

Teased Out of Time, by Charlie Hitchen

Loch Etive, Loch Linnhe, Kerrera and Lismore in a Wayfarer

Saturday 9th April 2011

Taynuilt Quay, Easter 2011. It was one of those weird *déjà vu* moments. God knows, I had stood here often enough before. I remembered that feeling of exquisite discomfort as I had sat here damply waiting for the shuttle car to arrive after an eventful canoe trip down the River Awe, one wet and windy October day in 2004. I remembered well enough, almost exactly twelve months before, standing on this very quay rapidly re-thinking plans for a trip out into Loch Linnhe in the face of very cold weather and a forecast of gales. Now we were back, Bernie and I, slightly later in the year with a decent five-day forecast and a more ambitious plan. This time we were going out into Loch Linnhe in *Nora*, our recently renovated, 40 year old, ex-sailing school Wayfarer, with an anticlockwise cruise around the islands of Lismore and Kerrera in our sights. We arrived at 18:00h, launched the boat, moored it to the quay, loaded the gear, ate supper and retreated to that particular luxury afforded by a 1998 Ford Mondeo Estate which only the connoisseur of kipping in the back of cars can truly appreciate.

Sunday 10th April 2011

The day dawned fine, calm and bitterly cold. We were off by 07:00h, somewhat concerned by the absence of wind. Our passage plan allowed us three hours to sail the 6NM against the tide to reach the Connel Bridge by 10:00h, in time for what laughably passes for high water slack there. It was essential that we made this deadline. Anyone who has seen Connel Narrows transform itself into the Falls of Lora – its mid-tide alter-ego – will understand why.

Had we allowed enough time? We had our newly-acquired 3.5hp Seagull outboard to rely on if there was no wind but we had used it little before and were not yet sure of its mettle. We should not have worried. Within minutes of launching, a wind sprang up, not the forecast westerly which would have been right on the nose, but a lovely F3-4 easterly katabatic rolling down from the slopes of Ben Cruachan, pushing us westward on a broad reach towards Connel. This outer part of the loch was unfamiliar territory to me: very beautiful, more rural and so different from the head of the loch which we had visited the year before. By 09:00h, as we approached the bridge, our easterly wind suddenly veered southerly and died. Typical!

We found ourselves dumped at the bridge ahead of time with a brisk 3 knots of tide still flooding towards us. Should we anchor up and wait, or plug on? It was time to call on 1930s British technology to save the day and it did so, admirably. The SEAGULL inched us under the bridge against the last of the flood and soon we had the wind again and were skipping past Dunstaffnage Marina, through the sound between Eilean Mòr and the mainland and onward out into Loch Linnhe.

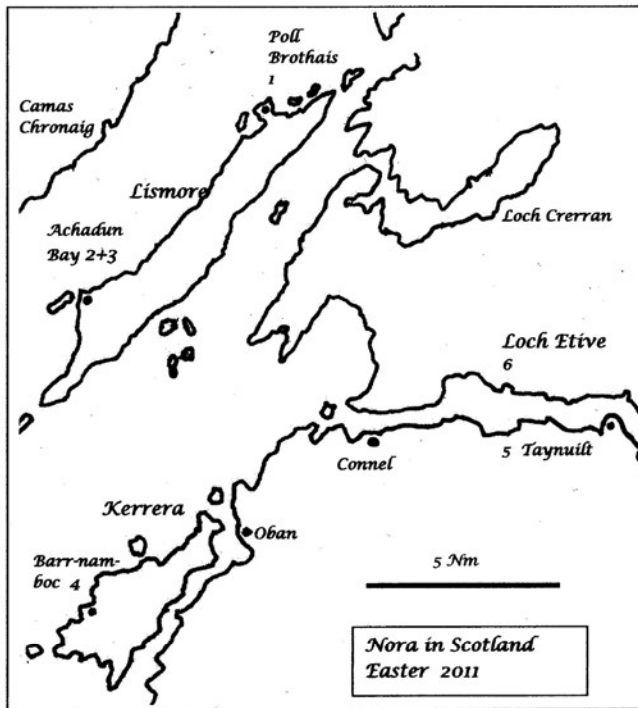
It had been an early start and a rather chilly one and so we pulled in for a second breakfast on the mainland shore at Camas Rubhna na Liathaig. We sipped our brews and enjoyed the vista. The change from the enclosed world of Loch Etive was dramatic.

