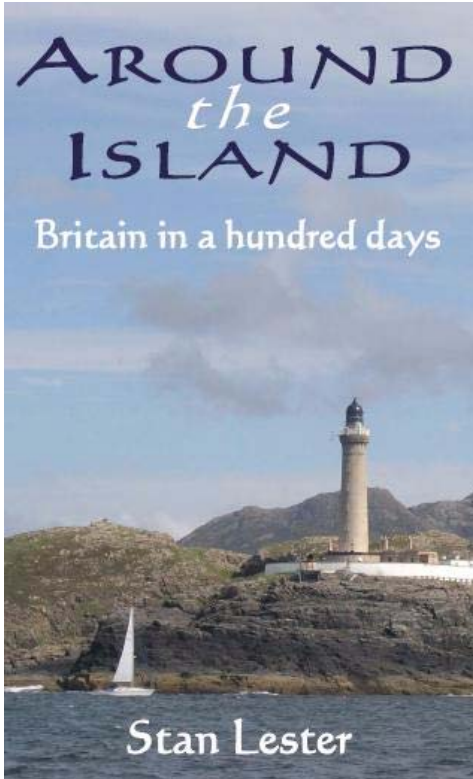


Extract from

Around the Island by Stan Lester



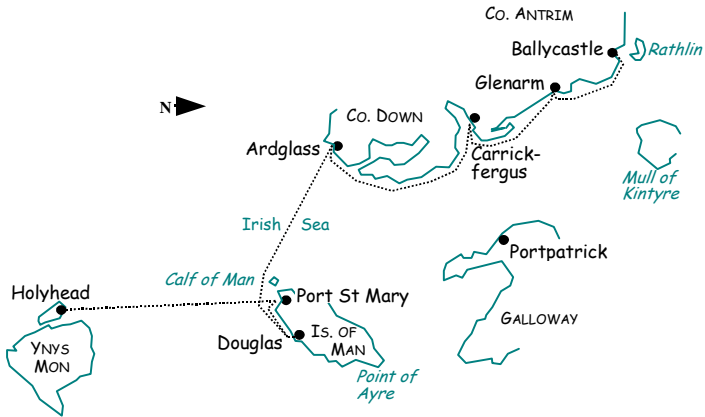
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In the sea of Manannan



Thursday morning brought forth a miserable dankness under a cold grey sky. We slipped our lines at half-past seven and motored out of the harbour in a flat calm, ghosting past the Skerries rocks at the northern end of Anglesey. I set the autohelm on a course I'd calculated earlier, leaving little for us to do other than keep watch, feel cold, drink tea and visit the heads. Twenty miles out from Holyhead the isle of Anglesey faded out of sight and we were on our own in a grey sea under a lighter grey sky. It was nearly noon, but it felt as if we were still waiting for dawn to break. The monotony was broken by two dolphins surfacing in the distance, then a fender came undone from the stern rail and

bobbed in our wake, making us practice our man overboard drill. Not long afterwards a cargo ship crossed half a mile in front of us on its way from Liverpool to Dublin, followed by another one going in the opposite direction. A little later the Isle of Man took shape as an indistinct smudge of grey between the grey of the sea and the grey of the sky. As the passage drew to a close the dankness began to disperse and the wind picked up enough for us to sail the last few miles into Port St Mary. We turned into the welcoming little harbour, paused on a mooring buoy for a cup of tea, then once we'd got our bearings we moved over to the quay and rafted up against a big yacht that was bound for Dublin early next morning.

I'd never been to the Isle of Man before. When I was a child we had half-considered a holiday there, so I'd seen the brochures and remembered that Douglas was the capital and there was a big waterfall somewhere and a water wheel somewhere else, maybe Laxey. I knew the island had its own government like Jersey and Guernsey and they still used the birch on offenders (or they might have stopped by now following pressure from the European Union or Amnesty International or somebody). I once went on a date with a Manx girl but I can only remember her saying the island was a bit parochial and that they had only just been dragged into the twentieth century (and that was in the mid-nineties). Oh, and Manx cats are tailless and the Manx emblem is a star made up of three legs because Manxmen are good at legging it. I needed to find out a bit more.

Ellan Vannin, the Isle of Man, has a population of about seventy-five thousand of which a third live in Douglas. The island has been ruled from Norway, Scotland and England, though it's had its own parliament called the Tynwald since 979, claimed to be the oldest continuous parliament in the world (Iceland's is older but it was suspended for forty-five years). Today it's a British dependency subject to the Queen as Lord of Mann, but it isn't part of England, the United King-

dom or the European Union. There are no customs formalities for visiting yachts as there are in the Channel Islands, though as we were to find out there is a Manx customs service. The island is an offshore financial centre and tax haven, this and tourism having displaced the traditional industries of farming and fishing as the main income-earners; there's a growing high-tech manufacturing sector too, which the Douglas government is keen to encourage. The island's heritage is a mix of Norse, Celtic and English and it has its own language which is used in official titles but isn't widely spoken. And the three-legged symbol is called a triskelion and goes with the island's motto of *quocunque ieceris stabit*, 'wherever it's thrown, it will stand.' Maybe Manx people tend to land on their feet.

