

# Lady Belle-North Sea Circuit

Donal Walsh

**Lady Belle** OVNI 385



*Lady Belle sails past Fingal's Cave, Staffa*

An account of a cruise from Dungarvan to Scotland, Shetland, Norway, Denmark, Sweden, Germany, Netherlands, Belgium, France, and England.

**L**ady Belle, an Ovni 385 aluminium hulled cutter with lifting keel and rudder, left Dungarvan on 28 May 2018: on board Donal Walsh and Clare Morrissey. We headed east and spent our first night at anchor off the pier at Fethard on Sea near Hook Head. Next day, we caught the tide around Carnsore Point but, later, were badly headed by a strengthening wind and contrary tide. We opted to spend the night in Wexford Town. The entry channel is well buoyed but is tight in places and one needs to be very alert and to observe the marks carefully. We picked up a visitor's mooring, conveniently located off the quays and later explored ashore. Our departure was timed to maximise the north going stream but there was a strong northerly head wind, and against the

tide it was very uncomfortable so we returned to Wexford and sat it out for the day. In better conditions we headed off again. At Wicklow Head we encountered dense fog, and the fear of a collision with another vessel made it challenging. Later we anchored in Killiney Bay and Clare had a swim. It was a good anchorage and we decided to spend the night there.

An early start gave us an advantage and, although we had to motor in light winds we made Ardglass by evening. Motoring again the next day, we made it to Carnlough and tied alongside a fishing vessel in the harbour. Another foggy day brought some scary moments as we made our way north towards Fair Head. Close encounters with a yacht and, later a rib travelling at 19 knots passing nearby was enough. I opted to close the shore and anchor until the fog lifted. Crossing the North Channel we headed for Port Ellen on Islay. Here we were joined by Dungarvan based yacht

