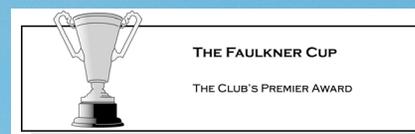


Annabel J sails to the Arctic

Máire Breathnach



Annabel J Bristol Channel Pilot Cutter

Scoresby Sund

Andrew and I spent the first night of our summer cruise in a quiet anchorage out of the tide on the Three Sisters River. We had wintered *Annabel J*, our replica 56' Bristol Channel Pilot Cutter, in Waterford, and this lovely anchorage off Buttermilk Point was a perfect spot to make everything ship shape before we headed out to sea. The plan for 2017 was to spend a month sailing and hill walking in Scotland, and then sail via the Faroe Islands to Iceland. If conditions allowed we hoped to sail to Scoresby Sund in East Greenland.

Our east coast stops were Arklow, Poolbeg, and Skerries. Weighing anchor off Skerries at 04.00 on 17 May the forecast was WSW F3/4 with heavy showers later. We got the heavy showers that evening but the log records 'the most beautiful rainbow ever seen'. In the Sound of Jura we were escorted by dolphins on both sides and the Paps were outlined against the night sky for the last part of our 26 hour passage to Craobh Haven. We transited Cuan Sound the next day and had a beautiful sail up the Firth of Lorne to the Sound of Mull.

We wanted to climb Ben Nevis and motored up Loch Linnhe to Fort William in the rain. The new forecast was for fresh to strong southerlies and we decided not to stay, so we headed south again through the Corran Narrows and Sound of Mull, to Tobermory. The following morning, my birthday, we climbed Ben More, Mull's only Munro. It was bucketing down, very windy, freezing, and foggy on the way up (worse than sailing!) but luckily for us the sky cleared as we reached the top giving us wonderful views of the island. It rained non stop the next

day and we stayed put in Tobermory catching up with minor maintenance jobs.

On 24 May we set a scandalised main, and weighed anchor. We have evolved a procedure for hoisting the mainsail. I lead the throat halyard aft to an electric winch in the cockpit and Andrew raises the peak by hand. From the cockpit I can also keep an eye on things as the sail goes up. Next comes the tricky bit; Andrew makes the peak halyard fast, and hangs on to the throat halyard while I take the fall off the cockpit winch, and bring it forward to make it fast on the mast cleat. Sometimes I imagine the sail coming down in a rush and Andrew shooting aloft!

We had light southerlies as we rounded Ardnamurchan Point and enjoyed the pilotage to the enchanting fairytale-like anchorage north of Castle Tioram, Loch Moidart. We made an early departure next morning, set the sails at Loch Ceann Tráigh, and went south to check out the beach at Camus an Lìghe. It was a great day and we sailed in light airs to Loch Scavaig where we had hoped to spend the night. This is another exquisite anchorage, but even in late May there were already four other vessels at anchor in the cove. We continued on to Loch Harport and found a good music session in the Old Inn. Next morning we met a lovely Slovenian couple who gave us a lift to the Sligachan Hotel from where we climbed Bruach na Frithe on the Black Cuillin. It was one of our best walks all summer and the weather was perfect. We returned to Carbst via the Fairy Pools and back in the Old Inn where I rested my



Castle Tioram, Loch Moidart

tired legs and Andrew slaked his thirst.

As we motored in headwinds along the west coast of Skye next day we passed Macleod's Maidens and Macloud's Tables so I played Miss Macloud's reel on the concertina. Having rounded Neist Point, we entered Dunvegan village harbour and returned to anchor off the Castle. If landing at the pontoon near the boathouse, its worth remembering that the castle gate closes at 17.00. In Loch Shieldaig, southeast of Loch Torridon, we anchored between the picturesque village of Shieldaig and an island which was covered in Caledonian pine trees. The light southerlies continued and we carried on to Ullapool where we picked up a mooring. En route to Lewis we ghosted through the Summer Isles in light airs. Shortly afterwards, a front came through so we had to drop the topsail smartly and reef the main. We brought up In Glumag harbour and entered the marina at Stornoway the next morning. Over the next week we enjoyed some good walks and swims on Lewis and Harris. The area around Huisinis has fantastic beaches and walks. It is well worth a visit. One day we hired a car and drove via Barvas to see the Calanish Standing Stones. We climbed Mealaisbhall, the highest of the rugged Uig Hills, and returned through Rognagall Valley. Back in Stornoway and just in time 'for one' we found a great session with fiddles and double bass in the Criterion bar. On a wet



Andrew, Loch Torridon

and windy Sunday morning, we drove to Tolsta beach for a, not surprisingly, cold swim and wondered why we were bound even further north to Faroe, Iceland and Greenland.