After I'd hoisted my triskelion flag in place of the Welsh dragon we set out to explore Port St Mary. A road took us a short distance along the coast, then we followed a path back around a golf course and into the village. A raised walkway ran from the centre along the coast in the direction of the harbour, and it would have made for a pleasant stroll back except that the tide was out revealing an unpleasant smell of seaweed and sewage. Other than that the village was attractive enough with a mixture of picturesque cottages, suburban bungalows and a rather stylish renovated apartment block. There seemed to be more art and craft shops than places to buy basic provisions, though we managed to pick up the few things we needed and find a very acceptable pub-restaurant on the way back.

Back aboard the weather forecast was for a gentle to fresh northerly on Friday, increasing to a near-gale over the weekend. My plan for the next passage had been to anchor at Peel on the north-western coast of the island before heading north to Portpatrick in Scotland. I was looking forward to calling in at Peel and visiting its nautical museum, the House of Manannan: Manannan is the Celtic sea-god who in times of threat is said to wreath the island named after him in mist. But the

harbour is exposed to the north, so it wouldn't do to be caught there in a strong northerly. I discussed some of the other options with Anna, and eventually we settled on Douglas because its inner harbour is completely sheltered and, should the weather keep us there, it's the hub for the island's bus service.

We set out in the morning under an overcast sky, soon clearing to bright sun and a gentle but cool easterly breeze. There was no hurry so we set full sail and tacked slowly up the coast, the windvane holding each course. Just over half-way our attention was attracted by two motorboats heading towards us from the direction of Douglas. I worked out they should just clear us astern when the smaller one, a rigid inflatable, peeled off and with a deft manoeuvre dropped in just behind *Indalo's* rudder and slowed to our speed. The two young women on board indicated they wanted to talk to us so I motioned them to come alongside. They turned out to be Manx customs officers and they took us through a questionnaire to establish who we were and where we were from. I offered to heave to and let them come aboard to rummage in my lockers, but they declined.

Two tacks later we were heading into Douglas and rapidly removing items of clothing as the full force of the midday sun made itself felt in the shelter of the harbour. The yacht berths are on the other side of a swing bridge that lifts up every hour, and we had a short wait before it swung and we were let in. The marina attendant directed us to tie up to the quay close to a packed pub, convenient enough but with the risk of beer cans and inebriated patrons dropping in. I'd completely forgotten was that it was the last day of TT week, the island's celebrated motorcycle races, so we couldn't have arrived at a busier time even if we'd visited on August bank holiday.

When I came back from the harbour office Anna had spoken to her daughter and she was beginning to think about getting back. My original plan was that we would go to Portpatrick, work our way up through the Firth of Clyde,

take the Crinan Canal through to the west coast, and part company at Oban. Without crew the canal is really a non-starter, so I would need to take the seaward route around the Mull of Kintyre. The forecast had improved slightly for Saturday, but the wind was still due to be a fresh northerly. Added to that the timing of the tides would make it difficult to get from Douglas to Portpatrick in one go, and with the wind on the nose it would be a long and unpleasant passage with little chance of arriving before nightfall. I pored over my chart of the Irish Sea: maybe we could make for somewhere on the south coast of Galloway? It still meant beating or motoring into the wind, and Anna wouldn't have an easy journey home even if we could get to Portpatrick the following day. I sat racking my brains and checking tides and bus links, but nothing worked so I gave up.

Next time I looked at the chart the answer was obvious: Anna could fly from Belfast, and I could follow the Irish coast north. We could make an early start, leave Douglas on the last bridge swing of the morning, backtrack past Port St Mary, cross the Irish Sea westwards with the wind nicely on the beam, and drop into Ardglass in County Down. If Sunday was fine we could continue on to Belfast Lough, otherwise my almanac said there was a bus to Belfast via Portpatrick. Anna said she would think about it but I'd already pictured *Indalo* making a landfall in Ardglass and as we went ashore I had the Blondie tune *Heart of Glass* playing in my head.

Douglas was both bigger than I'd expected from the little I had already seen of it, and more of a seaside resort and shopping centre than I'd imagined. It had some fine old buildings including the market house, a rather grand seaside terrace, and some tall houses overlooking the harbour. Up by the sea front a big screen showing highlights of the TT races was being watched by a large crowd of assorted bikers and holidaymakers. We weren't in Douglas long enough to get a real impression of the place, though for me it didn't have the same instant appeal or mix of the familiar and the foreign that

I'd felt when I first visited St Helier or St Peter Port. To be fair I might have had a different opinion if I'd come at a quieter time. Most of the seaward-facing eateries were packed out, but eventually we found a quiet café in an attractive galleried shopping centre where we were the only customers other than a whole shift of local police. They had piped music from the seventies and eighties playing in the background, including of course *Heart of Glass*. So Ardglass it was.



