as was the trip up Caol Scotnish and the walk up to the deserted village and inland around the freshwater loch where Beavers have been reintroduced. There was evidence of their tree felling activities everywhere but no Beavers to be seen sadly.



The Fairy Islands up Sailean Mhor are also unmissable and a quiet anchorage despite there being a bit of wind around. This whole area is paddle-board heaven. The advantage of this is that you see so much more wildlife as you are



treated as a part of it all. Seals are always inquisitive and I was able to get very close to a pair of Ospreys



nesting. We paddled back in the dinghy later to watch these magnificent birds courting and nest building and for a photo session.

Eventually we decided we had better leave Loch Sween on May 4<sup>th</sup> and continue on our way. We got as far as Loch Keills at the mouth of Loch Sween and after a long walk down the rocky peninsula to Rubha na Cille we got the bikes out again and cycled back to Tayvallich for dinner! On the way back to the boat at dusk we let the dog run the last couple of miles (he has a backpack!) and the deer were bouncing in all directions!

On May 5<sup>th</sup> we left for Ardfern but stopped on the way at an island called Macaskin where local MP Bernard Jenkin and family friends have summer holiday homes. They own and manage the island and we had a good wonder around on this once busy agricultural island where there were signs of previous settlement and farming everywhere, hidden beneath the bracken. Ardfern was a dead loss as the 'engineer' had no clue at all about our electrical problems so we booked the boat in for 10 days in early June, filled up with diesel and set off the next day.



For the first time we re-traced our steps from last year along the southern coast of Mull and fetched up in Ardanish on May 7th and tried several perfect little sandy bays, facing America, until we found 'the' spot with shelter,



good holding and good access ashore. There are many fantastic beaches along the south coast of the Ross of Mull and we had discovered a beautiful spot here last year. In settled weather it would be easy to spend a week in this area. We spent a couple of days exploring the nooks and

crannies and walking into the remote farmland where we stumbled across a large abandoned village that was not documented. I had some good paddle-board fishing and exploring. A sad feature of this bit of coast, exposed to the west, was the amount of garbage, some of it blown way inland by severe weather. We kept a couple of brand-new fenders (one from Canada!) and I replaced the trip line buoy for the anchor, also free of charge. We have made it a habit over the last 2 years to tidy up where we go and stash the plastic waste in caves or otherwise out of sight. On some beaches large 'builders-bags' have been left behind to be filled up and, presumably, collected at a later date. So, having tidied 'our' beach of plastic we were able to relax and have a bonfire and bbq ashore. The life-ring on display was apparently from a Norwegian fishing boat!



On May 10<sup>th</sup> we visited Iona on a gorgeous sunny day. We anchored in Martyrs bay which gives the easiest access ashore and a magnificent view of the Cathedral. We had a stroll ashore and Liz 'did' the cathedral (no dogs) while I





climbed the to the highest point (99m!) and had a wander around the countryside.

Stunning views of Mull in all directions and more lovely beaches. Iona seemed very crowded after the tranquillity we had experienced up to now with ferry-load after ferry-load coming across from the

mainland for a high-speed tour of Iona and then on to Staffa. Hundreds of Chinese and Americans 'doing' the highlands at rapid pace!

We decided to move on as with a forecast of a brisk breeze from the North that evening we needed to get out of the Sound of Iona which is one of those spots where the tide hurries across the shallows and creates a restless and uncomfortable anchorage, even on a good day. So, we headed north for Staffa to take a look at the famous Fingal's cave and all that. It is impressive and the geology is amazing.

