

## Coastal Regions of the UK and Ireland

May 13<sup>th</sup> to 26<sup>th</sup> 2006

Saturday 13<sup>th</sup> May – Dartmouth, Devon

*“A journey is a person in itself: no two are alike and all plans, safeguards, policies and coercion are fruitless; we find ourselves after years of struggle that we do not take a trip, a trip takes us”*

*John Steinbeck*

As we arrived at Dartmouth harbour on this beautifully sunny, warm day, we found the Polar Star dominating the picturesque port with its hundreds of moored yachts and cruisers and busy ferries darting back and forth. A short zodiac ride out to the middle of the River Dart took us and our luggage to the ship where we had a little time to unpack, explore and have a snack before being summoned to the observation lounge for introductions by Captain Jacek Majer and Expedition Leader Hannah Lawson to David, the Hotel Manager, Doctor Judy and the rest of the expedition staff. Hannah then gave us the all-important safety briefing. This was followed by our lifeboat drill and fashion parade in our natty orange life jackets. Promptly at 17.30 the pilot came on board, we cast off from the immense moorings in the channel and began our journey, following many generations of explorers, adventurers, privateers and naval heroes down the Dart and into the Channel.



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We stood on the open deck admiring the lovely homes perched amongst the trees on the steep valley sides, and Callum gave us a running commentary on the history of Dartmouth Castle, which has guarded the approaches to this important mercantile town for more than seven centuries. As we nosed out of the harbour we were pleased to find that the open water was glassy calm; we dropped our pilot into his waiting boat and turned westward to parallel the coastline as far as Start Point lighthouse, giving us views of the little villages perched on cliff tops and green fields dotted with sheep and cattle. Callum continued to relate some of the stories of this historic landscape, including the use of Slapton Sands in June 1944 as a training ground for the Normandy invasions by Allied troops. We dined at 19:00 and chatted to our fellow passengers before reassembling in the observation lounge to be given a briefing on tomorrow's activities by Hannah. Finally, it was time to enjoy our first night's sleep on board.



## **Sunday 14<sup>th</sup> May - Tresco and St Mary's, Isles of Scilly**

*"We pray thee, Oh Lord, not that wrecks should happen, but if wrecks do happen, Thou wilt guide them into the Isles of Scilly for the benefit of the poor inhabitants":* Parson Troutbeck Besant

We dropped anchor between the islands of St. Mary's and Tresco as Hannah woke us to a foggy morning, but one which held the promise that it would clear away to another brilliant day. After breakfast and a chance to collect a picnic lunch, the tender came alongside to take us to the island of Tresco.

We landed on the long stone quay at Carn Near, overlooked by the remains of Oliver's Battery, built by Admiral Blake in 1651 on the site of a former Bronze Age grave. To the left and right of the quay we could also see the outlines of field walls dating back to the prehistoric period, now underwater except at low tide. A short walk or buggy ride through the dunes and across the heliport, admiring the profusion of flowers as we went, took us to the Abbey gardens. The Abbey is owned by the Dorrien-Smith family who lease the island from the Duchy of Cornwall.

The sub-tropical climate around Tresco Abbey enables many plants to flourish that will not grow as well – if at all – almost anywhere else in Britain. The terraces display an amazing riot of colours, leaf forms, sizes and shapes. The layout was delightfully informal, with many self seeded specimens allowed to grow wherever they had rooted (well, for a while, anyway - we think that the gardeners take delight in the ravages of rare hurricanes and snow storms that devastate parts of the gardens allowing them to redesign and replant where necessary). We were privileged to be led around the grounds by a trio of knowledgeable guides from the gardening staff and Dorrien-Smith family. Five full time gardeners and two students tend the almost-4,000 plants. The names and details of every plant in sight were rattled off by our guides as they explained the planting and maintenance of the garden, the devastation caused by gales and storms, and the history and provenance of all the splendid sculptures and water features.

As part of the tour we were taken to Valhalla, with its figureheads from the hundreds of wrecks that the Isles of Scilly have claimed. The collection was begun in 1840 by Augustus Smith (the Scilly landlord) and was donated by the Dorrien-Smith family to the National Maritime Museum in lieu of death duties. Most of us then visited the gift shop and garden teashop with an envious audience of scavenging blackbirds, chaffinches, sparrows and song thrushes eager to snatch crumbs from our plates.

Instead of visiting the gardens, Callum led a group of hiking enthusiasts on a walk around most of the island via a system of well-maintained paths. We passed the remains of Cromwell's Castle (1651) built to defend the islands from invading Dutch fleets; King Charles' Castle (1550) on Castle Down, which is covered with a system of earthworks, fortifications and batteries surrounded by earlier entrance graves, round houses, field systems, cairns, enclosures and tin mine depressions; and the Blockhouse (1554). Several birders in the group, particularly Nicholas, spotted a wide variety of birds including pheasant, partridge, greenfinch and swallow and a few species of butterfly as we passed through woods, sand dunes, fields of mown hay, cut daffodils and asparagus, and little clusters of stone-built houses.

All too soon we had to leave this paradise and set off back to the jetty, some of us taking a slightly longer route enjoying the views of the pools, the white sandy beaches and the shallow aquamarine sea, spotting more birds and a lush abundance of seaweeds as we went. The tender then took us across to St Mary's, the main island in the Scilly archipelago.

Some of us ate our packed lunch on the quay side of Hugh Town, which is on a narrow isthmus separating two sandy beaches, before setting off on a walk around the Garrison with Chris to look for more local and migrating birds. Others enjoyed the opportunity to shop, sample a pint

of Cornish beer or cider and a meal, and relax. About twenty joined Callum, Jane, Judy and Bill for a walk along the coast to the Neolithic burial mound of Bant's Carn and the abandoned Iron Age village of Halangy. Once again, we were blessed with superb views and spectacular flora as



we went. Bant's Carn is the most famous of the roughly 80 Scillonian entrance graves, an impressive dry stone tomb with four enormous stone slabs forming the roof over a chamber excavated in 1900 by George Bonsor. The excavation produced four piles of cremated bone at the end of the chamber, some Bronze Age pottery in the entrance and part of a round-based Neolithic bowl. We paused to admire the view from Halangy, sitting on the

low walls that were the remains of this Iron Age and Romano-British village of interconnecting stone-walled houses. Excavation of most of the village in the 1950s revealed interesting interior features such as drains, hearths, benches, partitions and cupboards. When it was occupied it would have been on the edge of a marsh, not the edge of the shallow sea as now.