Saturday 11th June, day 29, started with an 0330 awakening. It seemed premature to be leaving the Isle of Man so soon but the weather was promising and I was looking forward to arriving in Ireland. We were soon motoring carefully past the swing bridge and through the outer harbour of a yet-to-awaken Douglas, with the promise of a gentle or moderate northerly to help us on our way. Port St Mary went past in two hours, half the time it had taken to sail in the opposite direction on Friday, and half an hour later we were clearing the Calf of Man and once more entering the open waters of the Irish Sea. The wind was northwesterly, now no more than a gentle breeze, but it was enough to raise the waves into a confused wind-against-tide chop. Less than an hour out from the Calf *Indalo's* speed dropped to four knots and our slow pace became uncomfortable in the rolling sea. I started the engine and set the autopilot, then retired below for a short break while Anna kept watch. When I came back on deck the Isle of Man had disappeared and the Irish coast had yet to show on the horizon, but the sea was now much flatter and more comfortable. Unusually for British or Irish waters this part of the Irish Sea is almost completely free of tidal currents, so for the moment I could steer directly for Ardglass without worrying about being swept downstream of my destination.

When Anna reappeared we could make out the Mountains of Mourne in the distance, but as yet the relatively low-

lying coast of County Down hadn't come into focus. It took shape gradually, and five miles offshore we could pick out what looked like Ardglass. The GPS confirmed our impressions and we dropped the mainsail and headed through the narrow entrance into the rock-strewn harbour. The main port inside the brakwater is home to the fishing fleet, but just beyond is another little bay called Phennick Cove where there's a small marina. There were plenty of unoccupied pontoons available so we tied up to one, boiled the kettle and reported to the marina office.

I felt pleased to be in Ireland and, though I'd never visited Ardglass before I somehow felt that I was on familiar ground. I'd been to various parts of the island over the last fifteen years, often working my way up the west coast from Kerry, Clare or Galway to Derry and Antrim, and I have many happy memories of both north and south. My overriding impression is of a relatively relaxed and friendly land, and that includes the northern province: even back in the early nineties my strongest impressions were less of the problems and dangers of the 'Troubles' and more of the helpful and talkative nature of the people I met. Anna's memories were less positive, but I was confident that this time she would come away with a different view.

Ardglass (Green Hill) was founded by Anglo-Norman settlers in the twelfth century and it has no less than seven castles or tower houses, built mainly to defend the incomers against the locals. Its harbour is far older and it was used as a natural refuge three thousand years ago, continuing to grow and prosper up until its heyday in the mid-nineteenth century when four or five hundred fishing boats would crowd in with their catches of herring. Even now there is a fair-sized fishing fleet and an active processing and marketing industry based on the quay. By contrast the marina, and even the bay that it is in, is much more recent. Phennick Cove in its natural form was a shallow, rocky inlet able to accommodate only the smallest boats. Ten years ago a

mix of local initiative and national and European support led to the rock being carved out, the cove deepened and a harbour constructed that's able to take all but the very largest yachts. The result is an attractive haven with good facilities in a low-key but unusual building, the whole thing fitting the scale and ambience of Ardglass itself. It's also very well-run by a locally managed not-for-profit company, and the welcome I received was typical of what I was to experience over the next few weeks throughout Ireland and Scotland.

After catching up on some sleep we took a walk along the coast and through the village, stumbled on the Old Commercial bar, and had a glass of Guinness each. The Old Commercial is one of those unmistakably Irish pubs with the locals seemingly resident at the bar and a fine collection of bottles and polished barrels behind it. Finishing my glass I donated two pocketfuls of accumulated coppers to the model lifeboat and we wandered off to look for somewhere to eat. The first place we considered was Aldo's, a converted three-storey terraced town house with a relaxed ambience and a good menu, but we dragged ourselves away and opted for the marina manager's recommendation, the golf club. The clubhouse is probably the grandest of Ardglass's castles or tower houses and it's claimed to be the oldest clubhouse in the world. It was homely rather than plush inside, but the food was good as were the views.