The 250 mile passage to the Faroe Islands took us 38 hours which we sailed and motor-sailed. The southwesterly F5 gradually decreased and backed southerly before increasing again. All the time we sailed with two reefs in the mainsail and staysail only. On a wet grey Atlantic 14 June, we made landfall on Suderoy, handing the sails in strong winds in Vagsfjordur before berthing alongside at Vaag Harbour. The next morning, after a late start, we bumped into our friend Grenville Byford who invited us on board *Revenge* for lunch which consisted of gin and salami.

In Hvalba we berthed alongside the quay. We tried to leave at 05.30 the following morning but strong southwesterly winds made it difficult to leave the berth as we were on a lee shore: so we went back to bed! Returning from a walk ashore that afternoon we met a lovely Faroese family who invited us for Sunday lunch the following day. Runi, cook on board local trawler, *Steintór*, cooked us a fantastic meal and we had a great day with him, his wife Ariosa, and their son Pauli. It was still blowing the next day and we walked over the mountain to Tvøroyri. On the climb I was hit in the face by a rock from above. I got a bad shock but was very relieved that it hadn't hit my eye. When the depression had gone through, we studied the Faroese tidal atlas ('the red scare book') and almanac to work out that we would have a favourable tide the following morning for the hop to Midvágur, Vágur. The car hire company beside the quay and small boat harbour in Midvágur, is a very convenient place for a visiting yachtsman to hire a car. Andrew is editor of 'Arctic and Northern Waters' the RCCPF book so we visited several ports and harbours by road to update the pilotage notes for the next edition.

I have always loved Shaun Davey's composition *The Brendan Voyage*, a concerto for uilleann pipes and orchestra based on the voyage of St. Brendan. One of the best movements is



