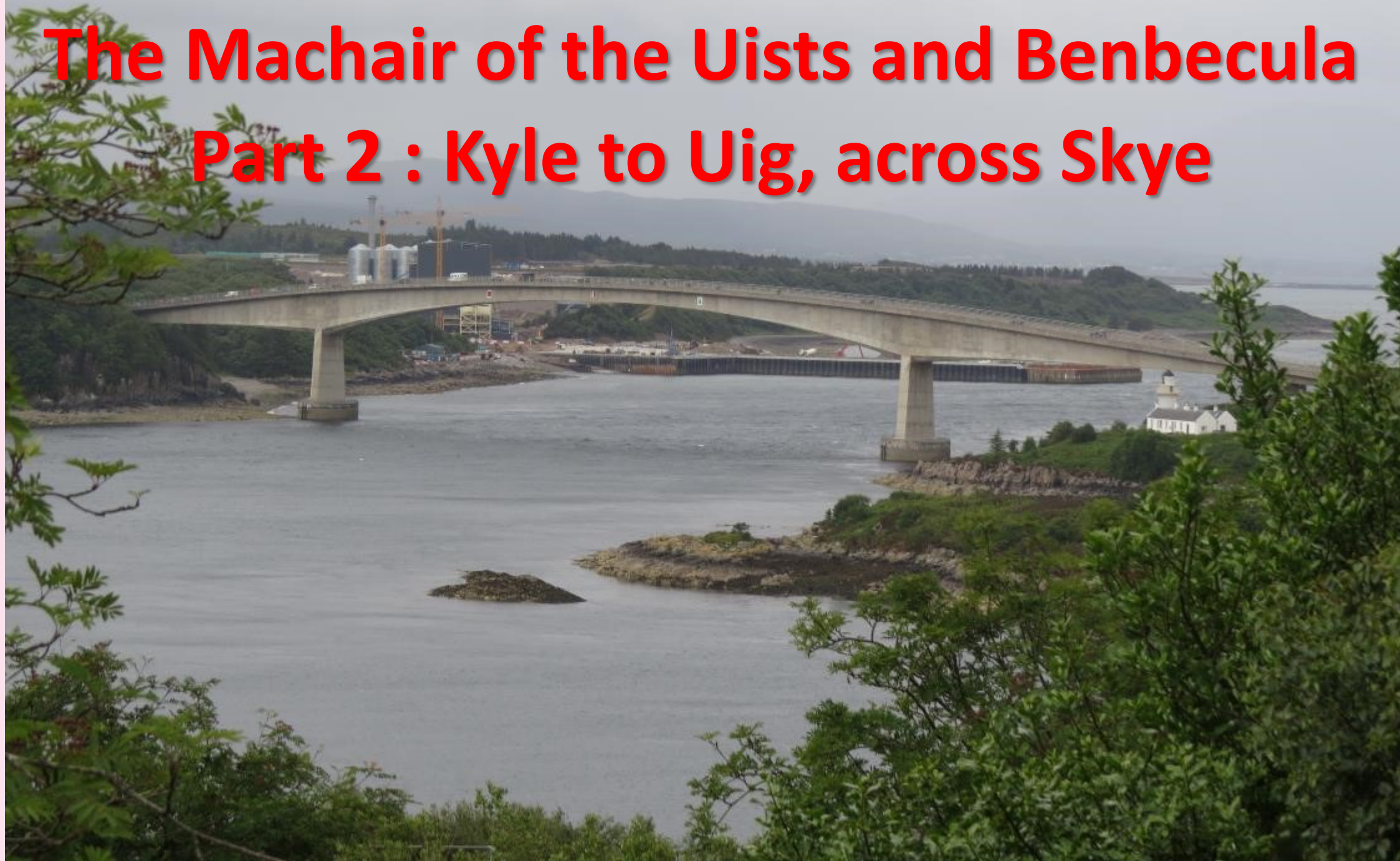


# The 2018 David Boyd Event

## The Machair of the Uists and Benbecula

### Part 2 : Kyle to Uig, across Skye







The 'Kyle Hotel' (its name not just a hotel in Kyle of Lochalsh) had many comfortable rooms and was very popular with workers and holidaymakers. They had a good selection of guide books in each room. The two things you think



