

LOG SERENADE 2019 – Bob and Linda Brown

‘Two tiny cruises’

2018 was a turning point for Linda and I, navigationally speaking. In the spring we sold much loved *Sapphira*, our Halmatic 30, after some 17 years. A season spent foraging through boat yards and marinas in Scotland and Ireland was somewhat tiresome as we became connoisseurs of osmosis, rust and mildew. But then Linda spotted *Serenade*, a 1990 Moody 346 advertised as cradled up on the hard in Coleraine Marina. Apart from lots of sails in good order, she had a nice big Thornycroft 37HP to push her along when the wind wasn't helping. Bargaining and survey – and no osmosis, rust or mildew to be found, and by September this lovely (and for me, enormous) Moody was ours!

We kept her in Coleraine, plugged in, heated and dry over the winter, watched over by very helpful Kenny Mailey working at the council marina, whilst I did the inevitable work to suit her for our needs.



Then, 5th April – BIG DAY! – a launching with Coleraine's enormous hoist; no messing around with trailers there – and soon she was happily parked on a pontoon, her bum wet at last, the River Bann swirling by and a chill wintery wind howling through her shrouds and halliards. Nearly two weeks later on the 18th, our car stuffed to the gills with us, Derek and Viv White, and an unseemly quantity of kit, disgorged its contents which were trolleyed on board, sails fastened and bent, and inaugural G & T's poured. This was more like it!

19th April

The following morning dawned bright and as clear as we all hope Easter mornings should be, and by 08.00 we'd cast off and out into the river. For those who don't know it, the short distance to the open sea is very beautiful, with gentle bends weaving north between mud banks, reed beds and saltmarshes, and beyond the low rolling dunes of Portstewart.

Some thirty minutes later saw us motoring out between the breakwaters at the river entrance, into the open sea, maintaining a northerly course for a while to avoid the nearby sand bars. Finally we turned on to a course of 060° and with the Thornycroft purring along at 1800 revs (inevitably the wind was bang on the nose) giving us a steady 6 knots, and we made best use of the east-going flood towards Rathlin Island. By 10.00 the Giant's Causeway lay some 2 NM off the starboard beam, and Rathlin was looming in the distance. 11.00 found us a few miles off Bull Point, and the eccentric West Light clearly visible – only Rathlin could install the lamp at the bottom of the lighthouse, rather than the top.

There are a mixed crowd of counter-currents swirling around to the west of Rathlin, and these seemingly shift and change at random with different stages of the tide. With the fresh easterly breeze, these produced a mass of confused overfalls, giving *Serenade* a bit of a slapping. She was brilliant, just motoring on happily, though we had to throttle back slightly to stop her head-butting every wave. Down below, our kit was slightly stirred but never shaken. Finally, closing with the cliffs hanging over Church Bay, dodging the odd reef, at 12.40 it was out with fenders and warps, and a gentle nudge into the pontoon after a passage of about 25 NM.

Rather a neat arrival I thought, new boat and all, with a nifty bit of parking on my part. That was until Derek brought me down to earth, commenting that the wind had done most of the work!

It was a pleasant afternoon and evening on the island, renewing acquaintance after a lapse of some years since we were in with *Sapphira*. The usual things – food on board and Guinness in McCuaig's Bar which (either for good or ill) is the same as it's always been.



Serenade snug into the pontoon at Church Bay, Rathlin Island

20th April

With high water Belfast forecast for 12.37 next morning, we were anxious to use the south-going flood in the North Channel to make Glenarm. So at 07.45 we cast off into cold hazy weather, politely declining the offer from an old soak tottering along the pontoon who kindly suggested he could lighten our cargo by relieving us of a bottle of wine. Half an hour later, under engine as there was no wind, we were off Rue Point, enjoying a hint of warmth from a pale sun, and keeping a wary eye on the little patches of mist rolling in. The sea, aside from the turbulence of the flood tide, was beautifully calm, and by 08.30 Thornycroft and tide were whizzing us past Fair Head, and on to Torr Head, at a healthy 12 knots, giving wonderful views of (in my opinion) some of the most fabulous coast to be seen in Europe. And, at precisely the right moment, up come Viv and Linda with reviving coffee and buns!