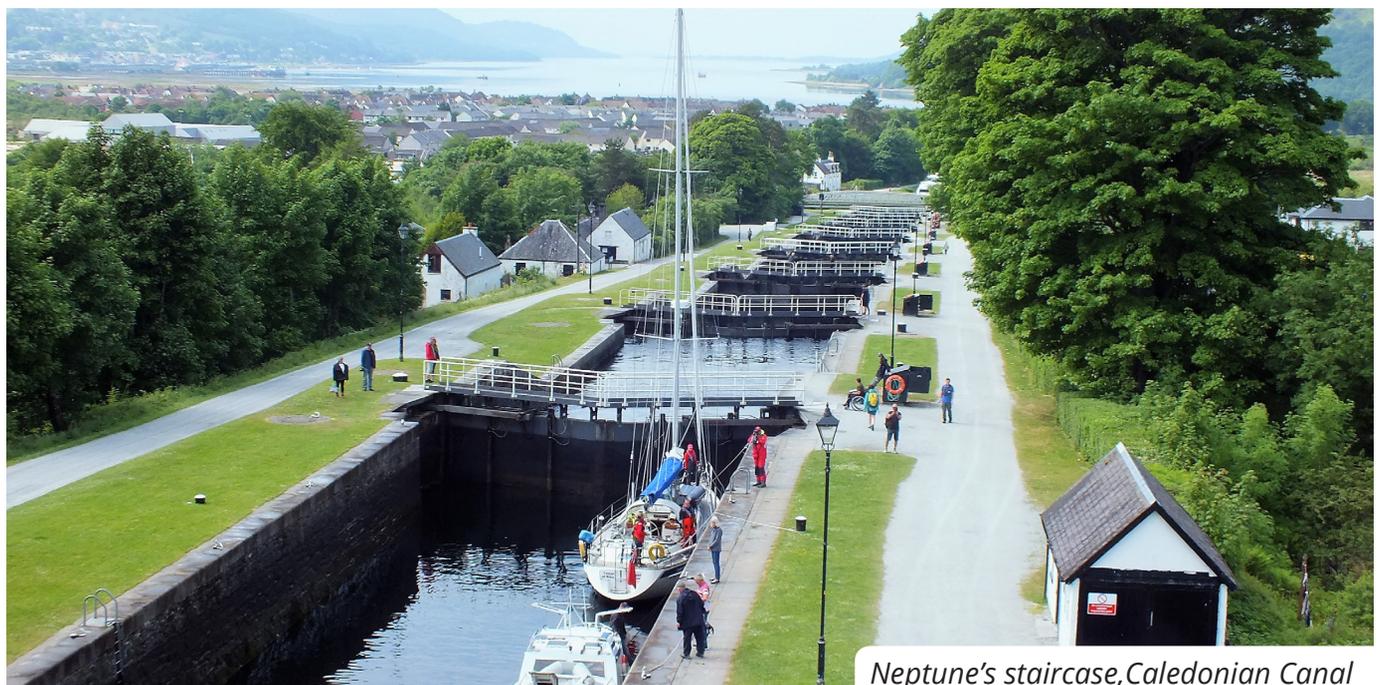


*Alex and Donal Caledonian Canal*

*Village Girl* also cruising Scottish waters. At this stage the weather improved and we encountered lots of fine sunshine. This was wonderful but there was little wind and we motored in the calm conditions. We spent the night at anchor at Carsaig, called in at Craobh Haven for supplies, transited Cuan Sound and later anchored in Easdale sound. Ashore it was interesting to explore the abandoned slate quarries. From Easdale we headed west to Mull and entered the anchorage at Tinker's Hole, and having transited Iona Sound, found an anchorage off Bunessen on the Ross of Mull. Conditions were ideal for exploring Fingal's Cave on Staffa and we did a photo shoot of *Lady Belle* with the cave in the background. Sailing through the Treshnish Isles we made for Coll and found a quiet anchorage in Loch Eatharna. Alex was to join us at Oban in a few days and as we did not want to stray too far north we headed back south through the Sound of Mull, entered Loch Linnhe, and anchored off the pier at Port Appin just inside Lismore Island.

The original plan was to go up the west coast of Scotland but Alex would need to leave somewhere on the mainland with good public transport services. Fearful that we would be in some remote northern area with poor transport connections, we changed the plan and decided to head north through the Caledonian Canal. Alex, travelling by train from Glasgow, was diverted to Corpach, where we locked into the basin at the sea lock and awaited his arrival. Our first day's transit saw us through the Corpach locks and bridges, Neptune's Staircase, Loch Oich and Loch Lochy. At the summit of Neptune's Staircase, I climbed the mast to get a good picture of the locks. We brought up for the night at the top end of the Locks at Fort Augustus. There was a huge delay here next morning due to 'a shortage of lockkeepers' and we lost several hours. In Loch Ness we managed to get a brief spinnaker run before the wind died off.

Clare took the opportunity to swim in the lake



*Neptune's staircase, Caledonian Canal*



*Clare, look out behind you!*

– Nessie was nowhere to be seen! There was another stop on the outskirts of Inverness and we spent our final night in the canal just inside the sea lock.

Our exit from the canal was badly planned and we found ourselves plugging a strong unfavourable tide under Kessock Bridge and through Inverness Firth between Chanonry Point and Fort George. Later we anchored for the night off the village of Cromarty. In light winds we headed north again and made Helmsdale. Alex left us here and we were caught by strong winds for two days. I noticed some rust stains on the bow and discovered that the lower bearing of the furling system had disintegrated. I was worried about setting the genoa until I was sure that the forestay would not turn with it. Having searched the internet and some Ovni owners forums I rotated it very gradually and found that the stay remained fixed and that the bearing



*Donal in Stavanger*

was only a support for the rope drum. What a relief! We could use the sail as normal and fix it back in the workshop at home.

Away again we spent the night at Wick before making the passage to Kirkwall, Orkney. Crossing to Stronsay we were caught by gales for three days and stayed alongside the outer edge of the ro-ro pier at Whitehall. With eased winds, we headed north again through confused seas off Sumburgh Head before bringing up at Lerwick. Another gale, another three days lost. Finally, we cleared the Shetlands and headed for Norway, covering the 190 nm in 36 hours in somewhat mixed conditions. Our landfall at midnight –although it wasn't entirely dark, was difficult with heavy mist and bad visibility. Approaching a rocky shoreline in those conditions would have been impossible were it not for all the modern electronic aids on board. Twenty years ago I would have opted to stand off at sea until the visibility improved. Delighted to have made the passage, we anchored in a cove south of Viksøyna.