The next day the weather forecast was for a fresh to strong northwesterly breeze, so rather than getting cold and wet flogging up to Belfast Lough we decided to stay put and explore. Ardglass is an unpretentious and down-to-earth yet attractive town or village, and with the excellent marina it was a good find and a fortunate ill wind that brought us across the Irish Sea. It hasn't escaped violence and vandalism but it's never been at the centre of the troubles and it doesn't seem particularly scarred by them. It's difficult to work out where the town centre is unless it's the harbour itself, as the shops, bars and eating-places (and the castles) are spread

around various streets, not always in the most obvious spots. Apart from the golf club I found a castle that's now an elderly people's home and another smaller but more castle-like one called Jordan's Castle that's still a castle, at least in the sense that it isn't used for anything else. In fact it was the only one of the seven to see action, having been besieged at the end of the sixteenth century before being relieved from the sea. The whereabouts of the other four I never found out.

Taking a walk out of Ardglass I encountered typical lowland Irish country with bungalows, more bungalows, lush green fields, derelict bungalows with big gardens, semi-wild hedgerows, and more lush green fields with the odd bungalow. Even the modern bungalows have something about them that is unmistakably Irish, and compared with England and Wales (and much of lowland Scotland for that matter) there's a feeling of having space to play with. On the way back I took a diversion along the northern edge of the harbour on a rough path over rocks and between clumps of grass. It provided good views of the marina, the fishing harbour and the village, along with old batteries, clothes, tyres, plastic fish cartons, a rusty wing off a car and a couple of hundred pink rubber gloves, size small. Ardglass might be an attractive place in general but it has the most litter-strewn beach I've ever seen, and I hardly think that lot was washed up from a shipwreck.

Back on board the forecast for Monday was ideal, a moderate to fresh southwesterly. Making use of the tide we could leave at lunchtime and get to Bangor or Carrickfergus before nightfall, then Anna could leave the next morning for Belfast and home. What actually happened was that the wind veered and we were faced with a near-gale from the north-west, so we stayed put. There wouldn't be enough time the next day to get to Belfast Lough and for Anna to get home, so she chose to catch the bus and fly a day early.

I accompanied Anna as far as Downpatrick where there's a connecting bus to Belfast. Our first bus took a roundabout

route out of Ardglass but it did let us see Killough, a village with a straight, wide tree-lined main street, another feature that seems to appear far more this side of the Irish Sea than it does back home. We arrived at Downpatrick in light rain and Anna boarded her onward bus while I walked off in the direction of the town centre, which was pleasant enough but hardly exciting in the drizzle. Its best feature was a fascinating hardware store that stocked all sorts of oddments that the owner brought out in little cardboard boxes. I wanted some small brass hinges for a locker door that had just come unhinged: they were so cheap I bought two pairs in different sizes, just in case.

Downpatrick is County Down's county town, and it's also the earthly resting-place of Saint Patrick. I picked up a map at the tourist office behind the bus station, and decided to visit the cathedral and the town museum before returning to the town's St Patrick Centre. The museum, housed in an old prison, was closed for renovation. The cathedral seemed closed to visitors too, though the woman at the desk in the St Patrick Centre told me that I could probably have gone in quietly at the back while the service was going on. She also told me there was no need to pay to visit the Centre unless I wanted to see the exhibition, so I just had a look at some static displays and browsed the shelves in the bookshop. I hadn't realised that the 'exhibition' was actually the main display so I came away without finding out very much about St Patrick, though I did find a copy of Tim Severin's book on the Brendan voyage and started reading it over a cup of tea while I was waiting for the bus.

Arriving back in Ardglass I thought I'd visit Jordan's Castle but like half of Downpatrick it was closed, or maybe I just hadn't worked out that I was supposed to scale the battlements or get in through a culvert. So I went to the boat and put the hinges on my locker, entered some waypoints in the GPS and checked the weather again. The forecast was for the wind to turn back to a southwesterly and drop to gentle

or moderate, which would give me a good run up to Belfast Lough. Because the time of high water had advanced by nearly another hour I brought my departure time forward to early morning, allowing me to leave the familiar port in half-light and enter the unfamiliar one in full daylight rather than the other way around. I prepared everything for the passage then went off to find some food before getting an early night. Resisting the temptation to have a three-course meal at Aldo's I settled for the fish-and-chip café, ordering a fresh and tasty cod and falling in with the crew of a steel yacht called *Kalima*, bound southwards for Cornwall and France.

I turned in at nine o'clock in the hope of getting a few hours sleep, but just as I was setting my mobile phone alarm my father rang at what to him was a reasonable hour to see how I was doing: I'd been going a month now, he reminded me. According to my grand plan I should have been in Portpatrick yesterday and moving on to the Clyde tomorrow, the equivalents on the Irish side being Belfast Lough and Glenarm, so I was two days behind schedule. On the other hand I'd lost at least a week and a half to gales and strong winds, so I couldn't complain too much. I was already 570 miles from home, over a quarter of the way around, and I had crossed the Bristol Channel and Irish Sea and sailed in waters new to me and probably to *Indalo*. Nevertheless the weather was still unseasonal and there had only been three or four really warm and sunny days so far. It was sure to improve, I told myself, and the best bit in terms of coastline, exploration and pure sense of satisfaction was just beginning. I switched the phone off and went to sleep.



