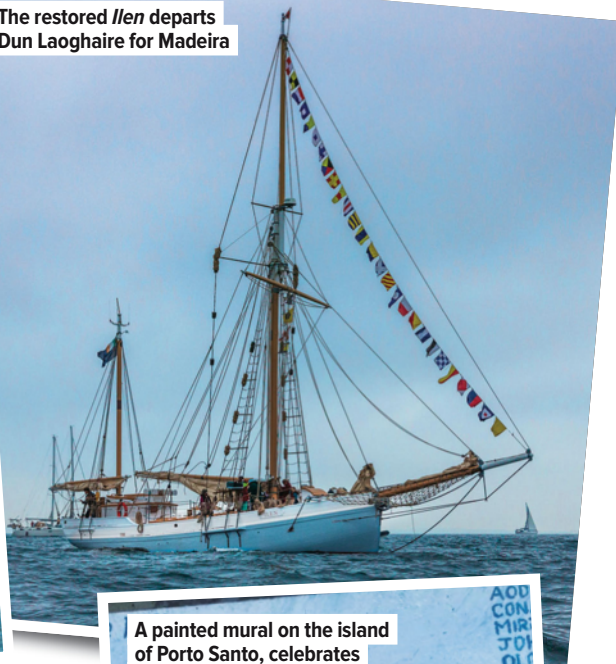


YOUR CRUISING STORIES

DAVID BEATTIE is the commodore of the Irish Cruising Club and has been sailing offshore for 50 years.



The restored *Ilen* departs Dun Laoghaire for Madeira



Alex Delamar celebrates his imminent departure aboard great uncle, Conor O'Brien's, iconic trading ketch, *Ilen*

A painted mural on the island of Porto Santo, celebrates the Saoirse Rally



Historic re-enactment of Conor O'Brien's epic journey

David Beattie reports from the Saoirse Centenary rally

During the afternoon of 20 June, 1923, following 'a good lunch' in the Royal Irish Yacht Club, Conor O'Brien slipped the mooring of his yacht *Saoirse* (pronounced 'Seersshah' and meaning 'freedom') and left Dun Laoghaire, County Dublin, on a voyage around the world.

On leaving the yacht club he was asked when he would return and he replied 'in two years' – which he did, to the minute! O'Brien had designed the yacht himself and had her built in Baltimore, West Cork. His voyage was important because not only was it the first recorded yacht circumnavigation south of the three great southern capes, but it was also the first time the flag of the newly independent Irish Free State had been seen abroad. His feat was recognised at the time because O'Brien was awarded the Challenge Cup of the Royal Cruising Club (RCC) consecutively in the years 1923, '24 and '25, an honour yet to be replicated. Immediately following its foundation in 1929 the Irish Cruising Club (ICC) elected Conor as its first honorary member.

The voyage was also notable insofar as during his stopover in the Falkland Islands

the islanders were so impressed by the seaworthiness of *Saoirse* that the Falkland Islands Company commissioned him to design and supply a larger version to be employed as an inter-island trading ketch. She was named *Ilen* after the County Cork river where she was built. She survived in the Falklands until the late 1990s – a testament to her design and the quality of her construction – when she was returned to Ireland and fully restored. She now operates cruises for an addiction rehabilitation charity called Sailing into Wellness.

The Irish Cruising Club resolved to mark the centenary by publishing a new edition of O'Brien's account of his voyage called *Across Three Oceans*, with an up to date foreword by leading yachting journalist W M Nixon. They also decided to retrace the first leg of O'Brien's voyage from Dun Laoghaire to Funchal in Madeira. We invited our members and those of the other established cruising clubs to participate.

KEEPING IT IN THE FAMILY

We also arranged for ICC members to crew on *Ilen* to and from Madeira. More than 60 cruising folk, including a number of close relatives of O'Brien himself, attended the

'good lunch' in the RIYC and one, Alex Delamer, O'Brien's great grandnephew, crewed to Madeira. In all, 28 yachts made the passage, mainly Irish but with several RCC, Ocean Cruising Club and some ANC members (Portugal's Cruising Association).

The first stop was in Porto Santo 40 miles

Ilen has spent the majority of her sailing life as a trading ketch in the Falkland Islands





O'Brien's descendant, Alex Delamar, was joined by crew members from the ICC

north of Madeira to convene and prepare for a parade of sail into Funchal on 3 July, 100 years to the day since the arrival of *Saorse*.

Ilen had an easy passage, meeting headwinds and thus motor-sailing from Dun Laoghaire to the latitude of Ushant where the northerlies filled in. She reached the island of Porto Santo, 40 miles north of Madeira, in 11 days, where the crew relaxed and painted the yacht's badge on the pier in traditional style. The crew had spent time swimming en route in depths of more than 4,000 metres off the Bay of Biscay.

The welcome in Funchal was superb, with a free bar, music and dancing most nights



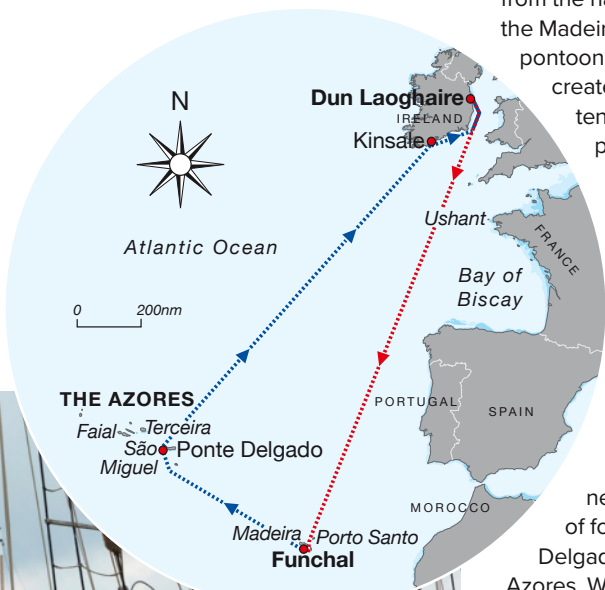
A victorious arrival in Funchal

All photos: eugene@eugenelangan.com

and complimentary dinners on two evenings concluding with a firework display on the last night. The local club – the Clube Naval do Funchal – arranged everything with support from the harbour and tourist authorities and the Madeiran government. A special pontoon for the participating yachts was created in the events harbour, and a tented village was built. Several participants decided to leave their boats for some time either in Madeira or in Porto Santo.

luxurious. Add to that mix a rolling watch protocol, whereby one person goes off watch each hour being replaced with another so that one meets four others during one's three-hour watch and only two people are changing clothes below at a time. This system worked superbly well.

The current question is how should we mark O'Brien's return in two years' time?



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The rally split up following the final dinner on 8 July, with some returning to Ireland or Britain, some to Portugal or Galicia and at least one ICC member heading down to the Canaries in preparation for a circumnavigation.

Ilen left Funchal on 9 July with a new crew and made a fast passage of four-and-a-half days to Ponte Delgado on São Miguel island in the Azores. We did this to avoid the inevitable northerlies along the Iberian coast and to make sufficient westing to fetch Ireland without a beat. Initially we motored in a flat calm and had three reefs in both main and mizen on a beam reach with a nasty sea at right angles to the prevailing swell.

ROLLING WATCH ROUTINE

Departing again after two days of rest, *Ilen* had a robust but manageable passage from there to Kinsale arriving after nine days on the evening of 24 July. With nine on board it was possible to run a three-watch system – three hours on and six off, which is



Ilen leaves Ireland at the head of the rally flotilla