about when you hear the town's name are Eilean Donnan castle and the Skye Bridge. A few years ago it would have been the ferry crossing which was important. In the 1970's, the ferry to Stornoway left from Kyle of Lochalsh. I once landed there at 6.00am on a winter's morning and caught the train to Inverness



It is still the terminus of the rail line from Inverness. Two pictures in the upstairs' corridor caught my attention. One depicts the Battle of Bannockburn and the other the raising of Charles Edward Stuart's standard at Glenfinnan. Neither of these offers comfort to Sassenachs. **Still, we had a warm welcome.**







### Thursday 21st June - The mid summer solstice

Bright sunshine and blue skies with some wispy clouds looked like a good omen for a fine day and calm crossing. The hills around Kyle looked picture postcard perfect. The white walls of the buildings in the town lent a Mediterranean feel to the view from our bedroom window. Amongst the trivia on Breakfast 'news' the forecast was for continuing good weather up in the northwest, confirming the likelihood of a good crossing of the Minch.

After an excellent breakfast we watched as some workmen tried to demolish a couple of Scot's pines and a weeping willow with a JCB. There was a traffic jam in Kyle so I used my instinct to head west along a narrow road which wound its way higher and higher above the town. Anne said we were lost but because I don't like to give up, I drove on. I did stop and ask directions when I feared that Anne might be right (again!). High above Kyle we came to THE PLOCK, a Community Park from which we had excellent views over to Skye and the road bridge. It is described by locals as 'one of the West Highlands finest landscapes'. It has been in community ownership since 1946 and has been a military base, a golf course and farm land. Now it is being returned to the wild for everyone to enjoy, either for walks or just to sit and admire the many views and 'watch the way the colours of the mountains change with the weather'. With this in mind you will get a fair number of colours any morning or afternoon. Sunsets there must be magnificent.

The Skye bridge is high and when you drive onto it, it is steep. After crossing the bridge we headed towards Broadford and found ourselves in a long slow moving queue of traffic. This gave us time to appreciate the dog roses, foxgloves, hawkweed and irises scattered along the roadside. The traffic eventually dissipated and we seemed to have the road to ourselves. Where did everyone else go?