From our vantage point we could gaze westward across miles of open water to Mull and the Morvern hills. The loch stretched out invitingly before us and we pushed on, northward into the Lynn of Lorne towards Lismore and Port Ramsay, our objective for the day. Obliging the wind had veered further so it was broad reaching again. With the genny poled out, *Nora* was flying and ate up the miles into the Lynn of Lorne. What a day it was to be sailing: a constant bottom end F4 and a flawless blue sky. Those winter hours spent in the garage making a new centreboard and rudder seemed now to have been well spent!

We passed Eilean Dubh to the north and hugged the Lismore shore. The following wind jettied us through the sound between Lismore and Inn Island easily enough against the ebbing tide and we reached westward to Port Ramsay. We had thought to stay here for the night but several yachts were already anchored and we were looking for a little more isolation. We rounded the north-east point of Lismore, thinking to make some progress south down the coast, but the wind was building and we retreated back into the lovely bay marked as Poll Brothais on the OS map to make a brew and have a rest.

As we lay down in the sun sheltered from the wind, the day's exertions, combined with the early start and yesterday's long drive up to Loch Etive, began to nibble away at our resolve. Bernie's explorations had revealed some invitingly flat campsites and an ample supply of firewood. Her suggestion that we stay here for the night seemed to make good sense. We were on holiday after all! With *Nora* lying on a mooring constructed from two anchors and a landline, we watched the day fade from blue to violet and then to inky blackness flecked with a wonderful sprinkling of milky stars.

Distance covered: 21 NM. Total distance: 21 NM.



Monday 12th April 2011

We made a slow start but there was little wind to invite us out onto the loch. Once again the day was fair and the forecast was good. I wanted to explore down the Morvern coast a little and so we decided to cut across Loch Linnhe to Camas Chronaig, a shallow bay just south of the vast Glensanda Quarry. We enjoyed the tranquillity of the morning and did not use the motor, choosing instead to link together patchy flurries of westerly wind teasing us across the loch. It was a grand spring day and we enjoyed the luxury of rolling down the top half of our drysuits.

Camas Chronaig exceeded all of my expectations, and revealed itself to be a stunning place, a storm beach of coarse granite sand guarding an isolated valley with no obvious trace of former habitation or industry. We lazed about. For sure, the west wind had 'dropped its message of indolence' on us. It was just a joy to be there and we threw away time brewing up, exploring and snoozing in the sun. As I filled our water containers from the ample stream which flows into the loch there, I looked up to see eagles soaring effortlessly above. Maybe Camas Chronaig is too exposed for an overnight stay in a larger dinghy but it would make a wonderful place to camp on a canoe or sea kayaking trip when the craft in question could be lifted clear of the tide.

Suddenly the wind arrived, filling in from the south. It was time to go. We wanted to cross

back over to Lismore and to work south towards Eilean Musdile and the Lismore Light. Bernie suggested a reef as the wind was most definitely increasing and I agreed. 'Reef early' is one of her endless store of cruising proverbs and it proved to be a good call, for by the time we were in the middle of the loch, *Nora* was beating into a F5, drenching us with spray. Bernie suggested that we free off and reach across until closer in to the shore and then beat up towards Bernera Island in the lee of Lismore itself. This would offer us some shelter from the wind and would make sailing more comfortable and dryer. Another good call, for soon we were in calmer waters and making better progress.

