

In Search of the “Cracking Sail”

Geoff Hilditch, among others, often speaks of easing the sheets, bearing away, and chasing the elusive “cracking sail.” So, it was with this quest in mind that Karl Behler and myself teamed up on his 36’ Ketch, ‘Canta Libre, and set off on our second cruise to Scotland. Naturally there are other reasons that each of us have to be on the trip. Karl is contemplating the sale of his beloved boat and intends to leave her at Crinan, but he is having serious qualms about this. Whereas I plan to monitor Karl’s electronic plotting systems and shadow them with the traditional paper method.

We slipped our lines on Monday 22nd July 2024 beneath a heavy overcast sky but exactly on time, Deutsche Bahn style headed towards PSM, (Port St Mary on the Isle of Man) with the news that President Biden had withdrawn from the American election ringing repeatedly in our ears. We slipped our lines beneath a heavy overcast sky, heading toward Port St Mary on the Isle of Man. The forecast called a south-westerly force 3–4 with rain and stronger wind ahead of the front.



Karl chose jib and full main, no mizzen. I’d have reefed the main and hoisted the mizzen, but there’s only one skipper aboard.

Two hours out from our destination the wind dropped. We were becalmed. The Iron Genny took over. Cracking sail? Not quite.

That night I Awoke feeling a certain pressure growing, so quickly made my way ashore only to find that 7689 is not the code for the toilets, so gingerly, painfully and nervously I make my way back to the boat. Horror of horrors, the cabin door lock has slid into place and I am forced to awake Karl and face the trauma of the Marine Toilet.

Day 5. We rose at 0430 hours and slipped out through Calf Sound. “What fun,” I muttered darkly into my collar—but it was. I’d forgotten the quiet delight of an early departure.

This one felt as though we were becalmed but as we shaped our course the wind began to increase and the quartering sea began to roll the boat most uncomfortably. As we approached Donaghadee Sound we were beginning to slow down again. Not a cracking sail, more of a creaking sail, with our joints doing most of the creaking as we took a berth in Bangor (NI) marina

As we approached Donaghadee Sound, our speed dropped again. Not a cracking sail—more of a creaking sail. We took a berth in Bangor marina, grateful for the stillness.

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The subsequent trip to Rathlin Island was a mixed bag weather wise, with flat calm but atop small Atlantic rollers, we sailed and motor sailed, oh! and we got hit by a quite severe squall en-route.

The next day we danced with the wind trying to cut the Traffic Separation Scheme at the correct 90° angle. Karl's navigation array is formidable. Brookes and Gatehouse Zeus 3, Navionics, Antares, autopilot, GNSS—German menus and all.

The system could follow a course with eerie precision. But it still needed a human to give it a course to follow.

I shadowed it with paper charts, pencil, and bearing lines. My method was slower, quieter, and less dazzling—but it didn't need power, and it didn't crash. To be fair, neither did Karl's kit

We called it “The Disco” and “The Library.” One blinked and beeped. The other whispered bearings and tide table data. Between them, we found our way.



Karl's Navigation Array.
Gulf of Corryvreckan beyond
'The Disco'