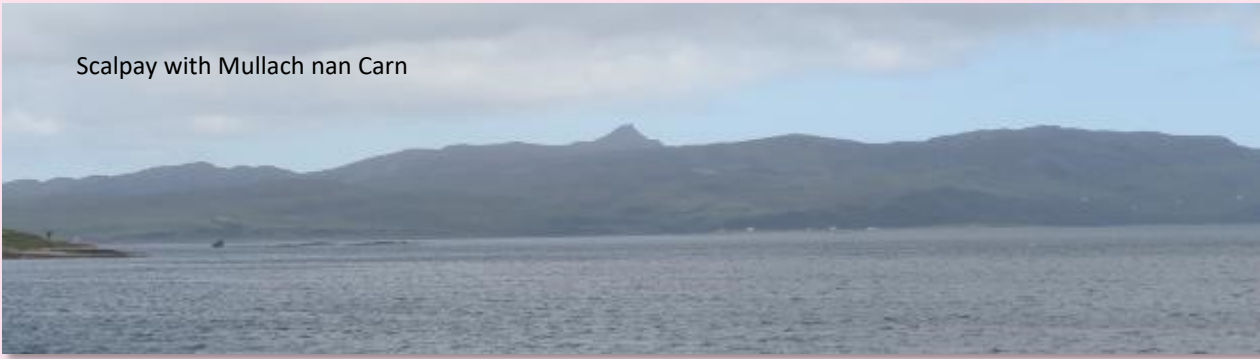
Kyleakin



The Skye Bridge



Scalpay with Mullach nan Carn



Ard Dorch village on Caolas Scalpay



Beinn Dearg and Loch Ainort



**The road through Skye** is wide and well surfaced. The islands of Scalpay and Raasay sit just offshore at the southern end of the Lower Sound., between Skye and the mainland. The narrow straight between Skye and Scalpay is called Caolas Scalpay. The sea was flat calm and as the clouds thinned both sea and sky became bluer. Skye became wonderfully beautiful rather than a bit threatening. At Loch Ainort you see the road on the opposite bank climb diagonally up the slopes of Beinn Dearg. There is a fish farm on Loch Ainort and somehow you want to park and have a look at the boats crossing to and from it. Its hard to imagine the thousands of salmon living in the cages. Part of me is grateful because by farming salmon their meat is plentiful and cooked properly is delicious. Perhaps they would be happier swimming wild in the Atlantic, exploring Greenland and Labrador. However if they were wild, most would be killed and eaten by seals or whales. A bit like cows and sheep! My mother used to say, 'If we were not going to eat them, no one would raise them'.



This guy knows his way around Skye!





Our first glimpse of the Cuillin



Eas a'Bhradain Waterfall runs into Loch Ainort



The shore road (A87) along Loch Ainort



The Cuillin



Am Mol  
Mol 3



The ferry heads for Raasay



The view from Sconser Golf Course



Glamaig near Sconser is only 773m but looks much higher



North of Broadford, to the left of the road, lie the Cuillins. We had a wee 'argument' about the "s". Luckily both are correct as there is Red Cuillin to the South of the more impressive Black Cuillin on the north. The most impressive peak is Sgurr Nan Gillian behind The Sligachan Hotel at the head of Loch Sligachan. It is one of the most popular hotels on the island especially with climbers. Here the road to Dunvegan branches off the road to Portree. Our progress was slow as we stopped often to admire the mountains and take many (too many?) pictures. Luckily Andrew snaps the views as we go along. Approaching Sconser, at the mouth of Loch Sligachan we had to stop beside the golf course. It has one of the best views in Scotland. You can see the islands of Scalpay and Raasay and the mountains of Skye's East coast. The sun was out and the sea was a remarkable even deeper shade of blue. A wee road leaves on the right, signposted to Mol. We made a detour up this road on our return journey and it proved to be one of the most photogenic short drives I have ever taken. At first the road heads uninspiringly towards and through a huge quarry but then it follows the contours of the land along the hillside above the loch. The views of Raasay are dramatic. We watched the white Raasay ferry make its way across the Narrow of Raasay heading for Suinish. On the Thursday tho' we had no time for diversions.





Towards the northern end of Glen Varragill we glimpsed The Old Man of Storr, a prominent pinnacle high above the sea, north of Portree. It is impressive when viewed from a distance and breathtaking as you get nearer. Close up it looks like a set from Lord of the Rings. Portree is the main town on Skye and even in early summer it is very busy. Book ahead if you are going to Portree. It has lots of accommodation but most of it already booked. We stopped in the main square to visit MacKenzie's bakery. The Mrs MacKenzie from the 1960's was a wartime friend of my mother. I studied dentistry in Dundee with her son Norman. Apparently Norman's brother still owns the shop. We bought rolls, oatcakes and bread for our trip. All were delicious. No time to tarry. Outside the bakery I chatted to an American gentleman whose wife's maiden name was 'Douglas'. They had come to Scotland to visit Lockerbie which gave its name to a scion of Clan Douglas. We chatted about the many places in Western USA which we had both visited. What struck him about Scotland, apart from its spectacular beauty was the lack of trees.







*Centaurea nigra*  
near Portree

If Knapweeds were rare or a bit difficult to grow they might be in demand as garden plants. They are certainly spectacular.