Máire on the Cuillin Ridge



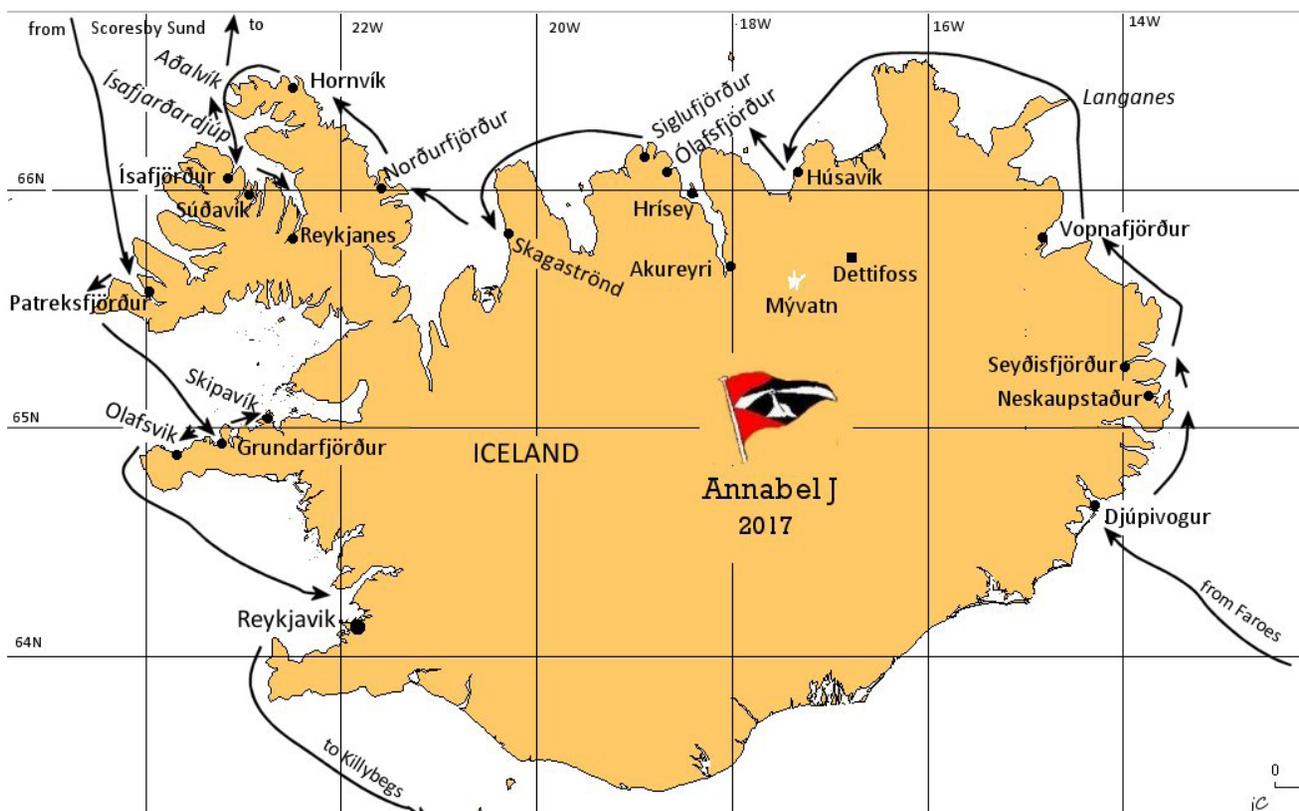
Flip

called Mykines Sound. It would have been great to sail around Mykines but not in the strong westerly. In a moderate swell, we entered Vestmannastrandur carrying a fair tide, 1 to 6 knots, and berthed at the pontoon in Vestmanna. My brother, Donal Walsh (ICC), and his partner Clare Morrissey (ICC) arrived the next day on *Lady Belle* having stemmed the tide in the sound. Although we were following a similar route, this was the only time that the two boats were together. After a visit to the local pub, Donal and Clare joined us on board *Annabel J* for roast lamb. We left the Faroe Islands the following morning, 24 June, carrying a strong tide west through heavy overfalls in the sound. *Lady Belle* followed, both boats bound for Iceland. We sailed most of the 280 nm passage which took us 46 hours with northwesterly winds. We exchanged 'TRS' on the VHF with *Lady Belle* until we lost contact. Our early morning landfall was beautiful and unforgettable with the high peaks of Prándarjökull mountains rising from the fog. Djúpvogur is an excellent port of entry. We berthed alongside Djúpvogur quay, cleared customs and were given a fish for dinner and an almanac for navigation by the harbourmaster, Stefan Gumundsson. One of the attractions in the town is Egginn í Gleðivík or The Eggs

of Merry May. Sigurður Guðmundsson, an Icelandic artist sculpted 34 giant size granite eggs which line the road and depict the shape, patterns and colours of the indigenous bird eggs.

We spent the next two weeks exploring the east fjords and visiting as many ports as possible to gather information for 'Arctic and Northern Waters'. Our friends Bridget and Michael Roche, with their teenage sons, joined us for a few days in Neskaupstaður, Norðfjörður. On passage to Seyðisfjörður, we put the young lads Donnchadh, Fearghal and David to work on deck and they enjoyed learning the ropes. Ashore in Seyðisfjörður we had a terrific hike in the surrounding hills which involved fording several rivers. Langanes, the north east tip of Iceland, has a poor reputation because of fog and overfalls but our passage around from Vopnafjörður to Húsavík was benign. Húsavík is the 'whale capital of Iceland' and it is possible to go on all sorts of tours from 'Silent whale watching' to 'Double tails and Sails'. The harbour is very busy and we were lucky to find a berth alongside the gaff ketch *Donna Wood*. With time in hand before our friend George Kidner's arrival we visited the local supermarket and bought food for a welcome dinner. As the meat was going into the oven we discovered that, what we thought was beef, was actually minkie whale. However this did not stop Andrew and George enjoying it.

Ashore next day, we visited the excellent whale museum and made a sight-seeing trip in George's car to Mývatn lake, Dimmuborgur volcano and Dettifoss waterfall. On passage to Akureyri we motored to the west side of Skjálf to see humpback whales breaching and blowing. The best way to see them is to cut the motor and allow the boat to drift. We motored close to Grenevik harbour on Flatey for a look at this pretty island. George cooked a special meal the night before his departure to Keflavik and I am happy to report that minkie whale was not on the menu.