The morning brought clearer weather and fine sunny sailing conditions with a gentle breeze ideal for the pilotage challenge through the rocks and islands. There was an opportunity to set the gennaker but as I disconnected the sheet from the boom, the wire of the key ring type fitting straightened and the piston flew off into the sea. Examining the other end of the boom it was apparent that fabrication of a replacement unit would require the services of a machine shop. I decided to put the job on ice for the moment.

At the picturesque harbour of Savgav, we rendezvoused with some friends aboard the German yacht *Fellini Days* who we had met in Iceland last year. We got the barbeque going, and over a few beers caught up on life since we last met. From Savgav a 10 hour passage of 55 nm brought us to Stavanger. En-route we passed through Haugesund, which was like a town with a water street through the middle. Stavanger fascinated us and we stayed a few days. The oil museum was very interesting as was the old town with its quaint colourful streets. Evidence of Norway's wealth was everywhere, fine restaurants, shops, and plenty of expensive pleasure craft. The male teenagers along the waterfront, with their RIBs, designer clothes, and mobile phones, vied with each other to impress their girlfriends. A far remove from the now forgotten pioneering oilmen who endured the hardship of the North Sea with primitive equipment to get the oil ashore.

From Stavanger we headed south to Egersund, a 50 mile passage which was tight on the wind

most of the way. Although we had been to Egersund before, we found it difficult to identify the north entrance and were very close to shore before it opened up. Here we encountered great difficulty anchoring due to the nature of the bottom which appeared to be a very fine silt with little holding. Departing Egersund there was a strong head wind and we made only 12 nm in four hours. We gave up and sought shelter in the tiny harbour at Nesvag. This was a delightful place with some fine examples of traditional Norwegian fishing vessels moored there.

Our next passage would take us round Lindesnes – Norway's most southerly point. The wind wasn't exactly favourable and I suspect there was also a contrary tide. We tacked through the islands as best we could to get some shelter but it was a real slog around the headland. Once clear of the head, with a freer wind we were able to take some interesting inshore routes through the islands and rocks where we found more shelter and calmer waters. At Mandal we found a quiet anchorage which was a far remove from the conditions we had encountered earlier. The weather continued to improve and, as a bonus, we were no longer subject to tidal streams. We took the Blindleia, a 12 nm long salt water fjord passage from Kristiansand to Lillesand that is protected from the open sea by an elongated archipelago of skerries and larger islands. Some of the gaps through the rocks are only 10 metres wide. This was a great pilotage experience but the route was very busy with other craft and there was a lot of barging through the narrow pinch points. From Lillesand we crossed the Skaggerrak and headed for Denmark's most northerly point, Skagen. With little wind we motored most of the 84 nm 14 hour passage.

Skagen was busy with visiting yachts. These were all rafted alongside, and there was great disruption whenever someone on the inside wanted to leave. At Skagen I was able to scrounge some scrap metal from an engineering works which allowed me to fabricate a temporary piston for the spinnaker boom. The passage south through the Kattegat was uneventful and we hopped from Skagen to Laeso. Danish Customs boarded us at Laeso and the officer announced that he was going to search the ship! I had to sign consent forms for this and was assured it would be carried out in accordance with Danish Law. He inquired if we had any cats or dogs on board and then asked if we had any 'seg rats'. I was horrified that he would even suggest that there might be sea rats on board and assured him that wouldn't happen. Then he corrected me 'not sea rats - cigarats'. This introduced a bit of humour into the situation and he was happy to conclude his business and be off.