The floral highlight north of Portree was an old road cutting where foxgloves and hawkweed vied with Wordsworth's daffodils in their profusion.





Uig Bay & The Little Minch

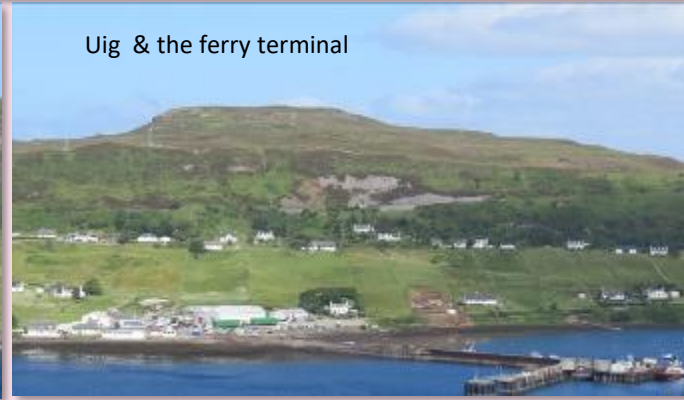


Soon we reached Uig Bay, on the west coast of the Trotternish Peninsula. The scene was idyllic. Sad songs use the word 'blue' to evoke feelings of sadness and misery. On a summer's day in Skye 'light blue' describes the high skies and deep 'blue' the ocean. How many shades are there? The famous 'Fairy Glen' of Skye lies in the hills north of Uig. We did not realise this at the time and so did not see it. I suspect the fairies were being impish and removed any signpost there might have been! Still when you think about, 'Where else would the Fairy Glen be, other than at the ferry port?' The houses of Uig town are mostly painted white and sit high above and scattered along the sheltered northern side of the bay. Our route is popular with tourist buses. I am not sure about the night life on Skye but the driver of this bus knows something which I don't.

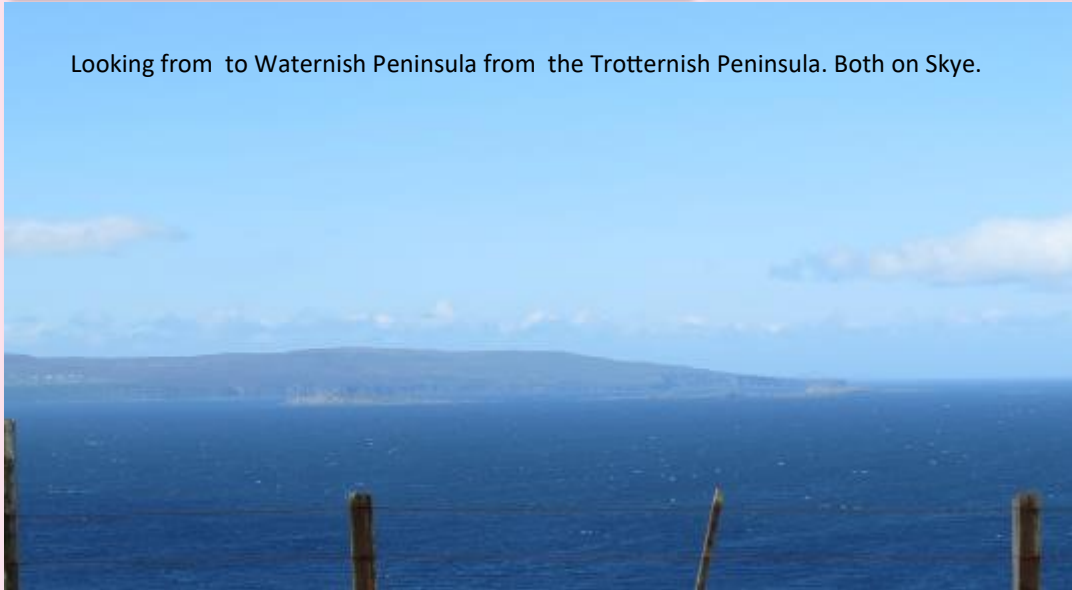
Ru Idrigil, Uig



Uig & the ferry terminal



Looking from to Waternish Peninsula from the Trotternish Peninsula. Both on Skye.