My alarm went off at two and momentarily I had to think where I was, what day it was, and what I was meant to be doing. I was in Ardglass, it was the fourteenth of June, and I was setting out for Belfast Lough. There wasn't a breath of

wind in the rigging or a ripple on the water's surface, and the first glimmerings of dawn could be made out in the sky. By the time I slipped my lines it was light enough to see any hazards in the water, or it would have been if not for the blinding floodlight that illuminated the fish quay. Several fishing boats were also leaving harbour so I made my way out with them. It was good to be out early and setting off on a decent-length single-handed passage again. Outside the harbour there was a faint breeze from the south-west, so I hoisted the mainsail in case it strengthened. The sky was heavily overcast, although according to yesterday's forecast rain wasn't expected; but nor was a lack of wind. I set a course to take me past Strangford Lough, and the rain set in.

Strangford Lough is a superb natural harbour about fifteen miles long by three or four wide, on the chart making a shape that looks like a leaping salmon. The long entrance channel to the salmon's tail is subject to fierce tides and the upper part is littered with rocks and shallows, but the lough is claimed to be well worth the careful navigation that's needed. I'd thought about stopping off there, but it's only a short hop from Ardglass, the tides mean it's not ideal as a passage port, and it's really a small cruising ground in itself that would need a spare day or two to do it justice. I gazed towards the entrance: like Abersoch and Peel, another place to come back to when I get time.

My next waypoint was the South Rock light buoy, more like a miniature lightship rather than a standard red navigational buoy. From there I tracked around the relatively flat coast of the Ards peninsula, keeping a respectable distance off to avoid the rocks and reefs. Portavogie went by, then Ballywater with its offlying reefs, Millisle, Templepatrick, and finally Donaghadee, the last three merging into one another. The entrance to Donaghadee was signposted on the harbour wall and looked tempting, but with the tide falling and without a detailed chart the chances were that I would run aground in the entrance. So I carried on for

Donaghadee Sound, a passage inside a small island that cuts about five miles and some potentially rough water off the southern entrance to Belfast Lough. From seaward it looked quite wide, but according to the chart the area is full of hidden dangers and the only safe channel is a narrow stretch of water marked by red and green buoys. The channel was easy enough to see, and knowing that the tide could sweep *Indalo* off course and on to the rocks I sighted up on the furthest buoy with a hand-compass to keep me from straying.

Now in Belfast Lough I set a diagonal course for Carrickfergus, which sits on the north bank a few miles upstream. If the lough had been busy I should have crossed over directly to the north side before following the coast in, but I couldn't see any ships entering or leaving. I noted what I thought was a shore installation, a curious-looking object with three pairs of tall columns like chimneys, but after a few moments I realised it was a gas or oil service vessel heading outwards on the Carrickfergus side. Ship safely past I dropped the mainsail and tied it down, then as if on cue the wind, which had never been more than a light breeze on the whole passage, veered westerly and got up its strength. I was cold and slightly damp and with less than five miles to go I didn't feel like hoisting the sail again, so I just smiled at the perversity of the weather, called up the marina, and put the ropes and fenders out ready to go in.

Carrickfergus marina is a fairly large modern affair surrounded by smart if rather soulless marina development blocks. It's in its own harbour, not even sharing an entrance with the fishing quay. Once moored I tried to orient myself among the maze of pontoons and eventually worked out how to get to the harbour office and facilities. I signed in, received a hefty pack promoting the borough of Carrickfergus, then had a shower in the excellent facility block to warm up. At the opposite end of the marina there's a pub-restaurant called the Windrose, so I went in for a snack and a pint of Guinness. After catching up on some sleep I set off to explore the town

and find a proper meal. It was still drizzling and Carrickfergus seemed drab and uninteresting and I couldn't find anywhere I liked the look of, so I wandered back to the Windrose for another pint of Guinness and a main course to follow the prawn cocktail I'd had earlier.

Getting back into the marina involves pressing a button and speaking on an intercom to the receptionist, who looks out of the window, works out that I'm not a terrorist or a yacht rustler, and releases the gate. There's another intercom to get into the compound that contains the bins and the toilet and shower block and yet another to get into the block itself. It was slightly disconcerting at first, like being in a high-security facility. Press button: "Visitor - *Indalo*." "Opening" (click). Press next button, wait for the voice asking me to identify myself. "Go ahead" (click). They're awake, I thought. Five minutes later back at the gate, press button, "Visitor - *Indalo*." No response. Maybe they wanted a password. Let's guess: it's the fourteenth of June so try "King Billy." I hope this doesn't happen between leaving the marina and wanting to get into the toilet block. "Sorry - go ahead" (click). I'm in.