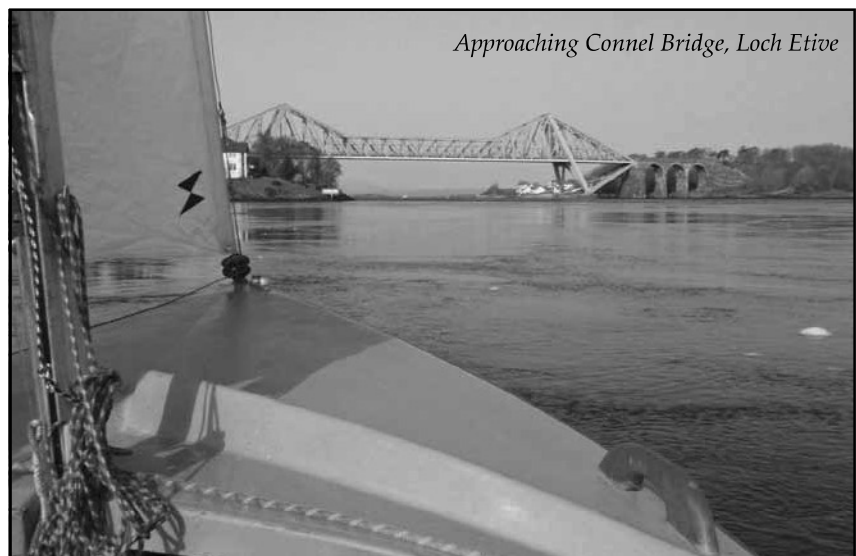
Conditions on the loch were becoming appreciably rougher and we decided to call it a day and anchor close in to Achadun Bay just north of Bernera Island. Once again, we were able to arrange a mooring with two anchors and a long landline. Flat campsites were at a premium here and we had to make do with a rather exposed one.

We ate and wandered off to explore Achadun Castle, a wonderfully dilapidated ruin with marvellous views over a loch which now looked distinctly lumpy. In these locations, with darkness gathering, it is easy enough to be teased out of time to speculate on those who lived and worked in such places years before. To describe these places as 'wilderness' is only to acknowledge a fragment of their story. They pulse with history, each ancient fish trap, lime kiln and abandoned stone quay speaking of communities, industries and technologies which have passed into history. As the sun set, the Lismore Light beckoned to us from out of the darkness. We would sail there tomorrow!

Distance covered: 10 NM. Total distance: 31 NM.

Tuesday 12th April 2011

Alas, the best laid plans and all that! The day dawned well enough and we packed quickly. The forecast was for F4-5 southwesterly, but as we loaded the boat



Approaching Connel Bridge, Loch Etive



Barr nam boc bay

sharp squalls began to sweep across the loch from the west. At first, these appeared to be manageable but each one seemed to increase in intensity. We had left the tent up until last and as the squalls howled over the headland they threatened to snatch it up and fling it into the loch. Each squall transformed the loch into a seething mass of whitecaps and williwaws.

‘Never get yourself in the wrong place at the wrong time,’ was Bernie’s proverb for the day and we agreed that it was clearly not sailing weather. In a lull between squalls, we moved the tent to a less exposed position behind a small crag, rigged extra storm guys and settled back in for the day. Squalls or not, it was a wonderful place to be and we packed the day with photography, chat and food. In between squalls, we explored the beaches, bays and headlands. I stumbled around trying to remember enough geology to make sense of this incredibly complex landscape without any real success: a case of a little knowledge not going very far at all. I won’t forget the BGS field guide next time! Time was, I would have felt ill at ease at a day ‘wasted’. Now, being there seemed as important as distance covered. As James Taylor suggested, maybe ‘... the secret of life is enjoying the passage of time’.

Distance covered 0 NM: Total distance: 31 NM.