Conditions began to deteriorate as we were passing Garron Point. We still had views of the lovely coast beside us, but ahead was a large fog bank, obscuring everything further south. Soon we were enveloped in a dense, dank, dark, dripping fog, turning the view of our forestay and pulpit into vague shadowy lines. We were happily sorted with GPS and chart plotter, but Derek leapt gleefully at the chance of using the radar, which after more than two years' deep sleep suddenly leapt into action, offering us alerts for waves/gulls/fish farms/creel floats and even other vessels, though not necessarily in that order, or any order.

With greatly reduced speed, we gently nursed our way into the head of the bay, which our instruments confidently assured us was at Glenarm. In the blanket of

gloom things became rather surreal: what looked to be a major buoy ahead turned out to be a floating coke can; gulls assumed the proportions of pterodactyls. And then suddenly a giant cliff loomed up – it was the low harbour wall of Glenarm Marina, and by 11.30 we were in, after passage through time and space of about four hours – 22 NM.

Gradually the fog began to lift, and a cold watery sun peeped out over the hills behind the village. We sat out the next two north-going ebb tides in Glenarm, doing various extra boaty jobs and rewarding ourselves with an excursion via taxi to dinner in the Londonderry Arms in Carnlough.

21st April

The secret (well, not *that* secret) of getting to Strangford is to leave Glenarm about 1½ hours before Belfast low water (about 07.22), thereby punching the last of the ebb tide. So, despite a certain woolly-headedness from last night's tinctures, we cast off at 06.00, reversing neatly out of a pontoon berth that would have had long-keeled *Sapphira* bouncing off everything in sight. Then out round Park Head in almost identical conditions to the previous day, except for the welcome absence of fog.

By about 07.30 the tide had turned and soon we were sweeping past Muck Island at about 8 knots, watching the flocks of razorbills, guillemots and kittiwakes that nest along its cliffs, and trying to steer a way between the rafts of birds floating in our path. Occasionally that delightful summer fragrance of all seabird colonies: poo, decaying fish and chick vomit, would waft over us, warmed gently in the morning sun.

Across Belfast Lough, we picked up speed again to about 10 knots as we were sluiced through Donaghadee Sound, dodging the various cardinals, finally bursting out into the familiar waters of the Outer Ards coast. By this stage we'd come to the view that the most comfortable revs for the Thornycroft was 2000, and this was delivering about 6½ - 7 knots as we passed that familiar litany of rocks and markers in the approaches to Strangford: Skullmartin, Burial Island, North Rock, South Rock, Butter Pladdy, and finally the Bar Buoy with the welcome outline of Kilclief Castle on the far shore. This coast is always a bit of a slog, especially south of the North Rock, where a counter current slowed us down, and a fresh southerly breeze slapped the waves against us, seemingly determined to hold us back.



Arrival into Strangford, photo by Brian Black

Finally we turned into the Narrows, where our helpful tide was still flooding strongly, and a lovely warm breeze blowing off the farmland. Viv emerged from below bearing whiskeys and we all toasted *Serenade's* arrival to her new home waters. And as we rounded Swan Island after a passage of about 50 NM, there was a grinning Brian Black ready to welcome our 'new' yacht, and to help out with further toasts....

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Two and a half months were spent in Strangford Lough, nosing in and out of Castle Ward's Strangford Sailing Club, the Quoile Yacht Club, and undertaking lots of jobs and improvements. A key task was sorting out the mains'l halliard which had previously dropped and snaked its way down the inside of the mast, needing complete removal. Replacement required hauling Andy Steenson up

the mast, where he had to follow innumerable and conflicting instructions yelled up by Brian and I from the safety of the deck. Andy was up there for about an hour, and whilst the job was a complete success, he was walking around rather strangely for some time after we finally let him down.