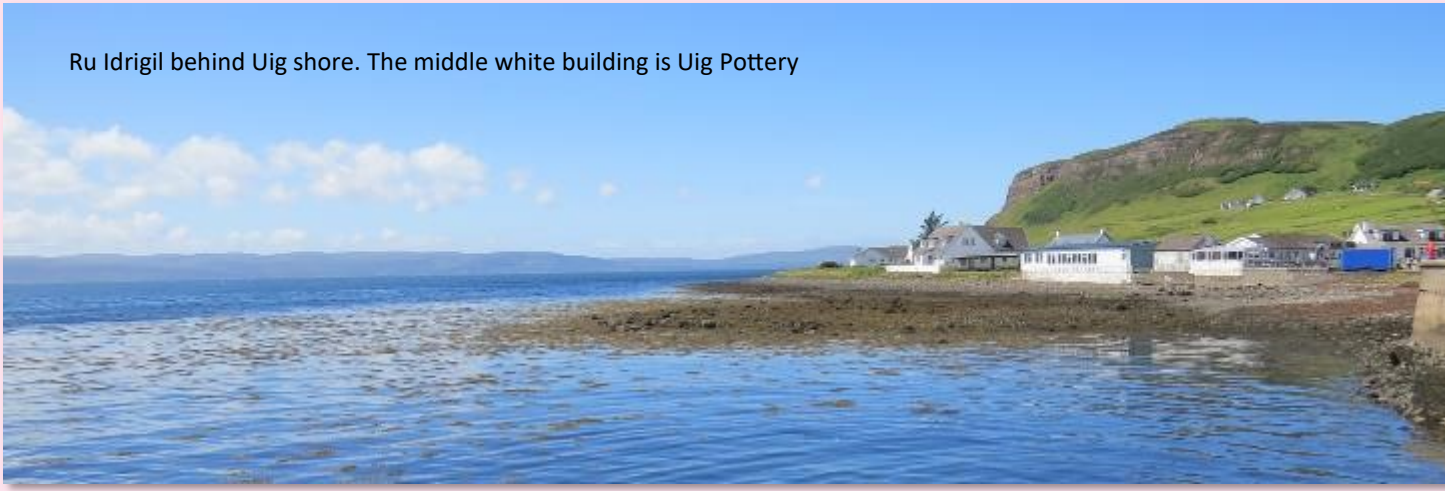


A field of Buttercups at Uig





Ru Idrigil behind Uig shore. The middle white building is Uig Pottery



The ferry terminal has been modernised since I first saw it in the 1970s. Back in the early 1070's cars drove along a high pier onto a platform on the ferry. The platform revolved by 90 degrees and descended into the bowls of the ferry and the cars drove off. The lift then went back up to deck level for the next car. It was exciting but time consuming. My abiding memory from then was of the prominent headland, Ru Idrigil (Idrigil Point) which towers above the blue waters of The Little Minch and of the haddock and chips on the boat.

The water in Uig Bay is very clear and it is easy to see the sea bed. Creels on the dockside hinted at Lobster, Crab or Langoustine fishing. There is a monument on the pier-side commemorating a visit to Uig made by King Edward VII and Queen Alexandra on 1st September 1902. They came by sea, not by land.







We checked in at the Caledonian MacBrayne office. I was relieved to know that I all my paperwork was correct. The office itself was hidden from the ferry queue behind two huge green lorries. These were the source of much interest when they came to board the ferry. The name of a tea room took my fancy.... 'SKYE'S THE LIMIT'. We visited the Isle of Skye Brewery, bought some beer, the T-shirt and a bottle opener; I am a good tourist. We walked along the pier and remarked on how clear the water was. We ate our MacKenzie rolls and Morrison's cheese at the pier-side.