View from Krossneslaug thermal pool

Knúter Karlsson, who lives in Akureyri, and is an accomplished high latitude sailor, visited *Annabel J* and we were delighted to be invited to Heimir Harðarson's talk on Scoresby Sund on board *Húni II*. The only downside was that the talk was in Icelandic and we didn't understand a word. However we had a very enjoyable evening on board the largest oak fishing boat ever built in Iceland. We caught up with maintenance the next day. I got the sewing machine on deck and repaired a tear in the main and topsail and Andrew did some rig maintenance. We overnighted in Hrisey Island where tourists are transported in trailers towed by tractors. Next day we sailed into Ólafsfjörður on the way to Siglufjörður. The Siglufjörður Herring Era Museum is one of the best maritime museums that I have visited and I enjoyed attempting to play the langspil (similar to a dulcimer) at The Folk Music Centre. It blew stink next morning and I took a bus to Hofsós to swim in the famous beautiful pool overlooking Skagarfjörður. Swimming was one of the highlights of our visit to Iceland. Almost every town or village has a public geothermal heated

pool (sundlaug), most of which are located outdoors and have hot tubs. The pools are the heart of the community and Icelanders visit them to socialise or make business deals. A woman in Patricksfjörður told me that there is nothing nicer than watching the aurora borealis from a hot tub in the middle of winter. We swam most days and our favourite pools were Neskaupstaður, Eskifjörður, Akureyri, Hofsós, Krossneslaug and Patricksfjörður. Fishing was another almost daily activity. All we had to do was put the handline over the side, wait a few minutes and then haul in a cod or haddock. *Annabel J* attracts an instant fan club wherever she goes. In Skagaströnd there was a constant stream of cars down the pier with local people who wanted to see the boat. It reminded me of when I was a child my father would bring us down to the quay in Dungarvan or over to Helvick to see visiting boats. We bought fuel from Dolli Bernsden, a respected local business man and politician, who drove us to the next town for gas and invited us for lunch in a local restaurant. Our anchorage off the village of Nordurfjörður was lovely. Ashore we did laundry at the local camp site and later walked to Krossneslaug, a beautiful thermal pool right on the sea shore.

Hornvík is at the heart of the amazingly beautiful uninhabited national park of Hornstranðir. Skipper Gijs, and mates Ruben and Will from the Dutch charter gaff ketch *Tecla*, which was anchored nearby, joined us on board for a beer. Later that evening they returned with a case of beer for us. We sailed in company with *Tecla* towards Isafjörður the next day. It wasn't meant to be a race, but as Andrew said, we were two boats going in the same direction. Both boats hoisted topsails to get a bit more speed. The wind died and we motored around to Isafjörður where we anchored in Poller to the southwest of the town. Over the next few days, we explored the inner reaches of Ísafjarðardjúp visiting Sudavík, Vátisfjörður, and allowed *Annabel J* to drift for a few hours off Brestskor to watch birds and seals feeding and whales bubble catching. We made a dinghy trip to bathe in a very hot thermal pool at Reykjanes Hotel before returning to Isafjörður.

My niece, Sibéal Turraoin, flew in from Reykjavik the following morning to join us for the weekend. Sibéal, who in the past has sailed with us in the Arctic, now lives and works in Iceland. We enjoyed catching up with her news and managed to fit in a sail, a walk in the hills, a few swims and beers before she returned to the capital.

We wanted to visit Scoresby Sund in East Greenland and had been monitoring the ice charts. The ice reports were not



Hornstranðir



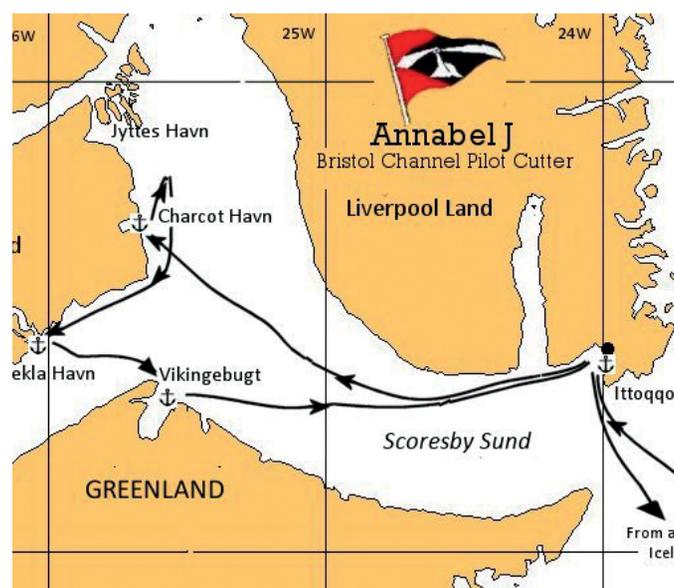
A lead closes

favourable and we debated whether or not to go. DMI, the Danish meteorology office, had not issued a new chart for over a week but the satellite charts indicated that the entrance to Scoresby Sund was open. The forecast was for NE 10-15 ms which is about 20-30 knots. Iceland was enjoying a heatwave and Andrew decided that, while we were waiting for a new ice chart and forecast, we should take advantage of the warm weather and do some varnishing. We provisioned for two weeks and prepared the boat for the 250 nm crossing of the Denmark Strait.