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Our next mini cruise was to join the Skiffie World event in Stranraer, at which Strangford Coastal Rowing Club would be competing. Linda had revealed a worryingly competitive, even aggressive streak, and she was all set to take part in the races. Similarly Dave Thompson and Celia Spouncer, from across in the People's Republic of Portaferry were also taking part for Sketrick Rowing Club, so what better than a cruise across, accommodation all sorted on board, and then a bit of a wander round the Firth of Clyde?

On the afternoon of 5th July, the four of us cast off from Strangford's pontoon, and coasted out of the lough on the ebb tide, on the way calling Belfast Coastguard for a radio check – all loud and clear. We knew we'd not make it to Donaghadee Sound before the tide turned against us, so put into Ardglass for the night, ready to kick off at the start of the ebb next morning.

6th July

A bright and clear dawn, and by 10.00 *Serenade* was nosing her way past the Ardglass breakwater with its clusters of fishing boats surrounded by fat seals looking for 'donations'. Initially the last of the flood was against us, but not too strong, and soon we were getting a good lift again, this time going NW back up through Donaghadee Sound. By now, the breeze had picked up to 4-5, smack against the tide running past Orlock Point, and so we got a rare old bashing until we turned the corner and got out of the current after about 34 NM passage. I'd called Bangor Marina earlier, and was cheerfully assured there was plenty of room along pontoon 'E' so just pick your slot. Why do these guys say this? Almost every slot was occupied, and by the time we'd nosed the whole way up the creek (as it were), nothing doing, what better chance to test *Serenade's* abilities going astern, threading between several million quid's worth of yachts? We finally found a spot we could just about squeeze into, next to a big lump of a thing bristling with fat fenders. Well, they aren't fat now.

7th July

At 06.30 we prised *Serenade* out of her slot and out of the marina for the crossing to Loch Ryan and Stranraer. Conditions were lovely; the NW wind in our favour for once, and *Serenade* just tramped along, out past Whitehead and way off in the distance we could see the Mull of Galloway. But then, alas, as we cleared the land, our friendly breeze died away, slowing us to a sloppy 4 knots. So on with the Thornycroft, and a motor sail with autohelm set for Corswall point at the north end of the Mull.



It was a lovely passage. From about half way across we were passing under squadrons of gannets commuting from some fishing ground to their colony on that improbable looking volcanic buttress of Ailsa Craig, where some 70,000 of them nest in a dense colony. Gannets always look cool as they calmly flap and glide purposefully low over the water. But today, in the bright sun they positively gleamed brilliant black and white, with the yellow-buff tint of their head and neck feathers showing clearly. Below us, dense swarms of moon jellyfish coloured the waters a sort of purple from the

rings of their reproductive organs visible through transparent bodies. I was a bit wary of these fellows – the smaller ones looked ideal for blocking an engine's cooling intake.

My passage plan proved to be a mistake. I seriously underestimated the strength of the flood tide running south along the western coast of the Mull, to the south of Corswall Point. As we closed with the land, it kicked in, bringing our speed down to less than 4 knots again, causing maybe an hour or two's

delay. The moral of this story is to steer well to the north of Corswall Point if there's a south-going flood, and then let it help you gently into Loch Ryan.

Anyway, we finally got in, dodging the various ferries, and then lined up for the final transit, following a straight line of tall beacons that mark the very narrow (and rather shallow) dredged channel into Stranraer, where a slot had been kept for us by the friendly marina folk, tying up at 13.25, after about 38 NM.

The Skiffie World fest in Stranraer was a great success. The small town has been hit badly by the shift of ferry traffic to Cairnryan, and signs of decay and economic depression are everywhere, so it wouldn't normally be on a yachtsman's bucket list. But not to be beat, the whole community pulled out all the stops for a great festival of traditional St Ayles skiff rowing. Crews from over fifty clubs took part: suffice it to say that the Strangford Coastal Rowing Club performed well, coming home with 2 golds, 1 silver, and 2 bronze medals, and were the second highest scoring club overall! Both the girls made the final of the senior ladies and had a great time competing against each other. I took part in a crew of the over 60's men who met for the first time as they climbed into the boat! True to form, we came in a heroic last.