There are similar basalt-cooling-rapidly-hexagonal rock-formations all over the Hebrides. The book tells me that this is a result of a massive volcanic eruption (Ben Mhor on Mull was a super-



volcano as was the caldera on Ardnamurchan) that covered the entire area in Magma which as then blanketed by a thick layer of ash and allowed to cool very slowly, thus forming these amazing crystalline formations. We were able to loiter in the mouth of the famous 'cathedral' cave and thereabouts, joining a tripper boat or two, before setting off NE to the island of Ulva, off the West Coast of Mull. As the evening sun started to get lower we wound our way past Gomatra and Little Colonsay, through reefs and channels, to anchor off a Bothy in Craigaig bay in a stiff and chilly Northerly. We went on a spectacular circular



walk on Ulva the next day, following the ancient track along the foot of the highlands and looking at the many ruins of farms and small villages abandoned in the clearances. We then had to climb up to the highest point on the island and on

the 'plateau' there was just us and the ubiquitous red deer. We had seen enough to know that Ulva needed further investigation so in the restless weather we opted for the visitor's pontoons in Ulva Sound (we were only the visitor!) so we could fill up the water tank and get ashore easily with the bicycles.

We were not disappointed, and the small Museum about Ulva life was fascinating. We learned that Lachlan Macquarie, founding father of Australia, was born on Ulva in 1792 and grew up in Ulva house. We also learned about

## The Father of Australia

### A local success story

My name is Lachlan Macquarie. You may know me as "the Father of Australia".

I was born in 1761, not far from here on Ulva. I joined the military when I was 16, during the American War of Independence which gave me a chance to travel the world. Before I died in July 1824 I'd been to North America, Jamaica and Egypt (not bad for a Mullieach) and spent time in India too, where I met my first wife, Jane Jarvis.

I was heartbroken when three years after we married Jane died of tuberculosis. So I returned home to Mull. Here I met Elizabeth Campbell, who was to become my second wife and a great support in my new role as Governor of New South Wales, Australia from 1810 - 1821

It's said I had a crucial influence on the transition of New South Wales from a penal colony to a free settlement, and that I played a major role in the shaping of Australian society in the early nineteenth century. I know all too well that for 11 years, Elizabeth and I toured widely, forged relationships, planned roads, towns and buildings and sought to establish a civilised and stable society.

Ill health and it must be confessed, colonial bickering, led me to offer my resignation three times during my Governorship and when it was finally accepted we returned home in 1822 with our son Lachlan. Our daughter Jane Jarvis had died several years previously in 1808.

We rest here at Jarvisfield in the mausoleum built by the Drummond family. It was donated to the people of New South Wales by Lady Yarborough in 1948 and today is cared for by the National Trust for Scotland and the National Trust of Australia (NSW).

the struggle it was to live on Ulva and feed an ever-growing population (the Chapel is big enough to accommodate 400!). As the population expanded (to 550) they eked out a living growing subsistence crops and harvesting seaweed for fertiliser. But when potash started being shipped in from abroad this 'cash crop' was done for and the local population was starving, and the landlord was

going bankrupt. The only rational thing to do was 'clear' the land and consolidate around one big farm. Maquarie was better than some and paid the tickets for those villages who opted for the 'American Option'.

So after 2 days in Ulva we had walked and cycled a lot of it and explored Ulva House and the estate where we met the one family (population now 5) now running the island from a combination of tourism (the Ferry Boat Inn), deer stalking and agriculture. In the evening we headed across the bay and anchored inside Scarrisdale rocks. Wanting to complete our Lachlan



Maquarie knowledge we cycled to his Mausaleum in Gruline and then across Mull to the sound of Mull at Salen for a beer and a meal. The Maquarie story is quite sad. Here is a man who gave a great part of his life and his health to create a working colony in Australia. While away he asked a relative to invest in land on Mull but this was not cared for in his absence and he lost a great deal of his money. When he 'retired' in bad health, the government of the day did not even give him a pension as compensation for his 30 years in Australia! He died a poor man.

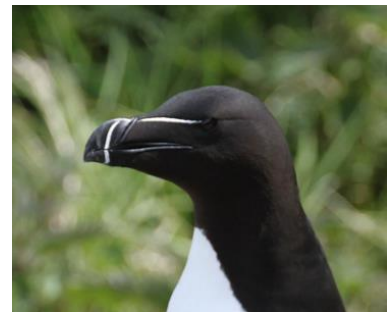
The next day dawned exactly as forecast: sunny, warm and relatively windless. I jumped on the bicycle for the ride 5 miles along the beach to the base of Ben Mhor, the only Munro off mainland Scotland except for the Cuillins of Skye. The book said 6 hours but I had a lovely stroll and it took 3. The views were spectacular and I could pick out the familiar



humps and bumps of the Outer Hebrides where we spent so much time last year. I could also see the Cuillins of Skye to the North and the Paps of Jura to the South East. Meanwhile Liz had taken her bicycle and the dog to explore the picture-postcard village of Knock and the glaciated valley containing Loch Ba.