Reading my Borough of Carrickfergus pack later in the day I realised that I'd just missed the annual pageant and re-enactment of the landing of William of Orange. William arrived on 14th June 1690 to begin his campaign against the recently-deposed James II. Calculating that he would get most support against the Protestant William in Ireland because of its majority Catholic population, James had landed in Dublin in March of the previous year. He quickly took control of the country except for Derry and Enniskillen, which he besieged. By the time William stepped off his ship his army had already lifted the sieges and regained much of the north, but despite an early victory at the celebrated (or notorious, depending which side you're on) Battle of the Boyne it took his forces more than a year to drive the Jacobite supporters out of Ireland. King Billy is still revered by Ulster

Protestants, but James, who fled to France soon after things started going against him, was regarded as selling out on his Catholic supporters and earned himself the unfortunate nickname of Séamus á Chaca. I won't translate.

Among the places of interest on the map in my pack I noticed that in addition to the very conspicuous castle on the other side of the main harbour the town had a gasworks museum. I wasn't sure that poking around a gasworks was the best thing to be doing on a Wednesday morning, but I read on and apparently it was the last gasworks in Ireland where gas was extracted from coal, a process that went on until the late 1960s and presumably the arrival of natural gas from the North Sea. Town gas it was called when I was a lad, and I'm sure we were a few years behind Ireland because I can remember our fires being converted to take the new stuff in the early seventies. I decided to go and have a look. The entrance was in a back street and it looked just like a shop, but unfortunately it was closed until after lunch. I wasn't having much luck with museums lately so I visited the castle instead.

Carrickfergus Castle is one of the most conspicuous bastions of English rule in Ireland. The keep is Norman, dating from 1178, with subsequent additions up to Elizabethan times. It saw action across several centuries up until 1760 when it was defended against the French, then it was garrisoned in the Napoleonic wars and again in the Second World War. As I arrived two school parties had just beaten me to the ticket office, but I escaped them by bounding to the top of the keep and starting my tour from there. There was no access to the roof, but as far as the drizzle permitted there were some worthwhile views up and down the coast out of the windows. In addition to the schoolchildren the castle was full of life-sized figures from different eras in its history, with some Norman soldiers armed with crossbows on the western parapet opposite some of their eighteenth-century counterparts loading a cannon pointing out to the east. There was a figure of the Constable from the fourteenth century, but the

one that intrigued me most was Con O'Neill frozen in the act of making his escape in 1603. Con was a prominent local chief with his own castle in Castlereagh and extensive lands at Clandeboye. Some of his men killed some English soldiers in a fight over a consignment of wine, and Con was locked up for abetting them. His escape seems to have been aided by his newly-wed wife and by one Hugh Montgomery, who helped him reach Ayrshire in return for a substantial portion of his lands which rather ironically were then settled by Scots from the area Con had fled to.

Having found a source of ginger beer in Carrickfergus and returned to *Indalo* laden with six-packs, I prepared to set off for my next stop, the little port of Glenarm, mid-afternoon. I motored out of the harbour at four o'clock, hauled the sails up and goosewinged down Belfast Lough with a moderate breeze behind me, steering carefully to keep both sails filled with wind. Hardly an hour passed before the wind dropped enough to call the engine into play. Thirty minutes later I was passing the gas terminal that marks the end of the lough when the wind returned, this time from the northeast. I unfurled the foresail again and set the windvane to steer. The wind brought a cold mizzle and soon the headland at the mouth of the loch, easily visible twenty minutes ago, all but disappeared from view. A ferry loomed out of the mist ahead of me: it was difficult to see what course it was on. I tacked in what I thought was the right direction and it came closer, so I tacked again and put the engine on in case I needed some extra speed. This time I was clear, but the wind must have noticed my lack of faith because it soon deserted me again.

Belfast Lough marks the boundary between County Down to the south and County Antrim to the north, and with it a noticeable change in the landscape. North of the lough the coast presents a series of rolling hills that consolidate into the sheer cliffs of Island Magee, a crescent of land almost cut off from the rest of Antrim by Larne Lough. Heading northwards I kept in the shadow of the cliffs until I passed the Isle of

Muck at the end of the peninsula. I identified the offshore East Maiden lighthouse and its companion Russells Rock, and further off made out the Mull of Kintyre over in Scotland, an indistinct blur on the horizon. Before long I was looking into the mouth of the lough and into Larne itself, where two ferries were waiting at their berths and another was making its way out. I gave way to the emerging ship and set a course to clear an offshore rock before closing with the coast at the dramatic, brooding Ballygally Head, where I caught sight of the long and twisting Antrim coast road. The next headland, McAuley, was the last one before Glenarm. I spotted a yellow buoy marking the end of a pipeline and followed the coastline around, until in front of me there appeared a village marked out by a disused stone mill to port and a church spire in the centre. I dropped the mainsail, headed for the mill, and came into a surprisingly roomy harbour.