10th July

After three days of lively competition, it was time to move on. Celia decided to stay, competing in further races, so Dave, Linda and I got provisions, topped up water and all that sort of thing. At 06.55, with a northerly breeze and low grey clouds, we gently reversed out of the pontoon, trying not to wake various crews sleeping off the previous night's festivities. We planned to go pottering around various anchorages in the Firth of Clyde, notably around the Isle of Arran.

It didn't look promising. As we cleared Loch Ryan and Finnarts Point at its entrance, the weather closed in. Whilst the northerly breeze gusting 3-5 wasn't an issue, a dense drizzle set in, at times trying very hard to qualify as heavy rain. Visibility dropped to less than a mile – traditional Scottish weather! We could tell we were near Ailsa Craig by the constant stream of gannets maintaining their course for the colony, and having to swerve as they spotted us in the gloom. For a brief moment conditions cleared, there was the giant rock, looking rather grey and sinister, about a couple of miles away, with a cap of dense cloud tumbling about its peak. And then it disappeared again.

The original idea of picking up a mooring in Arran's Loch Ranza no longer seemed quite so appealing, as all the forecasts, shipping and otherwise were offering several days of this stuff. So reluctantly we adjusted our course to make for Campbeltown. A phone call elicited the news that there was 'plenty of room', and whilst treating this with some scepticism, we decided to go for it. By 12.10 we could see Island Davaar at the entrance, with its contorted and impressive rock formations, and with better visibility closing with the land, we had a straightforward run in, guided by the leading marks, so one hour later we were snug on the pontoon after 38 NM's worth of rain. Smug too, as more boats piled in after us, with equally sodden crews, requiring a fair old bit of jostling and negotiations to get everyone packed in.

I had always regarded Campbeltown as a slightly dour, rather utilitarian sort of place – at least that's the impression I gained when berthing here on *Sapphira* with Ian Stephenson in 2004. But things have perked up since then. Firstly there's a marina now, not a minimalist windswept pontoon, and there is plenty of eating to be had around town, whilst the pubs have cheered up too, notably the Feathers which serves a range of seriously mind-altering craft ales from a bar flanked by two large wooden sculptures of improbably well-endowed ladies.

For the next few days a strong northerly howled its way down through the town and harbour, setting *Serenade's* stays, shrouds and halliards humming in sympathy, whilst sheets of truly authentic Scottish rain blew in. We hauled up the cockpit cover, giving us an extra 'cabin' whilst keeping things nice and dry below despite the weather.

Not to be outdone by minor meteorological challenges, Linda charged off and rented a tiny car. And I mean tiny – the sort of car you put on rather than climb into, with an engine that was barely capable of tackling the smallest of hills. However, into this Dinky toy the three of us squeezed in and explored the Mull of Kintyre.

The Mull is a beautiful landscape of rolling hills and rich farmland, which contrasts strongly with the rugged outer coast that looks towards County Antrim. Some things stand out in the memory – going to the beautiful Campbeltown Picture House, one of the earliest surviving purpose-built cinemas in the UK that opened its doors in 1913, to see 'Yesterday'; a rather curious film packed with many Beatles tracks; driving to the south end of the Mull to sample a globally awarded coffee and cake shop, where Dave was

finally defeated by a cake of architectural proportions; and perhaps a somewhat less focused memory of sampling Kintyre Gin at Torrisdale Castle. I always thought that being a Laird on a grand estate entailed hard work managing game keepers and land agents. Not so here – we found our Laird in shorts, stretched out on a deck chair, and all too ready to dispense and discuss the finer points of his botanicals.

We also visited the Mull of Kintyre lighthouse, this time seeing from the landward side of the mark that so often is negotiated from the sea, on passage to and from Gigha. You leave the car at the end of a long farmland track which gives way to wet, windswept foggy moorland, and follow a winding path

that slopes down for some two miles, passing the spot, now marked by a memorial, of the apparently still debated 1994 helicopter crash. The lighthouse buildings are mostly closed up (although apparently you can rent a flat there) and the light is automatic, but the close-packed buildings with their heavily painted windows, offer shelter from most wind directions. It would be interesting to be there in a really good storm.