Back in Hugh Town many took the opportunity to potter through the streets, visit Star Castle, look at the shops, take short walks on the coastal paths, drink tea, slurp ice cream or just sit on the sand or the harbour walls gazing at the fishing boats and the ferries coming and going from Penzance and the out islands.

Then at 15.00 we were back aboard the tender en route to the Polar Star as we set sail for Ireland. We passed by the Bishop Rock Lighthouse, built in 1850 which, as Hannah said, is the first landmark spotted by sailors and rowers coming across the Atlantic. After a pause for a snack and well-earned rest, we began the lecture programme, with Chris leading off with his beautifully-illustrated *Seabirds of Britain and Ireland*, a primer on the seabirds and coastal species we are most likely to encounter in our travels from Scilly to Leith. The evening continued with a briefing by Hannah on tomorrow's activities and a recap with contributions by Gary and Callum, another superb dinner, and our second lecture, Gary's *Been There, Done That*, which traced the path of the British Isles over the past one billion years from deep in the Southern Hemisphere, across the Equator and into its present position in the middle of the Northern Hemisphere (no wonder Britons love to travel), explaining the origin of the diverse rocks we'll see along the way.

## Monday 15<sup>th</sup> May – Garinish and Glengarriff, Bantry Bay, Ireland

*"Slan beo agus deir bua agus go unbeiimid beo ar an am seo aris"*  
 ( Goodbye, good luck, may all your endeavours be successful, may each of us be alive next year).  
 Gaelic saying.

The morning found us sailing on a moderate swell towards the south coast of Ireland, with a bit of fog obscuring visibility. At mid-morning, after our zodiac briefing, we sailed up the calm waters of Bantry Bay passing rafts of guillemots, with gannets wheeling around, and dropped anchor off Garinish Island. Lines of blue buoys marked nets where mussels are seeded; Bantry Bay mussels are exported all over Europe. The zodiacs were soon out to deposit us at Garinish Island, where we explored the garden. Laid out by Harold Peto in 1910, the Italianate garden is beautifully designed and enhanced by the idyllic setting. All the topsoil was imported to turn the bare rock into the impressive garden that it has become today. We wandered the pathways,

soaking in the atmosphere and savouring the heady perfume from the multitude of flowering bushes. The historians amongst us also enjoyed the rare opportunity to climb to the top of the Martello tower, a defensive position dating to Napoleonic times. On our way back to the ship, we quietly drove in as close as possible to the harbour seals hauled out on the rocks around the island, many with small pups. Beady eyes followed the boats and their occupants but neither mothers nor offspring seemed at all perturbed by our busy cameras.

After lunch we re-boarded the zodiacs for the short ride into the jetty at Glengariff. Here we were met by our driver-guides for the afternoon and were soon off driving along the picturesque Bantry Bay to Bantry House.



In 1796 the French Armada had entered the bay and spent six days there unable to land due to storms. Richard White warned the British of the French presence and his reward was a peerage and Bantry House. It has remained in the White family to this day. The house, though quite faded in grandeur, contains some unique treasures - such as Gobelin tapestries and Aubusson carpets; all alas have known better days.

The view from the front rooms to the Parterre and the bay beyond are superb. The gardens had been neglected for sixty years but are in the process of restoration and many of us climbed the 'stairway to heaven' to see the splendid view over the house. Others greatly enjoyed the 1796 French Armada Exhibition in the former stable block. Soon it was time to re-board the coach for the short drive back to Bantry, where we had an hour to explore and shop, before returning to the ship.

Back on board, after recap and briefing and dinner, we resumed the lecture programme, with Jane giving her talk on *Celtic Christian Art*, regaling us with stories of the early Christian monks and their valiant efforts to produce brilliant illustrated manuscripts in places like Iona and Skellig Michael, both of which we plan to visit, while being constantly assailed by the invading Vikings. This was a perfect precursor to our planned visit to the Skelligs, and we went to bed hoping for calm seas and good visibility on the morrow.

## **Tuesday 16<sup>th</sup> May - Skellig Rocks, Valencia, Bantry and Smerwick Harbour**

*'A tune is more lasting than the song of birds and a word is more lasting than the wealth of the world.'*

*Irish Proverb*



After a peaceful half-night at anchor in Bantry Bay, we emerged again into the open Atlantic and by early morning were approaching Skellig Michael. The swell and low clouds did not bode well for a landing, so instead we decided to do a figure-of-eight around the two islands. During our first loop we passed remarkably close to Little Skellig with its white 'icing' of gleaming white gannets, which had been visible from miles away. As we approached, the air was filled with the sight, sound and smell of these magnificent birds. Chris gave a running commentary and informed us that this was the fifth largest colony in the British Isles with 26,000 pairs breeding here. Many hundreds of them were in the air, circling above us, their black-tipped white wings vivid against the dark sky, while others were plunging from a height of 20 m or so off one of the points, where evidently a foolish shoal of fish was swimming. The strata on this sandstone island were neatly emphasised with rows and rows of the nesting birds. We also saw a few guillemots and puffins before we set off across the narrow channel to Skellig Michael, which is completely gannetless, for some reason we were unable to fathom.



As we completed our circuit of Skellig Michael, passing the new lighthouse, an older light tower and several steep stairways, we were able to view the beehive huts, occupied by monks from the seventh century onwards, clearly visible when silhouetted against the skyline. Jane gave us a commentary from the bridge while Callum, running back and forth between the bridge wings and observation lounge, pointed out the stone huts as they emerged on the skyline. It is

amazing to think that anyone could eke out an existence near the summit of this jagged island, but one could certainly appreciate that they met their objectives of solitary contemplation! A wonderful experience, and our compliments to the Captain and his bridge crew for such brilliant seamanship.