As we headed south through the Skagerrak, we encountered strong sea breezes in the morning and evening but little wind midday. There was another island stop at Anholt, followed by an overnight at Hornbæk, a seaside resort on the north coast of Sjælland. Then we entered the Øresund, which separates Denmark from Sweden, passing close up to Helsingør where we had good views of Kronborg Castle which was the setting for Shakespeare's Hamlet. Another 20 nm further south found us in Copenhagen. We tried to get some pictures of the Little Mermaid from seaward but it was difficult due to the depth restrictions and the large number of tourist passenger vessels. We berthed alongside the quay wall at Nyhavn right in the city centre, and, whilst it was busy; it was



*Entrance to Nesvag*



*Blindleia*

interesting to sit and watch the passing traffic. Clare's grandfather, Peter Enderson, was born in Copenhagen in 1882, from where he emigrated and found work in Ireland in the fledgling dairy industry. We took a bus, found his house, and walked the streets which would have been familiar to him in his youth.

There is useful small boat passage which provides a quick exit from Copenhagen and avoids the traffic in the main port. As we left we encountered the Irish yacht *Maeldúin* (ICC) making her approach to Copenhagen and we spoke with her on VHF. Crossing the Oresund to Sweden, we found an anchorage off the beach at Falsterbo but it was exposed to a terrible roll and so we moved to the south end of the Falsterbokanalen and anchored in calmer conditions inside the entrance breakwater. Our original plan had been to sail the Baltic States of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania but we realised now that we would not have sufficient time to

achieve this and we opted to head south for Germany.

A 12 hour passage of some 70 nm brought us to Gedser on the southern tip of Denmark. This is a forlorn place which I recalled visiting in 2009 and filling my water tank from the taps on the pontoons which contained salt water. This time it turned out that the place was alive with mosquitoes. Clare escaped but despite all my precautions I was subject of a savage attack. The crossing to Burgstakken on the German island of Fehmarn was relatively short 30 nm. Now, for the first time since Scotland we were able to get a good beer, in a proper pub, at affordable prices. From Fehmarn it was a short passage through the sound and under the bridge to the German mainland harbour of Heiligenhafen. It was fresh on the nose when we left Heiligenhafen bound for Kiel. There was nothing enjoyable about ploughing into a dirty short sea in a headwind, a few miles up the coast we

identified a small harbour at Lippe where we hoped we would get some shelter. The entrance was narrow but straightforward: inside we made fast to a grassy bank and relaxed in the evening sunshine. This was definitely rural Germany. Leaving, we again plugged into a head wind and dirty sea but we were making shelter all the time as we approached Kiel. Entering the bay, the wind was freer and we locked into Holtenau lock.

In the canal, conditions were so different: it was warm and calm and we kept station with a cruise ship also transiting the canal. Having been through the Kiel Canal several times, I wanted to try something new. The Gieselaukanal near Oldenburg is a short canal - about 1.5 nm



*Claire at Lindesnes*



*Big brother keeping an eye on Lady Belle, Kiel Canal*

long - which links the Kiel Canal with the River Eider. It has one lock and, in the company of some other boats, we locked through and soon found ourselves in the Eider River. The river is slow flowing and meanders a lot, travelling two or three miles to cover a straight line distance of a few hundred metres. Too much time was lost because of the meandering nature of the river and I would not take this route again. It was hot in there and, for the first time, we made full use of our bimini and associated sun shades. In the lower reaches of the river, we experienced strong tidal flows, and it was essential to factor the tide into any movements made in this area. In the sea lock we were pushed tightly against the lock wall and broke a blade on the propeller of our Watt & Sea turbine ( replacement cost €200.00 probably manufactured in China for €8.00.) Transiting the lock, we were back in the North Sea but the tide still influenced us for over 10 miles as we made our way through the sandbanks at the mouth of the estuary. This would be a treacherous place to be caught in strong onshore winds.

The stop at Helgoland provided an opportunity to top up our fuel tanks at duty free prices.