14th July

Finally, after three days conditions suddenly improved. The sky brightened, the wind dropped, and the sea seemed to settle, though this was difficult to judge as we were on the sheltered side of the Mull. So, with itchy feet and rudder, we decided to head out before port-rot set in, and in any case Linda needed to engage with that dreaded four-letter word ‘work’ in a couple of days. At 12.25 we headed out of Campbeltown Loch, making our way past Island Davaar with its impressive sandbar linking it to the mainland now exposed by the falling tide.

This tide did us proud, carrying us south along the coast, past Sanda with a light NNW wind, so up with the main, and over 7 knots speed over the ground on the GPS – all very satisfying, and course set for 215° to account for the expected ebb in the North Channel. Conditions were wonderfully clear, with the distant Antrim coast, and Garron Point before us. At 14.30, now clear of the Mull, we were treated to a mirage. Off to the north west, in the clear air, were a series of shimmering columns hovering over the horizon. This is a fairly common phenomenon in polar waters, caused by refraction of light passing through layers of air at different temperatures, but we'd never seen this in our waters. Initially we thought it was probably distorted Rathlin Island, but I now think it was more probably Islay playing tricks with our eyes.

With high water Belfast forecast for 22.40, the afternoon ebb began to slacken, and we needed to adjust our course to 230° as the ebb in open water hadn't been that strong. However, all still going well, although the wind had dropped, requiring Mr Thornycroft to be started up again, and the 6 knots soon had us closing with Glenarm, finally tying up at 18.10 after 33 NM passage. At this point Linda had to leave, for starting work the next day, so Dave and I got sorted for the final leg home.

15th July

As before, in relation to punching the last 1½ hours of ebb, required leaving Glenarm at 04.00 in the morning. I think we were both feeling a bit dopey, but it was a lovely morning, barely getting light as we headed out past the marina lights, and eastwards, once again towards Park Head, peering into the half-dawn to spot the various buoys and creel floats. However, a hot cup of tea soon kicked life into us, and at 05.10 the sun finally broke over a distant bank of cloud hanging over Arran in the far distance through gin-clear light. No wind, and sea utterly calm as we glided our way southwards, in a repeat of April's passage. And it inspired Dave to bring out his poetic side....

By the time we were well down the outer Ards coast, that old counter current had kicked in and a fresh breeze sprung up from the south, creating quite choppy conditions. However, our attention was mainly on an approaching fog bank, and as we neared the Bar Buoy, Killard Point and Gun's Island suddenly disappeared. By the time we were rounding the buoy, visibility had dropped to a few yards, whilst the GPS was cheerfully assuring us that we were approaching the Angus Rock (referred to by Walter Harris in 1744 as the