As we'd been unable to land, we had a couple of hours to spare so set off in search of a sheltered harbour where we could launch the zodiacs and get ashore. This we found at the north end of Valentia Island, and soon most of us were bucketing across the waves through a sudden rain squall to land at Knightstown, a picturesque fishing village and busy ferry terminal. Here we quickly made friends with locals Alan and Eoin, who gave us some excellent advice on tours. Several of us made our way by private car to visit the Skellig Experience interpretation centre, others walked around the charming town and found tea, and about 40 made the trek along the coast through the gardens of Glanleam House, remarkable for their profusion and variety of exotic trees, shrubs and flowers. Our ultimate objective was Cromwell's Fort at the tip of the island near the lighthouse, but we ran out of time to get there and headed regretfully back. En route we passed a mid-nineteenth century church roofed with local slate, the same slate that covers the British Houses of Parliament, and a row of lighthouse keepers' houses with their fronts firmly facing away from the sea. By noon we were all heading back to the ship for lunch and a run north into Dingle Bay.

Dingle Bay proved to be inhospitably wide open to the large swells coming in from the southwest, so large that the Captain decided that it would not be safe to disembark onto the zodiacs. While we waited in vain for the swells to diminish, Hannah and Damon in their zodiacs played with Fungie the bottlenose dolphin, who obligingly leapt in their wakes and obviously enjoyed the interaction. After disentangling ourselves from a sneaky cable that had wrapped its

amorous arms around our anchor on the bottom of the harbour, we set off north through the Blasket Channel in search of a calmer landing spot. Hannah picked a brilliant location - Smerwick Harbour, ringed by long sandy beaches and surrounded by green fields and colourful houses with a fringe of sandstone bedrock and orange glacial till. As usual, we talked to a curious local resident who told us about a little hill fort just round the corner from our jetty landing, so many of us trekked along a narrow road between fields full of sheep and cattle to Dun An Oir, a small promontory fort defended by a high wall on the landward side, a deep cleft, and the steep drops to the sea. The probably-Iron Age fort has an interesting recent history, when it was invaded by English forces under Lord Grey and Admiral Winter, who slaughtered James Fitzmaurice and 600 others, including Italian, Spanish and Basque allies. A stone sculpture by Cliodhna Cussen near by illustrates the story of the slaughter.

Others spent a happy hour or so walking along the lovely sandy beach and talking to friendly local inhabitants. We returned to the ship and immediately went in to dinner, which was followed by an extended recap and briefing, with Hannah telling us about tomorrow's plans, Chris leading a lively discussion on why the gannets occupy only Little Skellig and not Skellig Michael, Damon introducing us to the life history of Fungie and dolphins in general - he estimated that Fungie is perhaps 30 years old and likely to live at least another 10 years - Jane describing the Smerwick fort and sculpture, Callum giving us a preview on the next day's visit to Dun Aenghus and Gary talking about the local geology.

### **Wednesday 17<sup>th</sup> May – Cliffs of Mohar and Aran Islands.**

*"May the saddest day of the future be no worse than the happiest day of the past!"*  
*Traditional Irish Toast*

Hannah woke us this morning with the announcement that we were approaching the dramatic Cliffs of Mohar, and many of us were up and about in time to see the castle ruins on the cliff top - probably situated as a lookout - as we steamed by before breakfast. The overcast skies allowed us perfect views of the cliff features, which are cast in deep shadow on sunny mornings. At their highest the cliffs tower more than 200 m above the sea and are prone to a great deal of erosion. Guillemots flew by in streams to their nesting ledges on the sea stacks and cliff sides, kittiwakes could be seen in large numbers in the crevices and Chris on the bridge pointed out a few puffins.

Despite building seas and light rain, we made an early landing on Inishmore, the largest island in the Aran Islands. We had a long (8 minutes!) and slightly choppy zodiac ride into the sheltered harbour at Kilronan, where we found a fleet of mini buses waiting to drive us through the village and along winding roads to the Seven Churches. Jane led a brief tour of what is actually the remains of two churches, Teamphall an Brechan (Brechan's Church) begun in the eighth century and later added to, Teamphall an Phoill (Church of the Hollow) a few centuries later, and five dwelling houses built for pilgrims and priests. She also showed us one of the original Celtic crosses that she had featured in her talk of a couple of nights ago.

Our informative bus drivers then took us to Dun Aengus - an impressive Bronze and Iron Age fort perched on the 90 m high, and sheer, cliff edge. Callum was waiting to lead the walk up to the fort from the beautiful interpretation centre, past fields of limestone 'pavement' dotted with primroses, early purple orchids and burnet roses. In sheltered nooks behind walls and where moisture collected, stunted trees grew; in the past, much of the island had been wooded before the arrival of people and their need for timber and cleared land. The fort itself is an amazing dry stone semicircular construction of three concentric enclosures, with each wall ending abruptly at the cliff rim. We were all drawn to - or near to - the edge to peer down almost 90 m at the sea below. The earliest Bronze Age occupants of the cliff top lived in small stone houses and may

have built one of the stone walls to shelter their livestock and crops. Later, in the Celtic Iron Age, the immense inner walls were built, perhaps for defence but also as a statement of power and prestige. It was a truly memorable place, made all the more impressive in the driving rain, as we in our Goretex and wellies with packed lunches in our pockets thought about how it must have been to live here a thousand or two years ago.



As we headed back to Kilronan we admired the fields that had been laboriously constructed by the islanders. They had cleared much of the loose limestone off the land then transported sea weed and sand from the shore to mix with animal (and domestic?) manure and the small pockets of earth trapped in the fractured bedrock to form a thin layer of soil on top of the underlying rock. Here they were able to start producing one of their staples, potatoes, to eke out the ubiquitous salt fish. Our drivers pointed out the unique means of collecting rainwater, with large slabs of limestone set diagonally to funnel water into stone troughs. Inishmore has an astonishing 7-10 pubs (depending on which driver we had) for a population of 700 people, and only one grocery store.

We had an exciting ride with our excellent drivers Chris, Josefino and Gary back to the ship through Force 6 winds, driving rain and high seas - the more adventurous of us enjoying this more than others! By two p.m. the last of the zodiacs was back at the ship and we were rewarded with free tipples in our hot chocolate and a snack as we sailed. The afternoon was filled with time for a nap and then a most interesting talk by Damon on the *Marine Life of Britain and Ireland* with excellent photos to illustrate some of the more common or unusual animals he has encountered in his career. Questions and comments afterwards included a challenge on how Damon could prove that the octopus is the most intelligent of invertebrates, which Dr. Damon did quite handily, with much waving of arms and convolutions. After dinner, we began our film series with a showing of the classic 1934 movie by Robert Flaherty, *Man of Aran*.