On 31 July, we cleared out with the Customs official, topped up our tanks and finding katabtic winds in Jokafjorður, altered course for Aðvalik in the north west of Hornstrandir. The strong northeasterlies of previous days had eased. We monitored the sea temperature in the strait. It went from 10° off the coast of Hornstrandir to 1.5° when we sighted ice seventy nm from the coast of Greenland. We handed the sails as manoeuvring the boat under sail would be difficult in heavy concentrations of ice. We kept an 'hour on, hour off' watch system for the next fourteen hours, hand steering to dodge icebergs and growlers. The visibility was less than two cables and the fog didn't clear until we were approaching the settlement of Ittoqqortoormiit. This is the only inhabited part of Scoresby Sund and one of the ten most isolated communities in the world. Ashore, in the supermarket, we met the local policeman who told us that no formalities were required and, unless we wanted stamps in our passports, there was no need to visit the police station. The settlement is supplied by a Danish supply ship which calls twice a year and the first delivery was due the following week. Many of the supermarket shelves were bare but we found everything that we needed and noted that most things were cheaper than in Iceland. Later, we moved to Andrup Havn an anchorage less than a mile to the east which is more protected from drifting bergy bits and growlers.

Everything in Scoresby Sund is on a breath-taking scale. We covered 80 nm the next day, working our way west to Charcot

Havn, on the east coast of Milne Island, initially through 2/10 ice, then open water with occasional bergs and growlers. We can motor through 3/10 ice but when we found 5/10 we had to turn south in search of a lead. I spotted a polar bear and seals on the ice pack to the north. As we approached Charcot Havn, Andrew climbed the ratlines to look at the ice, which was nine tenths and went as far as he could see to the north. The two nm wide entrance to the anchorage was almost blocked with ice and we just managed to get in. Next morning we found that the fast ice to the east of the entrance to the anchorage had melted. We went north towards Jytshavn, but due to the freshening wind from the north, ice and rain we changed our plans and decided to make for Hekla Havn. We had a challenging afternoon making very slow progress through the ever changing leads but eventually found ourselves in open water with occasional large bergs. As we approached Hekla Havn from the east, we were close inshore and noticed the depth go from 80m to 40m to 30m to 20m in a very short time. We slowed right down and put her astern but still managed to 'touch'. At a time like this you become





Danish supply ship Ittoqqortoormuit

very aware of the remoteness of your situation. Luckily we managed to get off. Charts in these parts are of limited value as there are no soundings. The depths average 400m to 600m in the main basin and deeper in the fjords. We saw another bear on a floe outside the anchorage. Later when we went ashore to explore Hekla Haven I was more concerned that I was 'netted up' against the mosquitos than I was about the presence of bears. We didn't see any but that didn't stop Andrew from getting in a bit of rifle practise on an old barrel.

We sailed slowly in light airs the following day and took advantage of the glorious weather to take pictures of the boat from the dinghy. At the entrance to Vikingebugt, progress was very slow due to concentrated broken ice and bergy bits. The anchorage east of a small island on the south shore of Vikingebugt, was relatively ice free but yielded a small bergy bit for a celebratory glass of gin. Back in Ittoqqortoormuit, the supply ship was discharging. As we wandered around, we met happy smiling children eating bags of crisps and wondered what the future held for them. We visited the weather station, watched the meteorology balloon being launched and learnt how to pronounce 'Ittoqqortoormuit' (Eat Cut Door Duck Meat). Our last night was spent in Amdrup Havn where an ice floe drifted over our anchor and we had to use a combination of chain, engine and bow thruster to stop it pushing *Annabel* down the fjord.

I could have written my entire log about Scoresby Sund. It is one of the most beautiful places that I have ever visited. It felt like being on the edge of the planet.