On May 13<sup>th</sup> we went back to Ulva to pick up a pre-arranged stash of lobster, crab and langoustine. We had arranged this with a local fisherman before leaving 2 days earlier and it worked...the seafood was there waiting in the shed by the ferry slip and we left the appropriate cash in true honesty-box fashion. This was our first proper seafood feast of this season and we had been going a month!

Next day we set off North through Ulva Sound and into Loch Tuath. We spent 24 hours at North harbour, Gometra. This is an almost landlocked natural pool and open to the west for a spectacular sunset. We were up early on the 15<sup>th</sup> to go out to the Treshnish isles before the tourists! It just about worked. The anchorage off Lunga can be described as 'restless' so we were quick to jump in the dinghy and get ashore for an explore. The Puffins, Razorbill



and Guillemots are absolutely everywhere and this was peak nesting season, but no hatchlings yet, just a lot of noise! The dog was fascinated by the noise, quantity and smell of these birds and stood nose to nose with an inquisitive Puffin much to our amusement. We reckon he identified it as an aquatic partridge variant!!

The geology of Lunga is as fascinating as Staffa, with obvious layers upon layers of volcanic lava flows making it look like there are man made fortresses everywhere and the weird island called Dutchman's cap to the South provides

yet another example. Once the tripper boats arrived it was time to go....but not



before watching the ingenious process the tripper boats have invented to get the 'grockels' ashore. The incoming boats first collect a pontoon that is moored in deep water. With this strapped alongside but projecting 5m in front the boat steams into the shore, 'ramming' the ramp up the steeply shelving rock beach, waiting with engines running half-ahead while the tourists get ashore with dry feet. Voila! This is all made necessary because the landing beach is very exposed to wind, strong currents and a considerable tidal range and clearly changes shape all the time.

Still the 15<sup>th</sup>, we set off North and had a close look at the little island of Cairn Beg, with its ruined castle atop a plateau with cliffs all around asking the question...why? Onwards towards loch Cumbhain on NW Mull but a dodgy forecast and warnings in the guidebook about getting 'trapped' in Cumbhain diverted us NW where we fetched up for the evening in Arinagour Bay, HQ for the island of Col. We had visited Col a year earlier, the southern half, in transit to Barra, and were pleased to get the chance to complete our bicycle circumnavigation of this lovely island. The wild Machair and beaches on the West coast are just amazing and the meal we had at the re-vamped Coll Hotel was terrific.



The anchorage at Col was rolling and restless so rather than spend another night there we headed East to the mainland, through the entrance to the Sound of Mull and leaving Mull to Starboard we continued on to Lock



Drumbuie on the Morvern peninsula. This is a very sheltered natural harbour with good holding and a CCC favourite for cruising rallies because there is room for hundreds of boats to anchor, whatever the weather. For the first time almost we could see several other boats at anchor!

Next day, after a spectacular walk up above the Loch, we headed up Loch Sunart in a building westerly breeze. From the mouth to the head of the Loch is over 15 miles. Through Laudale Narrows is a picture perfect hunting lodge/castle with deer grazing on the lawn stretching down to the water. We turned around at Strontian and headed back into a 30k Westerley to anchor on