### **Thursday 18<sup>th</sup> May – At Sea**

*Who hath desired the sea? The sight of water unbounded  
The heath and the halt and the crash of the camber wind-hounded?*

*Joachim du Bellay*

Last night as we slept, or didn't, the anticipated storm caught up with us, bashing us with huge waves driven by Force 9 winds and higher gusts. Hannah and the Captain looked at the weather forecast coming into the bridge by satellite and in considering our options decided that, as we would not likely be able to land at Clare Island today, and would be unable to anchor in Clew Bay, we should proceed on up the coast in an attempt to outrun the storm. We spent an uncomfortable few hours with the wind and swells broadside, but finally the wind came around

behind us and the motion settled. By 08.00 under partly cloudy skies we had Tory Island in view, but with continuing high winds gusting to 40 knots and only one anchor (the other was lost in Antarctica) were unable to land. Jane and Callum gave a brief running commentary on the history of the island and Chris spotted some puffins, gannets and guillemots as the Captain brought us in unbelievably close to the stacks, cliffs and sea caves along the north shore of the island. In good expedition style, we then departed from our planned itinerary and sailed north into what we hoped would be more hospitable Scottish waters, filling the rest of day with entertainment and deck time.

Mid-morning, Callum presented *Crofting on the Western Edge*, the story of his youth (mis)spent on a Hebridean croft on the isle of Tiree. He began with the first crofters, the Neolithic and Bronze Age inhabitants of Skara Brae in Orkney, which we will visit next week, and concluded with the crofting-cum-tourism industries of today's Hebrides. After lunch we began with the engine room tours; an opportunity to see the guts of the good ship Polar Star. In mid-afternoon we were treated to *Whiskey Galore*, a riotous 1950's Ealing Studios film about a group of Scottish islanders who discover liquid gold following a gale similar to the one we are now enjoying.

Next up in the day's entertainment was a powerpoint talk by Bridget on *Seals: Flipped Friends*. She described the evolution of the species first, describing its natural history and the differences between eared (the sea lions and fur seals) and earless seals, and then familiarized us with the appearance and habits of the various species we may encounter in this part of the world.

During dinner we sailed up the west coast of the Isle of Mull, passing Iona and Staffa and the Treshnish Isles en route to Tobermory, a scenic little port on the northwest corner of Mull. After dinner we went ashore by zodiac to explore the village and enjoy a wee dram with the local folks. Despite a light drizzle we managed to acquire a few more souvenirs before returning to the ship – although a few stayed on and received a warm welcome at the bar!

## Friday 19<sup>th</sup> May – Rum and Skye

*"Often towards nightfall there's a feeling in the air...the oldness of the land"*

Valerie Gillies

Early morning clouds eventually yielded to bright sunshine for our landing at Loch Skavaig on Skye's south coast, where we enjoyed a slow saunter along a beautiful rapids to another, smaller loch above led by Chris and Gary, who filled us in on the local birds and rocks as we snapped photos of the stunning highland scenery. After a leisurely visit to the loch some of us boarded zodiacs and zipped over, past dozens of snoozing harbour seals, to nearby Soay to visit Gavin



Maxwell's ruined basking shark processing factory. Maxwell was the author of *Ring of Bright Water*, a wonderful story about the remarkable relationship of a man with his pet otter. Despite a

few light (!) Scottish showers along the way, we had a wonderful time observing the numerous seals, guillemots, razorbills and cormorants - and those in Callum's boat even had a sighting of a harbour porpoise and a feeding frenzy of terns and kittiwakes.

During lunch, we relocated to the Isle of Mull, the biggest of the Small Isles south of Skye, and went ashore at the old slipway near the head of Loch Scresort, from which we walked through beautiful bluebell-filled woods to Kinloch Castle. The Castle was built in 1902 by Lancashire industrialist George Bullough, who expended enormous effort and even more money to impress his friends with the best of everything, from the earliest "Jaccuzi" to a mechanical orchestra, to a mysterious ballroom where our guide hinted that secretive events took place - many of them involving the then Prince of Wales and perhaps accounting for the knighthood bestowed on Sir Bullough. His French wife, the Lady Monica, helped him spend his inheritance on some softer touches, added to the rather more ostentatious - and some might say grotesque - ornamentation favoured by Sir George.

As we headed back to the ship we could smell the tantalizing fragrances emanating from Chef Marian's barbecue grill on the back deck, and were soon tucking into a mixed grill of steak, chicken, salmon, lamb, sausage and other delicious meats as well as a range of salads, basking in the warm evening sunlight. We shared our meal and were in turn delightfully entertained by four of the Scottish Natural Heritage staff from shore, and then set off south around the west side of the island through rafts of many hundreds of Manx shearwater, wheeling and congregating on the sea before their return to their burrows on the scree slopes of Rum.

## **Saturday 20<sup>th</sup> May – Isles of Islay and Gigha, Scotland**

*As the sea and the sky as this time passes by  
The blue bells of Gigha in bloom.*

Ian Tamblyn 2005

We awoke to another calm sea sparkling under a sunny sky to find ourselves anchored off one of the seven distilleries on Islay, the second largest island in the Inner Hebrides. We went ashore at Port Ellen and boarded buses to drive across the island for a visit to the town of Bowmore and one of Islay's famous distilleries of the same name. Islay is the richest of the Scottish Isles due to the perfect conditions for making fine malt whiskies, plenty of water, barley and peat. The route took us along an extraordinarily long straight road past the airport and through blanket bog with fresh peat cuttings.

Bowmore is one of the oldest distilleries on the island and was established in 1779. We were led around the distillery by guides. Bowmore is unique in that it still smokes the barley on malt floors and we were led into the cavernous room with its unique odour. We then proceeded past the flowing water from the river Lagan into the main part of the distillery to see the huge mash tuns where the milled barley (now known as gist) is mixed with hot water. The sweet liquid run off or wort is then put into the washbacks where yeast is added. After 48 hours of fermentation the wash is ready to enter the copper stills for distillation and then the raw spirit passes through the spirit safe where it is measured for duty to be paid. The final process is barrelling so that the final mysterious transformation can take place. Bowmore uses oak barrels that have previously contained bourbon or sherry. In the warehouse we enjoyed the heady aroma of the "angels' share" – the liquid lost to evaporation as the whisky matures. We then, finally, had a chance to sample the product – and very fine it was too!