Glenarm is one of the delights of the Antrim coast. The harbour dates from the fifteenth century when it was used by fishermen and by monks for trade; it also became an important centre for exporting lime, hence the stone mill. Nowadays it's primarily a marina with modern-style pontoons protected by the original harbour walls and some more recent additions that do a good job of keeping out the swell from heavy seas. As I rounded the breakwater I was hailed by harbourmaster Tom McKnight, who pointed me into a berth. Tom explained the history of the harbour, pointed out the rudimentary shower block, and explained how he saw the place developing in the future. Like Ardglass the idea was for any development to be of a style and scale in keeping with the village, and the new facility block and restaurant that was planned would be in a restored warehouse or barn. There had already been some opposition to the marina and the local people were keeping a watchful eye on further developments, so the sort of anonymous harbourside blocks I had seen at Carrickfergus wouldn't be appearing here.

It was already well into the evening when I got into Glenarm, and by the time I'd tied up the boat and finished talking to Tom it was ten o'clock and too late to do any proper exploring. Catching the tide north would mean leaving at 0600, so I did little more than take a few pictures, have a snack, and turn in. Glenarm deserved better, but maybe not a full day when the forecast was suitable for moving on.

At the appointed hour I set off for my third wet passage in a row. Leaving the harbour behind I kept clear of some shellfish farms, crossed the double bay of Glenarm and Carnlough and headed for the looming bulk of Garron Point where a few houses were hanging on the steep sides of the hill. Next was wide Glenariff bay backed by the village of Cushendall, then continuing the Antrim pattern of glen, head and glen I rounded a less prominent headland that gave way to Glen Dun and its village of Cushendun. This I'd visited from the landward side perhaps ten or twelve years back. It's a preserved National Trust village busy with visitors in season and it was partly laid out in the 1920s by Clough Williams-Ellis, more famous as the architect of Portmeirion in North Wales. *Indalo* was plodding away under motor and autohelm so I readied my camera to take some photographs. Almost on cue the engine began to struggle and lose power. I backed off the throttle, changed into neutral, and gradually increased the revs. No problem there, so there must be something around the propeller. I ran the engine gently in astern and a big clump of seaweed floated to the surface. Changing to ahead *Indalo* seemed to struggle slightly, so I guessed there was still some weed on the prop and settled for a gentle pace of four knots through the water.

At Cushendun I was already making an extra knot over the ground from the tide, and as Glen Dun gave way to the tall cliffs of Runabay Head the stream doubled its strength. From now on the coastline was all steep slopes and high cliffs, no bays or glens for relief. It was surprisingly green:

there were exposed rock faces here and there, but most of even the steepest slopes were verdant and some were wooded. The protruding Torr Head was a stony exception and beyond that Fair Head came into view, its cliffs stacked on top of rocky slopes like a rack of organ pipes. The tide was in full flow now, first three knots, then three and a half: hardly enough time to admire Fair Head before I was past it and shaping a course between the mainland and Rathlin, the island where Robert the Bruce hid out in a cave and learned patience from watching a spider spinning its web. Coming in to Ballycastle I rang the marina, put my ropes and fenders out, and turned gently into a berth. It was still only half-past nine in the morning.



My last visit to Ballycastle had been the summer before I bought *Indalo*, accompanied by a young lady who I was trying without a great deal of success to interest in the boats in the marina. The weather was fair then: today it was grey and miserable. My first priorities were to change my clothes, hang up all the wet gear, have a shower, get some shopping and find some fuel. The shower was in a house that also contained the harbour office, so I could pay my dues at the same time and enquire about the fuel pontoon which I'd failed to spot on the way in. Not due to arrive for another couple of weeks, was the reply: I'd need to go up into the town to the nearest garage. I'd explore first and take my jerry cans up later.

Ballycastle divides more or less into two parts. Along the front it has the character of a small and fairly sedate seaside resort, with a few shops and pubs at the marina end, the Marine Hotel in the middle, and the bowling green, tennis courts, beach and tourist office on the Fair Head side. From the hotel a road runs at a right angle to the beach uphill through a residential area and into the town centre, nearly a

mile from the coast. I found the tourist office and picked up a map and some bus timetables, drank coffee in the hotel, then walked up into the centre. The sea front was drab in the drizzle but the main street was attractive enough and in front of the church it opened out into a neat little triangle called, for some reason, The Diamond. It's even a triangle on the map. Eventually I came to a petrol station on the far side of the town centre. It not only had the cheaper red diesel for boats and tractors but, if I brought my cans up, they would run me and the fuel back to the boat. Typical local helpfulness, *and* they wouldn't take any extra money for it.