Wednesday 13th April 2011

We were away quickly by 10:00h. The calm conditions suggested that the motor might be called upon, but by the time we rounded Bernera Island, we were beating into a F3 south-westerly. As we neared the Lismore Light, we

were caught by a squall, not nearly of the same order as those of the day before but enough to set the pulse racing. With the weather closing in and the wind increasing, we decided to avoid the more turbulent water around the Lismore Light and with board up we fast-reached through the gap between Eilean Musdile and the southern tip of Lismore. Now let’s see you do that in a fin keeler! We set our course for the southern tip of Kerrera some 5 NM due south and pushed on. The weather deteriorated with further squalls and showers of hail, so much so that we furled the genny in the squalls and sailed with reefed main alone. Visibility became poor or very poor at times. Worse than that, we were cold!

The loch began to get lumpy and we passed that watershed point at which you begin to look upwards to the crests of approaching waves. Oh yes! All the usual signs were there. It was beginning to look a little like, ‘the wrong place at the wrong time’! We decided to abandon our plan to sail around the southern tip of Kerrera but to find shelter as soon as possible. In between the squalls, with patches of blue sky above us, it would have been easy to convince ourselves to carry on, but another piece of wisdom from Bernie reminded me that it is, ‘better to be anchored in harbour wishing you were out at sea, rather than the other way round’.

As we approached the rocky coast of Kerrera, I used the GPS to locate Barr-nam-boc Bay, a waypoint I had saved in the GPS as a possible bolt-hole. I had looked at this place several times on Google Earth and it seemed to offer the possibility of good shelter behind a ruined jetty. I had read that the bay had been a major port for inter-island traffic up until 1860 and



Hot grub & alcohol, Barr nam boc



Nora at anchor on Loch Etive with Bheinn Trilleachan & Ben Starav

so figured that there might be sheltered space there for a Wayfarer. We steered for Barr-nam-boc, guided by the summit of Torbhain Mor, a distinctive rocky knoll which stands above it. The ruined quay duly appeared from the greyness of the coastline and we anchored *Nora* up behind it in shallow water above a sandy bottom where she could dry out in safety. Phew!

The quay itself had clearly once been a substantial piece of work, but 150 years of disuse and storms had taken its toll. There was a small, flat, grassy area just large enough for the tent tucked into a cliff adjacent to the quay. Several brews of hot chocolate spiced up with a drop of Captain Morgan's Rum warmed us and calmed the nerves. I understand that taking alcohol when you are cold is physiologically stupid, but psychologically, with dry clothes and a sleeping bag to hand, it seemed to make perfect sense! More exploration, more squalls, good hot food and then sleep.

Distance covered: 9 NM. Total distance: 40 NM

Thursday 14th April 2011

The following morning was a wash-out. The winds seemed lighter but the rain hammered down and we began to think we might be in for a whole day of it. We discussed our options in the light of the variability of the weather, in particular, the option of making our way back up towards Connel and re-entering Loch Etive which would provide us with more sheltered sailing possibilities if the weather were to remain unsettled. This seemed like a good plan and when the rain stopped at 12:00h we decided to put it into action. High tide at Connel was 16:00h and our pilot told us to be there about one hour before to

avoid drama under the Connel Bridge. The forecast was for southerly F4 moderating to F3. We would need to crack on. Visibility was again poor as we left Barr Nam Boc behind and sailed northward along the rugged west shore of Kerrera. The following wind provided us with an exhilarating sail but close attention to chart and GPS was necessary to thread our way through the mist-covered islands and fish farms.

The crossing to Maiden Island from Rubh a' Bherarnaig, the northern tip of Kerrera, caused some anxiety as the wind died in the middle of the main ferry lane to Mull and the isles. Once again the SEAGULL came to the rescue and a combination

of motoring, sailing and a fair tide deposited us at Connel by 15:00h with a nice flow still urging us onward under the bridge and into the loch. Once through the narrows, the wind freshened, though this time now from the east. We were thankful for the sake of our hearing to be able to cut the motor and begin a long and cold beat up to Taynuilt. A few rousing sea shanties kept our mind off the cold. It was a fairly dismal evening and we struggled to feel our toes and fingers. Darkness was nearly upon us as Taynuilt Quay appeared through the greyness. We tied *Nora* up to the jetty after another memorable day's sailing.