We also took the opportunity to wander around the small town of Bowmore and all had started with a visit to the famous round church. We were given two explanations for its shape - either so that the devil couldn't hide in the corners, or so the congregation couldn't and so miss out on giving a donation! We boarded the buses again for the lovely drive back through rich fields filled with grazing sheep and their fuzzy lambs, which are beginning to look quite fat now. Our short zodiac hop from Port Ellen to the ship involved yet more high winds and the odd spray of water, just to help us wake up fully from the comfortable, warm bus trip.

Over lunch we sailed to the small island of Gigha that has recently been bought by the 110-strong community of islanders. We landed at the ferry slipway where a small bus and driver were at our disposal, but many chose to walk the lanes to Achamore house gardens, some following the woodland path through beech woods and carpets of bluebells. Others set off with Jane and Callum to find the ruins of a 13-14<sup>th</sup> century chapel, Kilchattan ("church of Cattan", a 6<sup>th</sup> c abbot later made a saint) and ancient gravestones and stone crosses in the adjacent cemetery, one depicting a 1500s MacNeill laird complete with chainmail and huge Scottish broadsword. We

then clambered up the hill of gorse to find the Ogham stone, the only one of its kind in the Western Isles, with barely decipherable early Celtic engravings, before finishing the walk with a stroll through the gardens of Achamore House. The garden is set in mixed woodland with a pond, follies and curving paths which led us through the flowering rhododendrons and azaleas. Peacocks called and the gardens were at their best - it was a lovely spot. We all found ourselves eventually drawn to the island hotel for tea, before heading back to the ship for our trip through the Sound of Islay, between Islay and Jura, with the sun setting behind Islay casting a warm light over the Paps of Jura.



## Sunday 21<sup>st</sup> May - Staffa and Iona

*'Beauty crowds me till I die' -Emily Dickinson*



What a day! In the early hours of the morning we dropped anchor off the basalt cliffs of Staffa and sized up the landing for our excursion ashore, as there was a bit of a swell at the steps. After breakfast we began our zodiac landing, enjoying the peace before the busy local ferry boats bustled in with tourists from Iona. Most of us had the opportunity to climb to the top of the island, but the puffins we had hoped to see were either out at sea or safely below ground in their burrows incubating their eggs. The main draw though was Fingal's Cave. Staffa's amazing hexagonal columned cliff face was formed by the slow cooling of basaltic lava as it came into contact with colder bedrock. It was easy to appreciate how Mendelssohn was inspired to write his Hebridean Overture after visiting the island and seeing Fingal's Cave nearly 200 years ago. As we left the island, we cruised in the zodiacs into Fingal's Cave, to gain another experience of this remarkable and inspiring feature, and found some floating rafts of puffins before setting off across the short distance to Iona.

Iona is inextricably linked with St Columba and his followers who brought Christianity from Ireland to Scotland in the sixth century and it was from here that 'The Word' spread to the rest of Britain. It was here, too, that the Book of Kells was largely written and illustrated before being taken to Ireland for safekeeping during the Viking raids. To reach the Abby we wandered through the ruins of the nunnery. The walls, with the surviving graceful arches and cloisters, are now a wonderful habitat for flowers and lichens. Before reaching the Abbey, some of us paused to see the simple grave of John Smith, graves of local islanders, and markers for unknown seamen who washed up on these shores during World War II. We searched in vain for the burial sites of MacBeth and more than 40 other kings of Scotland, Ireland, Wales and France who are reputed to have been buried in this lovely cemetery. The Abbey has been faithfully restored and is now the centre for the Iona Community, an ecumenical group of men and women who seek new ways of living the Gospel. Iona has a very special ambience - peaceful and enchanting. Several of us spotted or heard the elusive corncrake, and Chris led a group in search of other birds, while others set off up the road to the north end of the island and its sandy beaches, sheep and a friendly old horse.



After our return to the ship, recap and dinner, we settled into the observation lounge for Jane's second lecture, *Celtic Art and Culture* as we sailed north again, past Tiree and Coll and out into the Minch for our journey into the open Atlantic and, we hope, our visit to St. Kilda tomorrow.

## Monday 22<sup>nd</sup> May - The St Kilda Archipelago

*'Sailing over a calm sea we may be wafted to a land surpassing in wonder and in beauty every region hitherto discovered on a habitable globe'*

Mary Shelley

The conditions were less than perfect as we approached St. Kilda in the early morning in 30-40 knot winds from the north and big swells. Once inside the Bay, however, we discovered that we were well sheltered from the worst of the wind and sea, and everyone was cheered when Hannah gave word that our planned landing was a "go"! She brought the islands' warden, Peter, to join us on board for a bite of breakfast and brief briefing, to save time ashore. Although there was a nippy wind, we were bathed in brilliant sunshine, to transform the island and banish its ghosts.



We were met by the warden and two colleagues who supervise the continuing restoration works, research and archaeological investigations. They led us on a tour of the abandoned settlement with its feather house on the shore, the gun which was installed to repel U-boats during World War I, the numerous black houses and the street of improved housing built by the landlord in 1860-61. On the terraces above the later village we could make out traces of earlier occupations, including St. Columba's chapel (that man did get around!). Archaeological investigations have confirmed that the island was occupied since Neolithic times, or at least 3-4000 years.



Islanders lived by crofting - using all the resources around them in addition to small-farming, including harvesting the seabirds for feathers, oil and meat. In the winter the houses would have been cosy yet smelly - with the peat fire burning, the bird oil lamp and the cow at one end of the room. We had close encounters with the primitive, native Soay sheep with their cute lambs; several St. Kilda wrens were spotted (larger and paler than mainland birds) and fulmars were billing and cooing on the grassy roof tops. A trio of Giant skuas was

soaring high above the village, and nesting wheatears and house martins were abundant. A sedge warbler and a few swallows were the only reminders of the importance of St. Kilda as a safe haven for migrants. We all visited the museum, and the excellent small shop to buy books and postcards, and have them stamped. Some climbed the hills to The Gap behind Village Bay for a view of the other islands and a panoramic shot of Village Bay, the houses and *cleitan*. The embarking onto zodiacs from the jetty was as fun as the landing, with huge swells sweeping over the stage and steps, requiring that we time our step onto the boats just right - full marks to the drivers for holding their zodiacs so steady! After lunch aboard, many of us took up Hannah's offer of a zodiac cruise around the bay to see nesting and rafting puffins, kittiwakes, guillemots and fulmars, and some of us spotted a shy grey seal and very bashful male eiders before being chased back to the ship by a snow and hail squall - we've experienced it all today.