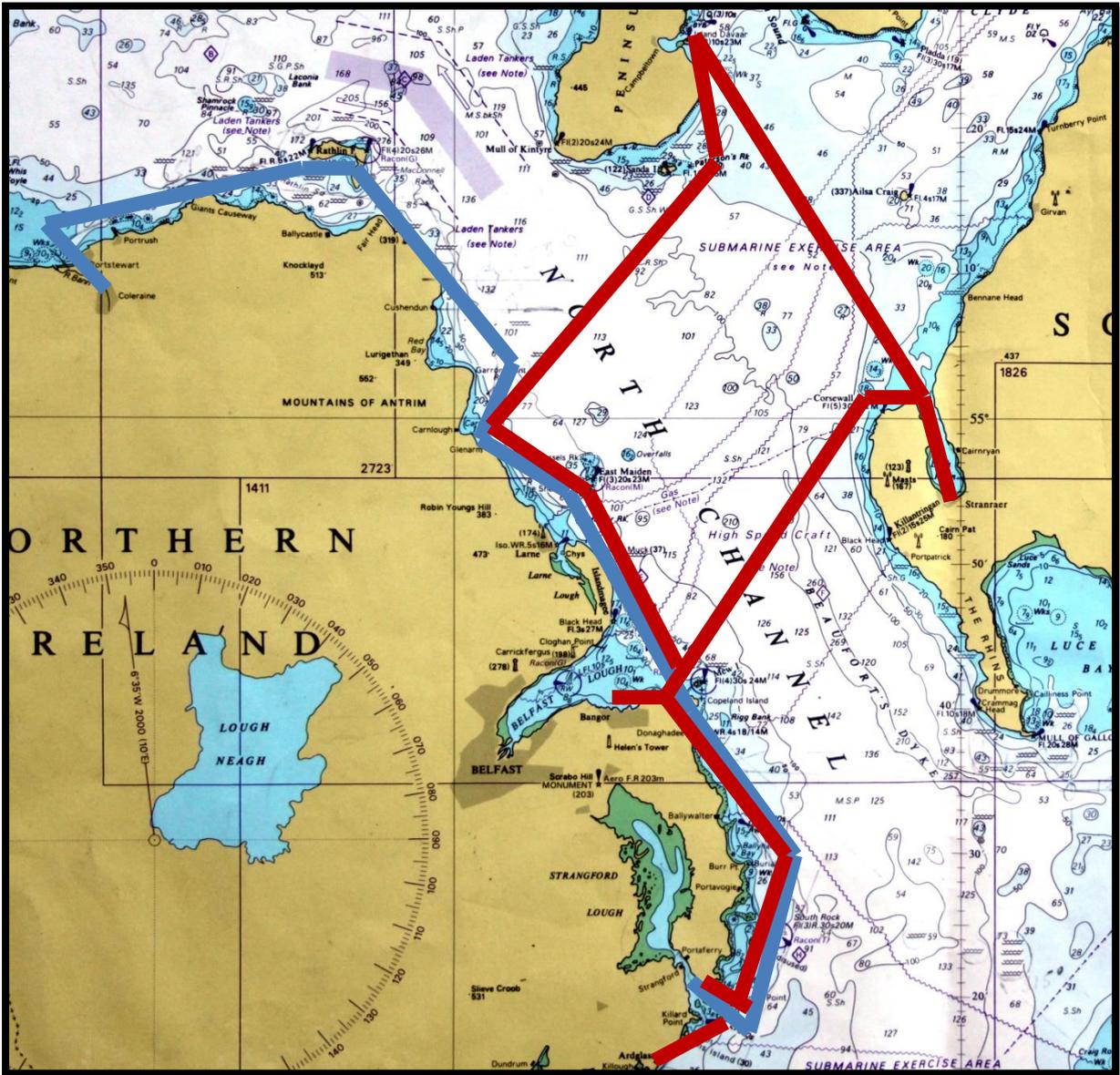
‘Anguish Rock’!) at speed. Pointing *Serenade* in the right direction was largely a matter of guesswork at this stage, but the current was helpful, and eventually the lighthouse loomed up, a couple of chains to port. Next thing to dodge was the current turbine, thankfully slipping past at a similar distance to starboard.

Dawn rising on a Celtic sea

Out here where sky and sea
Meet in a concordant symphony,
Riding a watery form that
Gives sense of substance
Yet dare to touch this silken form,
Then beware of bewitching pull
Where mind would follow body
In attempt to know
and understand more
Beneath this surface lays
The quiet of the deep.
At first surface giving promise,
Solace
A welcoming as soft surface
Mirrorlike now, reflecting
Cloud-skies from above
But beneath this mirror
Let not mind falter and stare
Forever
Let not the soul be drawn
And entrapped to mind-touch

Beneath the silken paradigm.
Oh how grey-bright
With golden sun-rise
Here stretches out
Far and wide
towards all aqueous horizons
Sea and sky co-joined as if
Un-identifiable twin-form
However easily mistaken
For one and the same thing
Here it is easy to turn
A world upside down
Or is it upside in
Flip these two watery worlds
Of sea-sky dance
As one meets the other
A merging so easily envisaged
Where bi-form
Is seen
Not as two
But one.

As we dropped speed, nosing past Swan Island, the Regatta was in full action, with yachts appearing and disappearing in and out of the fog from all directions. But never mind, we were home, and it was the work of a few minutes to pick up and secure the mooring after 50 NM lovely cruise. And even less time taken to crack open a couple of beers!



Serenade's two mini-cruises 2019