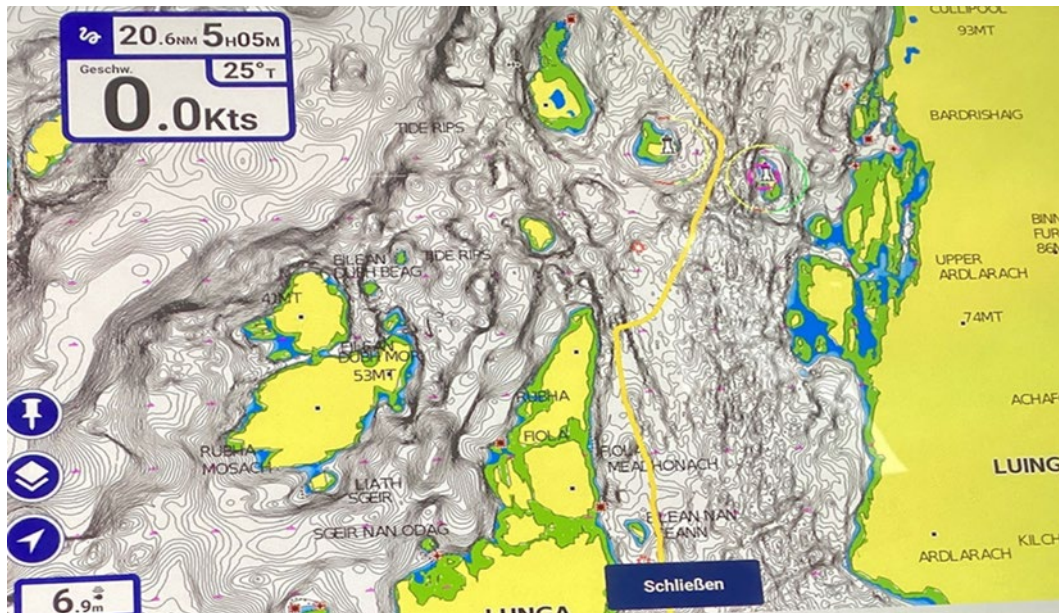
My more Traditional methods
'The Library'

We shaped our course through the Sound of Luing, hugging the port side to cheat the tide. Karl had planned to turn left between Ormsa and Fladda. I held a contrary view—between Fladda and Dubh Sgeir, each conveniently marked by a lighthouse.

Suddenly The boat veered to starboard, caught by an eddy. The sea didn't crack, but something else did—our alignment, our rhythm. We sat side by side, checking and questioning each other. Then, In that moment, we shared a sense of mutual trust, of quiet security.

We journeyed on.

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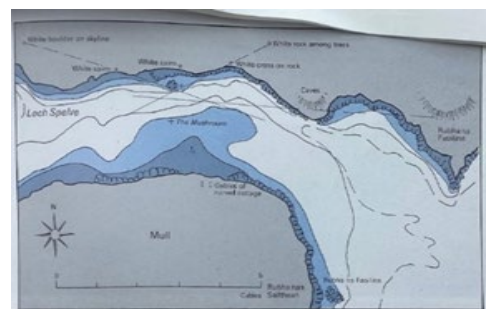


Our track through the sound of Luig

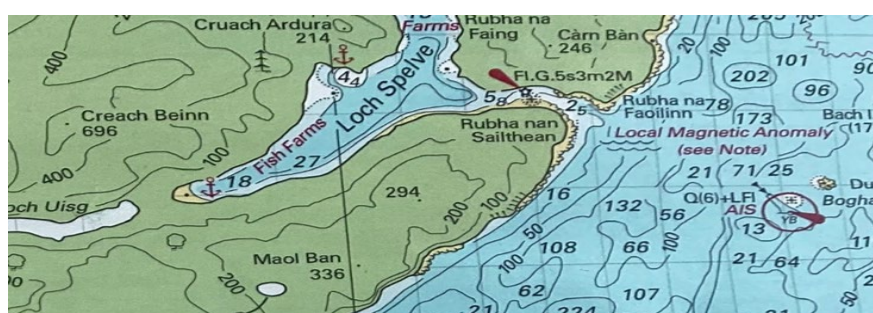
We shaped our course toward Loch Spelve with care. The pilot book offered bearings and warnings, but the leading lines were elusive.



Navionics Chart Plotter



Sailing Directions



The traditional version

The chart showed a rock and a green buoy that seemed to fill the entire channel. Electronic and paper versions conflicted. Some aids were missing. Some features still stood, unlisted.

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Karl chose Croggan to anchor for the night—its only listed facility: a red telephone box.

We sat side by side, cross checking each other's choices, until we shared a quiet sense of security. and so it came to pass, the boat settled, the amber liquid flowed. the sea shanties rose. An excellent evening

Later that evening, we phoned home. Afterwards, Karl tells me that there has been a change of plan and that instead of leaving the boat at Crinan and returning to Caernarfon by land, we shall return to Caernarfon by sea.

There is no doubt about it, I cannot compete with B&G either in terms of speed or accuracy, but always be prepared for the inevitable signal loss or power failure.