Back to the ship we set sail to view other islands in the St Kildan archipelago - Boreray, Stac An Armin and Stac Lee. These are home to the worlds largest north Atlantic gannet population - 65,000 breeding pairs. It was a marvellous sight, the islands erupting dramatically out of the sea and the gyre of birds around their summits. The Captain obligingly made a couple of circuits, with gannets and fulmars and skuas unconcernedly swooping around us. We then steamed away across the wild waters heading for Lewis tomorrow. After dinner Damon talked about his work as a diver on various projects including doing a survey for Greenpeace at St Kilda in *Underwater Research*.

The day ended with the Captain steering the ship between the two largest of the Flannan Isles, where in December 1900, the three lighthouse keepers mysteriously disappeared. The following are two verses from a poem that commemorates this tragic event:

*Though three men dwelt on Flannan Isle  
To keep the lamp alight  
As we steer'd under the lee, we caught  
No glimmer through this night.*

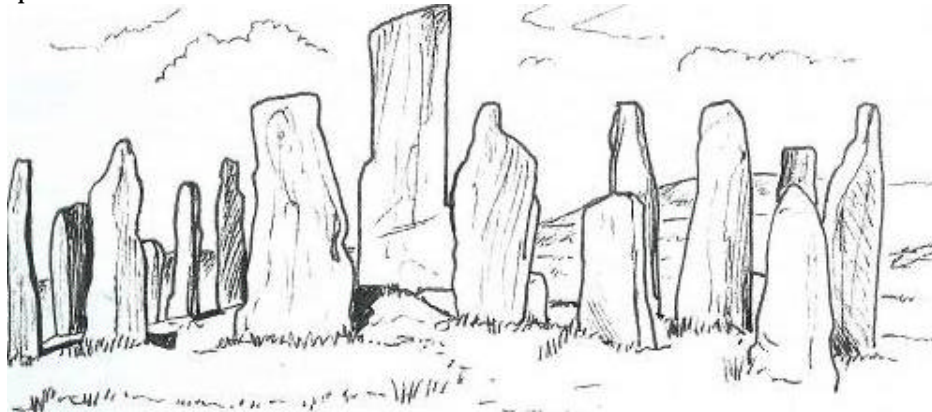
*...Aye though we hunted high and low and hunted  
everywhere,  
Of the three men's fate we found no trace  
Of any kind in any place.  
But a door ajar and an untouched meal  
And an overtopped chair...*

*Wilfred Wilson Gibson (1878-1962)*

## Tuesday 23<sup>rd</sup> May – Isle of Lewis

*“Travel is fatal to Prejudice, bigotry and narrow mindedness”* Mark Twain

We awoke to yet another beautiful day approaching Stornoway on the east coast of the Isle of Lewis. After breakfast we tied up at the pier recently vacated by the Caledonian MacBrayne ferry *Isle of Lewis* en route back to Ullapool on the mainland. We soon boarded our buses and met our drivers and guides for the day and set off across the island from the east side to the west, through barren moor land. Our guides explained that peat cutting is still carried out from traditional family plots to fuel open fires, but most people now have gas or oil fired heating. As we passed a peat bank in the process of being cut, we could see that three layers are generally taken, the blocks being air dried on the banks and losing a third of their volume before being taken home. The morning’s tour was done in opposite order on each bus, but included the same stops.



Our first stop was at Callanish to see the magnificent standing stones arrayed on a high point of land overlooking a sea loch and the surrounding countryside. There are more than 50 stones, among the largest and also the tallest of any of Britain’s megalithic sites. The stones are set in a Celtic cross-like arrangement, with a long avenue of two parallel rows leading to a central circle around what may be an earlier chambered cairn grave, and continuing in another, shorter double row. The stones are all of Lewisian gneiss, so probably came from a nearby source. We completed the visit with a tour of the new interpretation centre and bookstore at the bottom of the hill and, as we left the site, could see two more smaller stone rings, also with magnificent views over the sea lochs and hills of northwestern Lewis.



Our next stop was at 2000-year old Dun Carloway broch, a partially-collapsed but nonetheless awe-inspiring double-walled drystone tower commanding an outstanding view of the bays and inlets on the west side of the island, north of Callanish. In times of trouble, when raiding parties approached, the broch may have been used as a safe refuge for local families. It also certainly stood as a statement of local power and prestige, and would have served as a lookout. We had time to scramble up the staircase between the walls to the top, then take a few photos of the ruined croft buildings nestled around the foot of the hill.

We proceeded on to the village of Gearrannan. Here we found a whole village of restored black houses, built in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries and only abandoned by the elderly occupants in 1974 when it became too difficult to keep up the fabric of these stone-walled straw-thatched buildings and the surrounding croft fields. The black house resembles the traditional long house which existed in Scandinavia for a thousand years. Entering through the attached barn, we went into the main room that was partitioned with stalls for the cows at one end and the family accommodation at the other. We sat down on the low furniture beneath a pall of smoke from the peat fire and listened as our guide Mairi related stories of the lives of the people who had lived there until so recently. Callum and Jane pointed out a prehistoric site high on the hillside on the opposite side of the bay consisting of several scatters of quartz flakes and cores and a few quartz veins and outcrops, forming a huge quarry and workshop area where quartz was reduced from large blocks to smaller cores and finally into tools such as knives, scrapers and arrowheads.

Our brief visit to Lewis ended all too quickly, without an opportunity to visit any of the Harris Tweed factories, still an important part of the local economy. However, our bus guides passed around a pamphlet explaining the processes involved in transforming washed wool into the finished cloth. First it is dyed with incredibly bright chemical dyes. After being dried the wool is mixed and then teased out and spun into yarn. The whole process is carried out automatically by great machines worthy of a Victorian factory. The yarn is sent out to the crofts where the weaving takes place, before being passed on to the garment manufacturers.