Distance covered: 17.8 NM. Total distance: 57.8 NM.

Friday 15th April 2011

The day dawned dull and damp although the forecast offered us southerly F4 winds. We slipped away on a broad reach down the loch at 10:30h. The plan was to cruise around and to overnight in Cladderlie Bothy before returning to haul out the following day. I wanted to show Bernie the campsite that my brother Steve and I had used when we cruised the loch on a paddling and canoe sailing trip several years before.

The miles slipped by, the sun burst through the clouds and after the exploration of a variety of inlets and beaches we anchored off the sandy bay by the campsite, a place designated by the OS as Rhubha Àird Rainich. The site was just as I remembered it, a lovely flat grassy stretch for camping with a bubbling stream close by to provide water. The view north to the head of the loch with Bheinn Trileachan and Ben Starav framing the Glencoe hills was simply stunning. (*See top left*)



Team Nora at Glen Etive campsite

Planning

For planning purposes we used Imray Chart C65 Crinan to Mallaig and Barra. We also used OS 1:25000 sheets 359 and 376. In truth, the larger scale OS maps were more useful on this coastal cruise than the chart.

We used two pilot guides: *Clyde Cruising Club Sailing Directions – Kintyre to Ardnamurchan* and *The Yachtsman's Pilot to Mull and Adjacent Coasts* by Martin Lawrence. Tidal information was downloaded from easytide.ukho.gov.uk. Our GPS was loaded with six figure OS grid references using the OS

website *Get-a-map* which we found to be a most useful planning tool.

We found Google Earth useful to inspect possible anchorages, even though the satellite photography coverage is of very variable quality for this area. There are masses of sources on the history of the area but a good starting point is <http://www.southernhebrides.com/hebrides-history.html>.

We ate lunch and lounged about in the now warm sunshine. Why bother with the bothy? We decided to camp where we were and spent the afternoon beachcombing and drinking in the view. There was plenty of driftwood for the Kelly Kettle and to fuel a small fire to warm us as the sun went down and the last rays of sunlight illuminated the impressive wall of Ben Starav further down the loch. In the half-light, memory called me back to days of fear and laughter spent rock climbing on the boiler plate slabs of Bheinn Trileachan more than thirty years before and to the wild tops of the Glencoe hills over which we had tramped in summer and winter. What a place.

Distance covered: 11 NM. Total distance: 68.8 NM.

Saturday 16th April 2011.

I was up early and tried my hand at fishing with no luck. We had a grand sail in a fresh breeze back up the loch and reached Taynuilt Pier just after noon. This left us with enough time to haul *Nora* out on the rising tide, clean her down, pack the car and push on home.

Distance covered: 8 NM. Total distance: 76.8 NM

What a fantastic trip! These islands and lochs are marvellous locations for dinghy cruising. We had not covered a great deal of ground but had visited some fascinating and astonishingly beautiful places. In the whole week, we had not spoken to another soul nor indeed had seen another human figure. For a week we had existed almost outside of time, reliant upon our own resources and making our own decisions for good or ill. Maybe that's what dinghy cruising is all about.

We'll be back. CH

Launch site

We launched and recovered in Loch Etive from the beach to the east of Taynuilt Quay, adjacent to where the River Awe enters the loch. (NN011327) There are a number of similar launching spots on the beaches to the southwest. There is ample parking for car and trailer nearby.

Anchorage

PLACE	GRID
Launch & night #5	NN011327
Camas Rubhna na Liathaig	NM875342
Poll Brothais	NM869460
Camas Chronaig	NM814453
Achadun Bay	NM804397
Barr-nam-boc	NM799286
Rubha Aird Rainich	NN083391