Now for a moan about the weather. After all the walking and hauling I had another set of wet waterproofs as well as some uncomfortably humid undergarments, and by the time I'd changed out of them the cabin had so much apparel hung and draped around it that it was beginning to look like a laundry room. I was enjoying being in Northern Ireland but I wasn't enjoying the climate. This was the fourth day of rain or drizzle and the temperature seemed well below what it should be in mid-June. Even with five or six layers of clothing on I was feeling chilly at sea, and at night I was still sleeping with my three-seasons sleeping-bag zipped up and the forecabin hatch shut, with only a slight opening in the mainhatch for ventilation. The boat had the atmosphere of dampness and condensation that I'd expect if I was sailing in April or November, and I was seriously considering buying a warm air heater to plug into the marina's electrical supply. I looked at my log and saw that I'd covered 659 nautical miles since leaving Dartmouth. If I'd headed south rather than north I could have been enjoying the sun and warmth in Porto or Figueira da Foz by now.

Not wanting to walk back into town in the rain I donned yet another set of waterproofs and headed for the Marine Hotel. The food was acceptable but not quite up to what I'd expected, and the Guinness was too cold and not as smooth as it had been in Ardglass. It's all the same stuff brewed at St

James's Gate in Dublin, but I'm convinced that they put something in it that's compass-sensitive so that it doesn't travel as well north or east as it does south and west, and the northerners and the Brits have to go to Dublin if they want a decent pint. Last time I was in the southern capital it was so smooth and creamy that it was possible to drink embarrassing amounts without noticing. It was nearly as good in Galway, too. But take it across to London and it catches a chill and tastes bitter by the end of the first glass.

It was still drizzling in the morning, but at least the weather was brighter and warmer with a rising barometer and hope of a better day to come. Before doing anything else I needed to clear the propeller of the seaweed it had collected off Cushendun, which meant either going for a swim or inflating the dinghy. I chose the dinghy, as apart from my reluctance to take a dip in the chilly sea it hadn't been used since Solva and the outboard motor needed a run. So I motored around the harbour for five or ten minutes, took the engine off, then half-deflated one of the tubes so I could grope around under *Indalo's* hull, clearing the weed with no more inconvenience than a wet arm and ear.

Now the weather was improving I thought I'd go for a short excursion somewhere. My first choice would have been Rathlin, but I'd missed the morning ferry and I didn't want to vacate my berth so I settled for a bus trip to Bushmills. Bushmills is an attractive settlement in its own right but it also has a distillery that goes back to the beginning of the seventeenth century, claimed to be the first anywhere to be granted a licence. Understandably it makes great play of this along with the fact that its whiskey is triple distilled, unlike the average Scotch which only gets two goes (though the Scots will argue that if you're using modern equipment and techniques two are quite enough). I'd done the distillery tour a few years back so I just elected to watch the video and look around the exhibition and the shop. I couldn't resist adding a bottle of Bushmills Malt to the stores: I had one a few years

back and it was delicious, a fine smooth taste with a hint of brandy. Since my last visit Bushmills had become more slick and commercialised, and the entrance favours visitors in cars over those on foot. Nevertheless the produce is just as good. In years gone by there used to be a Rathlin ferryman who would open a bottle of the stuff, throw the cork in the sea and invite his favourite passengers to help him finish it off.

Back on board I put my damp gear out in the sun then I rang Rosemary, a friend from Londonderry who I'd unsuccessfully tried to contact when I was in Ardglass. Ballycastle was further from Londonderry than I'd imagined and it was a bit late for her to come over for the evening, and she was busy on Saturday too. I wanted to be in Islay by Sunday at the latest, so we had to leave it at that. A pity as she would have given me an excuse to do a day trip over to Rathlin. So I finished off the navigation to Port Ellen on Islay and did my routine engine checks. Normally these are no more than a formality but this time the gearbox oil was nearly off the dipstick, maybe something to do with the prop getting fouled and making the gearbox overheat. It needed automatic transmission fluid, which I didn't have; though I could probably hold out until Port Ellen. The forecast was for a gentle to fresh south to southeasterly, warm but with a possibility of drizzle, so there was just a chance that the engine would only be needed for a few minutes at either end.

Jobs done, I put my slightly less damp gear back below, then went for a walk to see Ballycastle in sunlight. I ambled along the beach, took some photographs of the town and of Fair Head, then crossed a little footbridge to take a country route back into the town centre. It was a fair puff up Dun-a-Mallaght Road but good exercise for the legs and lungs, and I was rewarded with views across to Rathlin, Fair Head and in the distance the Mull of Kintyre. No sign of Islay though: the northern horizon was obscured by haze. I followed a track across a valley and back into town, where I picked on the Cellular Restaurant for dinner purely because it was in the Triangle

(sorry, Diamond) and below ground. It was intimate and cosy with tables set between pews, and the food was up to the mark too. It was a good farewell to Ballycastle and to Ireland, though it would have been good to have some company to share it with.