Once back in Stornoway we had to board almost immediately to maintain our busy schedule including a landing at Lerwick tomorrow morning. Through the afternoon we enjoyed two more lectures. Jane started us off with her *Introduction to British Prehistory*, illustrating some of the sites that we have seen coming up the west coast and have yet to see in Shetland and Orkney, tying them into the cultures that she had described over her past two lectures. Sonja then presented her talk on the Cetaceans of Britain and Ireland: *Fins and Flukes*, illustrating and describing the main species of toothed whales and dolphins and baleen whales that occur around the British Isles, and playing some of the sounds that these creatures make in socializing with each other and locating prey. After recap and dinner Gary presented another short talk on *Diamonds*, describing how these gems were formed and how they have acquired their mystique. This was followed by a film on *Scatness*, a documentary about the archaeological excavations at this remarkable site that we plan to visit tomorrow adjacent to the Sumburgh airfield on Shetland. We had one last treat before bed, the Captain had altered course slightly to pass very close to Sule Stack and Sule Skerry, the former covered in gannets, the latter covered in puffins - swirling around in there thousands like midges, and rafting in hundreds on the sea - a lovely spectacle on which to end the day.



### **Wednesday 24<sup>th</sup> May – Lerwick and Jarlshof, Shetland Isles**

*'When one tugs at a single thing in nature, he finds it attached to the rest of the world'*

*John Muir*

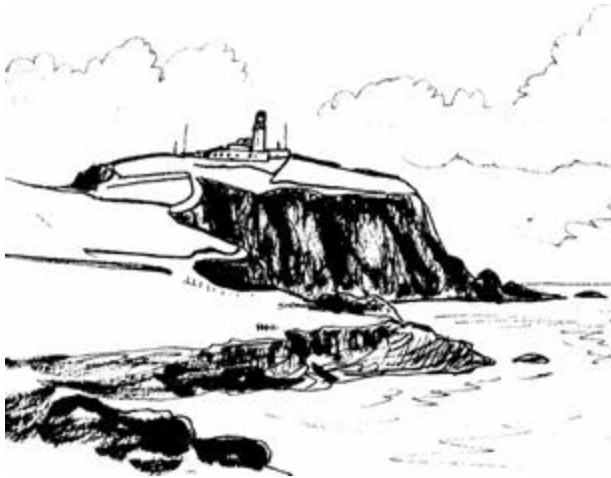
For those of us up early - not too many after the long day we had yesterday - we could see the Shetland Isles appearing on our port bow and the smaller flat top of Fair Isle off to Starboard. After breakfast, Callum presented his *Joys and Perils of Northern Archaeology*, a personal journey through some of the sites he has worked on and some of the methods he uses to find and record

sites. By 11:00 we were tied up at the quay in Lerwick and our guides John and Nadia and their drivers were there to meet us and escort us on a day of exploration of Mainland, the biggest of the Shetland Isles. We passed through Lerwick and drove by the remains of Clickimin Broch on the shores of a loch. We then drove through the village of Fladdabister, largely abandoned during the 19<sup>th</sup> century Clearances, noting a lime kiln on a knoll, where seaweed was burned down to extract lime for the fields. As we passed through Sandwick, John noted that at 60°N we are at the same latitude as extreme northern Labrador, Fairbanks, Kamchatka and Bergen, but the tail end of the Gulf Stream makes these isles more temperate than most other places at this latitude.

The first stop for Bus 1 was at the Sumburgh Hotel, where we enjoyed a cup of tea before climbing the steep road above St Ninians Isle, where we walked down the lane to get an overview of the tombolo – the spit of land with crescent shaped beaches on either side that joins the island to the mainland – and the site of the church where in 1958 a large hoard of Pictish silver was excavated.

We all visited Scatness, a multi-occupation site that was discovered just seven years ago during construction of a new road. A team of archaeologists from Bradford University has been excavating the site since then and simultaneously building replicas of some of the structures found so that visitors, who are strongly encouraged to tour the site, can gain an appreciation of how people lived there over several thousand years. At the centre of the house is the remains of a broch, which is surrounded by several wheelhouses and roundhouses.

After a short but excellent tour we crossed the approach to the runway at Sumburgh airport to reach Jarlshof. Jarlshof is an important site that displays the remains of continuous human habitation over a 4,000 year period. Unlike Skara Brae, the original settlement was successively built over. These layers of history have now been exposed by archaeologists. Finds date from the Bronze age, the Iron age, a later Broch with a walled garth, a more recent round-house and wheel house, two sous-terrains, and finally the farm house named by Walter Scott as Jarlshof. Recent discoveries by students from Bradford University at Scatness suggest that the Jarlshof Bronze Age buildings, once thought to have been roofed with wood or whalebone and turf, may have had stone roofs.



Refreshed by coffee and biscuits at the Sumburgh Hotel, Bus 1 travelled the short distance to Sumburgh Head and walked up to the Stevenson lighthouse. Apart from the magnificent coastal scenery the deeply gullied cliffs were alive with breeding seabirds. Fulmars rode the wind above rock faces that were covered with nesting guillemots, razorbills and kittiwakes, while crouched in the higher nooks were puffins and circling overhead were a pair of skuas. The view back towards Jarlshof and across the airport towards the rolling treeless hills of Shetland was stunning.

On the way back to Lerwick we passed Catpund, a huge expanse of soapstone workings, where the Norse and most likely their predecessors carved out blocks and shaped forms of soapstone for use as bowls, lamps, pots, spindle whorls and platters. The site is very reminiscent of a soapstone cliff at Fleur de Lys, across the Atlantic on the northeast coast of Newfoundland, where archaeologists have deduced that thousands of similar soapstone vessels were extracted over several hundred years between A.D. 500-800. We returned to Lerwick in time to catch the shops and library, and especially the magnificent Town Hall to view the superb set of stained glass windows tracing Shetland's history. We enjoyed the late afternoon sunshine, and many of us wandered through the lanes and found the 'lodberries'; built right into the sea, these combinations of house, store, and small yard were perfect for the smuggling trade that used to be rife in Shetland.



As we enjoyed dinner the Captain steamed towards Mousa, the 2000 year old broch, the tallest of this kind of defensive structure around the British Isles, sitting on the edge of the bedrock shore commanding a view of the narrow sound between Mousa Isle and Mainland. To the east we could see the ruins of a 19<sup>th</sup> century manor house and on the hillside to the west the substantial remains of a croft buildings. Chris took the bird folks over the hill and far away to search out some feathery finds, while Damon found some nesting puffins for those who stayed near the broch, and Callum pointed out some cormorants watching us with beady eyes from their cosy ledges. With a swell rising, the ship had to reposition - twice! - before we could come aboard once more, so those who just can't get enough of our handsome zodiacs had the opportunity to enjoy them for just a while longer. By eleven o'clock we were finally aboard and shortly abed...