We logged just over 309 nm on the passage back to Patreksfjörður, Iceland (which is named after our own St



Children in Ittoqqortoormuit

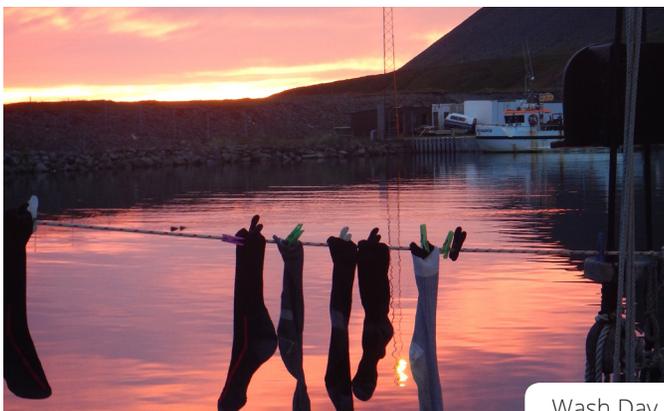
Patrick). We motor-sailed and sailed with mainly light fair winds, and it was necessary to keep a good watch as there were quite a few icebergs. Half way across, we said goodbye to both the ice and 24 hours of daylight.

Having had a swim in the fantastic pool in Patreksfjörður, we celebrated our arrival by going for a drink in the local pub. Our next stop was Grundarfjörður and we anchored close to Kikkjufell, the most photographed mountain in Iceland. From there we went east and enjoyed picking up the transits for pilotage to Stykkishólmer where we anchored off the harbour at Skipavik. The plan was to get to Reykjavik to meet Sibéal again before we sailed for home. It was a short hop to Ólafsvík and on the way we caught a huge cod.

Reykjavik had more tourists than ever and we were delighted when Sibéal offered us the use of her car to explore the famous sights outside the city. We visited Geysir, Gullfoss, Pingvellir and explored the coast of Sudurnes.

It was sad to say goodbye to Sibéal but it was time to return home and we left Reykjavik on Monday 21 August. We had studied the long term forecasts and had made lots of screenshots of weather charts. Strong winds were forecast for Tuesday and Wednesday and we hoped to be in Scotland or Ireland by the weekend just before strong westerlies were forecast in all the Portpatrick sea areas. Our first night had clear skies and we watched a wonderful display of the aurora borealis. The Inuit say the northern lights are the souls of the dead playing football with a walrus skull.

By noon on Tuesday the wind had increased from the east and we were heading south with two reefs in the mainsail and a staysail. The seas were rough and it was difficult to move around the boat. A locker door burst open and, as I tried to stop the crockery from crashing to the cabin sole, I was thrown across the cabin. I spent the remainder of that watch hoovering up the broken bits and pieces. When the second reef pennant parted we dropped the main and continued under staysail alone. *Annabel*'s main is 860 sq ft and taming the sail and securing the rig kept the two of us busy. On Thursday the auto pilot broke and we hand steered in short watches. Later in the afternoon, the wind eased and the seas subsided. Andrew managed to re-reeve the reefing pennant and fabricate a new way of connecting the autopilot ram to the tiller arm. We were able to sail again and returned to our



Wash Day



Andrew and Sibéal

normal 'four on, four off' watch routine. We made our landfall in Killybegs on Sunday 27 August.

Our passage from Reykjavik had taken just under six days and we had logged 842 miles.

We spent a few days in the new small boat harbour in Killybegs before sailing to Teelin, Blacksod and Kilronan, Inis Mór where we were weather-bound for 5 days. On the day of the All-Ireland Hurling final between Waterford and Galway, we made a Waterford flag from old pillowcases and bravely flew it from our rigging. We cycled to Poll na bPéist (the Worm hole) and Andrew had a dip. Later we watched Galway beat Waterford in Joe Mac's.

A weather window of sorts opened on the 6 September and we left Kilronan. The final passage was one of the hardest all summer. We sailed and then motor-sailed into a SW 5 until we weathered An Tiaracht, on the Blasket Islands. Once we rounded the Mizen we tacked downwind, first to avoid the Old head of Kinsale and then back on the port tack for Waterford harbour. The autopilot failed off Youghal and we hand steered in one hour watches. At 0450 on 8 September, with 4,300 nm under our keel, we re-anchored off Buttermilk Point and turned in for a few hours before motoring up the River Suir to our berth at Waterford City Marina.