Karl's range of electronics is very impressive. His Brookes and Gatehouse kit is amazing, even in German. Fortunately he speaks the language pretty well.

His Zeus 3 has a built in 10Hz GNSS receiver for both GPS and GLONASS, it also has full autopilot capability and will follow the given course. Unfortunately, it does require a human crew to give it the course to follow and to trim the sails etc, for now! The obvious danger here is giving it incorrect data, it will follow a dangerous course if it is given one to follow. Karl also has Navionics and Antares systems as back up. Plus he does carry a set of paper charts. But. What is the consequence of a power failure or external hostile interference with the nav data bases?

The RYA position has recently been modified from teaching electronic navigation alongside the traditional methods to “Digital First”. The first RYA course again sure to be affected by this revision is the Day Skipper course

Day 10. We rise at 0620 and head for Oban to reprovision and take on water and fuel. That done we anchor in Arden Capel Bay. We have looked at the weather forecast for the coming week by using the ‘Weather and Radar App’. Flat calm for the next few days followed by a low coming through the Irish Sea, just as we will be hoping to cross from the Isle of Man to Anglesey. Later that day, just as we are approaching Gigha, where we originally planned to stop, we decide to continue to make the most of the settled conditions. 29 hours and 142 miles later we are approaching Peel ahead of the weather in time for a rest and a shower.

29 hours, 142NM, Motoring the whole way, memorable but a Cracking Sail? Not certain about that one.

At our request we tie up against the wall just inside the sill/ footbridge. We clean up in the old police station and Karl disappears to get some kippers only to return with devastating news. The Kipper emporium, “Manx Kippers” has closed down. No more Manx Kippers!!?? A Pizza and a pint

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go someway to alleviate our concern as we watch the forecast wind and rain start to cross the island. At midnight we slip the surly bonds of Peel (Thanks President Reagan) and make our way to the refuel berth before setting off toward Moelfre on Anglesey. The sea is lively as we depart. Karl and myself have been through Calf Sound before, but neither of us have been through in these conditions, so we have planned to go around the Calf of Man adding about an hour to the trip.

Our initial plan was to anchor on the east coast of Anglesey if necessary into Moelfre, to allow for the tide at the Swellies. But! Says I. If we harden up a tad and get a touch of help from the tide God, we might lay the Holyhead corner, then scoot down to Caerarfon Bar and home. So, after a bit of mental calculation and the use of the rule of twelfths, it is decided and the course alteration is made requiring a reef in the mainsail and the hoisting of the mizzen.

Karl returns to the cockpit from the mainmast but without the winch handle that he had taken with him. I ask how many winch handles remain, the answer is 3. So, NO Karl. You cannot go forward, in the dark, to recover the errant hardware. There is only one of you!

Dawn begins to make an appearance and soon we can confirm our landfall to the west of Wylfa Power Station, slightly left of where we wanted to be, but the tide has turned in our favour lee bowing us into a now wind over tide condition. Nothing drastic yet, but the sooner we weather Holyhead

the better, unfortunately the wind has shifted into the west. The autopilot thinks its time we tacked, but it cant do this without a crew, yet! A button is pressed and the ships head begins the turn. The starboard sheet is released and the other sheeted home but its not working!! Initially the boat turns through 110 degrees before settling down at 90. We are now pointing directly at the skerries, most disconcerting. Suddenly “Super Karl” appears and trims the autopilot tack angle correctly and all is well with the world. This is confirmed by a second, successful tack. We are soon making good progress against the Skerries on our port beam about two miles distant. We tack again, it goes well despite a slight increase in True Wind Speed and the sea is becoming a bit wetter as it jumps over our starboard side. Canta Libra’s 10.8 tons, all up weight, arent bothered a bit and she charges through the waves but the human crew are pleased to crack the sail and steer to clear South Stack.

It turns out that we are about an hour early, so the mainsail is taken down entirely, Karl even found the missing winch handle. I go below to make us some lunch, a venison burger, and to tidy the smashed plates and books..

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So, after all our fears and alarms we eased the sheets, bore away and



enjoyed a cracking sail.

At Long Last.

“Vorsprung Durch Technic”,

as someone used to say.

(No! I've no idea either)