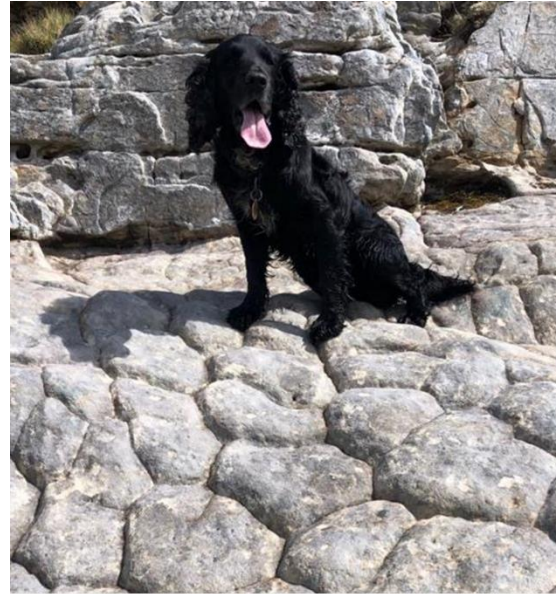


the North shore behind an islet at Garbh Eileen. Here we saw a Sea Eagle do a fly past and otters played on the bank of the

island. After the usual walk and paddle board we headed to the pontoons at

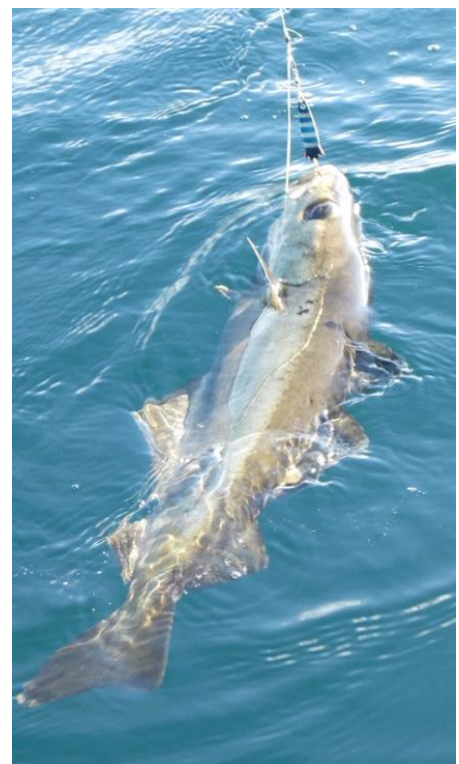
Salen on the 18<sup>th</sup> for a re-stock, water, a lovely walk through the forest and a meal in the pub.

In the morning we headed west and, still within Sunart, we turned to the South into the smaller Loch Teacuis which is a real treasure. The CCC guide book makes both entrances, either side of Carna island, sound very tricky indeed! They require concentration as the tide boils through the narrows of both and there are submerged rocks and eddies



aplenty. To get to the anchorage at the head of Teacuis we went through the shallow narrows dividing the outer n dinner basin and anchored, in splendid isolation,

in the only permissible spot, surrounded by high hills and beautiful scenery and some amazing volcanic rock formations which the dog is showing off in the picture. We had a couple of good walks, including to the top of the nearby 600m hill giving 360 views of the area and looking into Sunart and across to Mull. Next day we moved to an anchorage in the Outer basin next to the island of Carna and fished in the 'stone passage' Eastern entrance and caught some decent Pollock for dinner on the 20<sup>th</sup>. It was spring tides so the tide boiled in an out and at high tide, in the tideline, we were suddenly surrounded by a shoal of mackerel, seemingly being herded by something bigger, probably seals.





Reluctantly we had to leave the next morning to make progress towards Ardfern. First we headed for a lunchtime spot at Glenmore Bay in Loch Sunart and then on to Loch Aline, half way down the Sound of Mull, where we found the amazing white House restaurant for a food extravaganza, expensive but worth every penny. On the 22<sup>nd</sup> we continued SE down the Sound of Mull, turning South past Duart Castle and following the Mull coast until we turned into Loch Spelv. Once through the narrow entrance this Loch is like a large inland lake and we chose the far SW for an overnight spot and a really memorable walk along the valley along the shores of Loch Uisg, towards Loch Bule on the Southern Coast. We were surrounded by Rhododendrons the whole way.