Crossing to the island of Norderly, we decided to negotiate some of the channels between the islands and the mainland. This is the setting for the novel 'Riddle of the Sands' and I thought that we would get a good feel for the place by being there at low water. Making our way inside Juist, we headed west along the gat until we could go no further and anchored to await the flood. In order to explore, we launched the inflatable and followed the line of pricken marking the channel. With the rising tide we were able to make our way through to the deeper water on the west side of the gat. I was surprised as we passed Memmeret to note how low lying it is. The flood made for a very strong current against us and I figured that we would not make it through the second gat on the same tide. We changed plans and headed south into the Ems and carried the flood all the way to Delfzijl.

At Delfzijl we took the staande maste route towards Groningen and onwards to Dokkum and Harlingen. This can be slow but I had not travelled the Delfzijl - Lauwersoog section before and wanted to tick the box! Locking out to sea again at Harlingen, we crossed to Den Helder where we moored in the yacht haven



*Lady Belle in the Eider River*



*Lady Belle in the sea gat near Juist*

by the naval base. Here we were boarded by the Military Police who were preoccupied with preventing transportation of illegal immigrants to the U.K.

The west coast of Netherlands was monotonous, just one long sandy beach from north to south and scarcely any change in scenery. There was a lay day in Scheveningen, where we became tourists and visited Den Hague. Crossing the traffic lanes at Rotterdam we were cleared through by Maas Entrance VTS. Then we headed to Blankenberge just west of Zeebrugge in Belgium. This was better than Zeebrugge as there is little time lost entering the harbour compared with the two mile lead and traffic signals with associated delays to be negotiated in Zeebrugge. We lost a day to strong winds in Dunkerque, and then struggled west to Calais.

Hampered again by strong wind, it was an exhausting sail to Boulogne-sur-Mer. Once inside the breakwaters, the channel is very deceptive and several yachts which did not observe the buoyage were aground on a sand bar. Departing Boulogne, progress was really slow and, in the strong head wind, it was very uncomfortable sailing. In the end we relented, eased the sheets and headed back to Boulogne. A wise decision: the next day was easier with little wind and we had to motor in the calm conditions.

We called at Dieppe and Fecamp, both interesting towns, then crossed Baie de Seine and anchored off the beach at Arromanches within the remains of the Mulberry Harbour. There is only a slight gradient on the beach here and you have to anchor a long way from the shoreline. This also means carrying the inflatable a long distance over the sand to get above the high water mark if landing at low water. The tidal

streams are strong here and our passage times were dictated by them. At St Vaast we didn't go into the locked basin as the opening times would have restricted our movements. There was a favourable stream most of the way round Cherbourg peninsula but after we passed Cap de la Hague, it turned against us and the last few miles into Alderney were slow.

It was Clare's first visit to the Channel Islands and so we called at St. Peter Port and Sark. The anchorage at Dixcart Bay in Sark was very uncomfortable even though there was little swell. The forecast was for strong northerly winds and we decided to cross the Channel before they came. We were headed for a while mid-way across but a slight shift allowed us to lay Dartmouth. In the freshening wind this was a powerful sail and we made great speed over the last few hours. Caught by the strong winds we spent two days in Dartmouth. The best we could manage when we did leave was Fowey. On a visitor's mooring, we spent one the most miserable nights ever rolling all over the place. The morning was no better but we were not going to endure a second night of hardship. In poor visibility and a fresh westerly, we headed to sea, bound for Falmouth. It was uncomfortable until we cleared Dodman Point after which we were able to carry a slightly freer wind. What a relief to be in Falmouth – here we got good shelter anchored off the town quay within sight of the Chain Locker!

With little sign of any great improvement in the weather, we decided to head for home. We made good speed to the Lizard and across Mount's Bay. By the time we got to the Longships, the tide was against us and we fought for every mile. The wind was very tight



*Lady Belle at anchor Fethard on Sea*

on the nose and it was a hard passage until we started to get the shelter of the Irish coast. Out of the dark came Mine Head light later followed by the familiar light on Ballynacourty Point. We picked up our mooring in Dungarvan Town Quay and secured the ship.

In all we visited seven countries in 80 days covering almost 3450 nm. Despite the fine summer weather we encountered lots of strong winds and were held in port by twelve gale days. Overall *Lady Belle* performed well and we were able to cope with the all the problems that arose.