## **Thursday 25<sup>th</sup> May – Kirkwall, Orkney Isles**

*'What is travelling? Changing your place? By no means!  
Travelling is changing your opinions and your prejudices'*

*Anatole France*

The morning dawned bright yet again - what a fabulous stretch of weather. We were soon off by coach in the able hands of our guides and drivers to visit some of the most important of Orkney's prehistoric archaeological sites. As we passed by fields of Aberdeen Angus cattle and Cheviot sheep grazing on lush emerald fields we could see why it is said that Orkney islanders are farmers with boats whereas Shetlanders are fishermen with crofts.

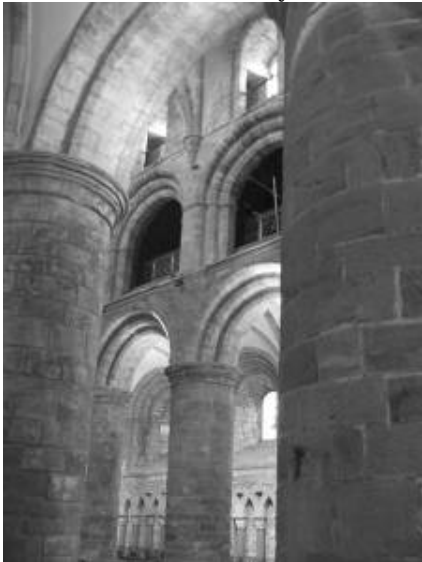
Both buses did the same tour but in different orders, with both stopping at Maes Howe, an extraordinary structure. From the outside it is merely a grassy dome in a field but at the end of a back-bending narrow tunnel we came into the 5,000 year old chambered tomb. Constructed with giant sandstone blocks, some weighing as much as nine tons, it is a marvel of architecture, and was designed to align perfectly with the setting sun at the winter equinox. In the 12<sup>th</sup> century, Norsemen broke into it and left behind what is regarded as the largest collection of Viking runes outside of Scandinavia, one indicating that they had removed treasure from the site – perhaps!

Another port of call was the Ring of Brodgar, a stone circle that originally would have had 60 standing stones in a circle 103 metres in diameter, dating from about 3200 BCE. The ring is surrounded by a henge (ditch) that is a very impressive 10 metres across and up to 3.5 metres deep, bridged by two opposing causeways. The whole ceremonial site may have taken as much as 10,000 person-days to construct. Around the ring we could also see many additional mounds, undoubtedly containing tombs.



Across the loch from Brodgar at Stennes is another set of standing stones. These sites, along with Maes Howe, are all part of an important ceremonial landscape; with Skara Brae added, they are also part of a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Skara Brae is an impressive collection of stone dwellings that pre-date the pyramids. Severe storms in 1850 exposed the perfectly preserved dwellings that had been protected for 5,000 years by their blanket of sand. Along the shore of Skail Bay below the village we could also see some of the curiously angled stone slabs present at the standing stone sites, suggesting that they detach from the bedrock in that manner.

Beside the new Visitor Centre there is a reconstruction of what it might have been like to live in one of these houses with its stone hearth, stone dresser and stone beds. It does not really prepare the visitor for the real thing. It was easy to imagine the farmers and fishermen living in this tightly knit community. They kept cattle, sheep, pigs and goats; some cereal crops were grown; they hunted deer and would have made use of any stranded whales - although in those days, the shore was some way off due to lower sea levels - and like most of the peoples whose coastal sites we have visited, they harvested the resources of the sea and strand.



In Kirkwall, we headed for St Magnus Cathedral. This Medieval cathedral, hewn out of ancient red sandstone in the 13<sup>th</sup> century by master masons of the same school as those who built Durham Cathedral, is truly magnificent. All too soon it was time to re-board the Polar Star and we set sail at 14:00 bound for Leith where our journey would end. The afternoon was taken up with the sad job of packing, a final showing of the film *Around Cape Horn*, a final recap briefing for tomorrow's disembarkation, a showing of the trip's best photos, and the Captain's Farewell Reception and Dinner. Fittingly, the day continued as fine as almost all of those that have preceded, with sunny skies, warm temperatures and a light breeze ruffling the sparkling North Sea.

## Friday 26<sup>th</sup> May – Leith and Edinburgh

*‘There must be a beginning of any great matter,  
but the continuing to the end until it be thoroughly finished  
yields the true glory’*

*Sir Frances Drake*

Early this morning we passed by the mighty Bass Rock in the mouth of the Firth of Forth – one last chance to see the king of North Atlantic seabirds, the gannet - en route to Leith, the port on the northern edge of the ancient and capital city of Edinburgh. This morning we bid farewell to all the new and old friends with whom we have shared so much on this marvellous trip. Bon voyage, and we hope to see you again.

*We have travelled 1852 nautical miles on our voyage from Dartmouth to Leith*

### Daily Ship's Log (12:00 noon)

Noon Location	Date	Wind	Temp (Celsius)	Latitude	Longitude
Dartmouth	May 13	Var	13	50°01.5 N	009°28.8W
Scilly	May 14	SSE 1-2	13	49°53.9 N	006°18.1W
Garinish	May 15	Var 2	15	51°39.8N	009°52.0W
Skellig/Douulus	May 16	SSE6	12	51°56.8N	010°17.5W
Smerwick/Aran	May 17	SE6	12	53°07.5N	009°37.8W
Aran/Tory I	May 18	SW8	11	55°33.5N	007°44.8W
Tobermory/Loch Scavaig	May 19	calm	12	57°01.3N	006°12.4W
Islay/Gigha	May 20	N5-6	12	55°37.5N	006°21.7W
Staffa/Iona	May 21	N5	10	56°21.2N	006°21.7W
St. Kilda	May 22	W5	9	57°37.0N	008°21.8W
Stornoway	May 23	S4	13	58°11.5N	006°09.5W
Lerwick	May 24	SE3-4	12	60°07.2N	001°08.3W
Kirkwall	May 25	Var	13	59°00.3N	002°48.8W
Leith	May 26	Var	12 (est.)	56°03.7N	002°59.8W