At some stage I had been bitten by yet another wretched Tic. This time the swelling and inflammation developed into the dreaded 'concentric ring' and burned like crazy so we decided to be prudent and headed for the doctor in Oban the next day. After a quick visit to the excellent Oban hospital and no waiting at all I was told by an Irish doctor that there was nothing to worry about and so cycled back to the boat and we departed for Ardfern, motoring into a rising SW and in uncomfortable bumpy conditions. After experimenting we found that Merganser was happiest at 12 knots, rather than the usual 8.5, with a bow up attitude and the stability created by speed.



We arrived at Ardfern on the 23<sup>rd</sup>. We had booked in to get various jobs done and to leave the boat while we headed for New York, via West Mersea, for a family wedding.

Returning on June 14<sup>th</sup> we were not impressed. The generator was now completely unusable because of a diesel leak and they had not made any progress at all with our 240v electrical problems, so still no battery charger and a necessity to run the main engines to heat water and charge the batteries: GRRR. Friends Chris and Mandy Pugh had joined us so we decided to ignore

the problems we had and get going as time was limited and the forecast looking less good.

On a lovely afternoon we set off, through the tide race of Dorus Mhor and into



the Sound of Luing, stopping on the west coast of Luing at the 'Back of the Pond', a tricky but worthwhile stopover with several highly sheltered channels and a local hub for

the Lobster fishing industry.

The next day we headed north in dreadful weather and torrential rain and stopped at Easdale for breakfast, a rest and when the rain stopped, we went ashore for a look for and explore of the Island which has a fascinating history. Once the biggest slate producer of Scotland the island suffered severe flooding

in a huge storm and the mining never re-started.

After a very embarrassing moment when jester got hold of the island's pet duck and mascot called 'Flash' we beat a hasty retreat and pushed on down the Sound of Mull to Loch Aline.



By this time, more boat

problems had shown themselves. A smell of diesel that we had ascribed to the generator issue had got steadily worse and investigation revealed that the yard had failed to re-seat the fuel separator on the starboard engine properly and we had a lot of diesel in the sump! In addition, the charging circuit to the starboard engine had failed completely, with the alarms sounding etc. It was

therefore good to get to Aline to clear out 70 litres of diesel, charge the batteries using a car charger and take stock! We also had another excellent outing to the White house!

On the 16<sup>th</sup> we headed for Tobermory, visited last year and one of those 'must do' spots to visit when cruising the Hebrides. We found some jump leads to



provide a 'work around' for battery charging the starboard batteries and had a good explore ashore and then set off back around to Loch Sunart where we went through the eastern passage, close-by Scorpion rock and into a sheltered anchorage close behind a rocky ledge called Sgeir a'Choire. The weather was against us for the next few days so we stayed in Loch Sunart, back to Salen and then to Tobermory via Drumbuie where we put Chris and Mandy on a bus for their return trip to Oban. Liz and I decided to wait for a better weather window in Tobermory and explored Tobermory further on foot and cycled to the spectacular Glengorm castle to the NW where we met a man who had grown up on Houseboat Mulroy in West Mersea!



On the 21<sup>st</sup> we set off around Ardamurchan to Muck where we anchored on the Northern side. In fantastic weather, over two days, we explored the whole of the island on foot, did



some fishing, met the 'Laird' and learned of the Muck farming lifestyle and shooting parties in the winter. While here we witnessed a truly amazing sunset on what was virtually the longest day; it seemed

to go on and on and on.

Despite a pressing need to get home for the arrival of Liz's mum from NZ we decided to push on to the Northern end of Col for a magical 24 hours anchored in amongst the 'archipelago' and exploring the nooks and crannies, beaches and having a final fish. This left us a 58 mile dash back to Ardfern the next afternoon where we tidied the boat up, left her on a mooring, left a jobs list at the Boatyard (!) and departed for the South.



Post script: Circumstances changed so we did not get back to the boat in 2019 except to lay her up in the Ardfern marina in October and check that all jobs were done and all was in working order again. In early March 2020 we sent Squirrel Marine Transport north once again to collect Merganser and return her to Tollesbury, just prior to Covid-19 lockdown.