Escalonia grows well on the west coast





In the queue for the ferry we met several SRGC friends. Ian and Anne Christie, Ian Young and Julia Corden, Roma Fiddes and Peter and Anne Foley.

The ferry arrived on time and we were soon on board MV HEBRIDES. There was quite a delay before the ferry sailed. The two huge lorries were coming with us. Along with many other passengers we stood entranced and amazed at the skill of the drivers. They negotiated the ferry ramp with barely inches to spare on either side. It took a lot of skill on the part of lorry drivers and the ferry crew. The last hurdle was to get the second lorry far enough on board to allow the ramp to be raised. What was on the lorries? They were loads three and four of twelve of similar size destined for North Uist. They are parts of a £15 million water purification plant which was built at an engineering factory in Muir of Ord, then dismantled to be transported to Lochmaddy, where it will be put together again. As soon as the ramp was up the ferry sailed. Soon we were rounding Ru Idrigil and heading for north Uist.



Uig Fish Box Trough!

CALEY FISHERIES LTD 08  
TEL: 01793 478773  
NO UNAUTHORISED USE



Uig







# THE FERRY CROSSING

A short distance along the shore north of Ru Idrigil is another headland called Prince Charlie's Point where there is a cave in which the Prince slept before escaping to France. Flora MacDonald's grave is north of Uig in Kilmuir. (Flora and her Prince make up a thread to this article). The north west coast of Skye is rocky and unwelcoming but is also photogenic. Just north of Ru Idrigil, on the next promontory there was a prominent rock stack, like short version of The Old Man of Hoy on Orkney. As the ferry entered the Minch we could see the small islands of the Fladda-chuain archipelago on the north horizon as well as the steep cliffs of the Waternish Peninsula to the west.



The Ru Idrigil headland



The Ru Idrigil headland



The islands of Fladda-chuain archipelago, north of Skye



Ru Idrigil and the more northerly headland



Waternish Cliffs



Waternish Cliffs



First view of the Outer Hebrides



We had a relaxed and leisurely crossing. The recently upgraded lounge is very comfortable. With windows all round you could survey the islands at leisure. Some of us were more at leisure than others!







After about an hour we could see the hills of North Uist in more detail. The entrance to Lochmaddy harbour looks tricky to landlubbers like we SRGC members.



Andrew found out where we were using the GPS on his phone. Yes we were still at sea but definitely heading for Lochmaddy.

There is a light on the small island of Glas Eilean Mor to guide ships in foul weather. There seemed to be plenty of hazardous rocks on both sides of the ship as we entered the shelter of Loch Nam Madadh.

At Lochmaddy things were awkward. If we docked normally and drove off over the prow ramp, the lorries at the stern ferry would be too heavy for safety. The answer:- the ferry docked stern first.; the lorries reversed off; the ramp went up; the ferry sailed out, turned round and docked prow first. Everyone else could then disembark. I am glad Caledonian MacBrayne provided this extra entertainment for our crossing!





The ferry docked stern first in case the weight of the pantechnicons destabilised it





As soon as one lorry was safely on shore, the drivers ran back to disembark the second one.



Hero Drivers



Lorry No2





We did not linger in Lochmaddy but got on our way as soon as we left the ferry. The road soon became single track with passing places. There was so little oncoming traffic that again we felt as though we had the road to ourselves. North Uist is easy to drive through. There is one main road which encircles the northern half of the island and which forks south at Clachan, following the western side of the island. You can't get lost; you might just take longer to get to Benbecula. There is no road on the east side in the southern half of North Uist.

Just south of Lochmaddy there is a wooden sculpture of Hercules the Bear. (As I typed bear my finger touched the "z" key and the iPad interpreted this as zebra! Hercules the Zebra). If you don't know, Hercules belonged to famous champion wrestler Andy Robins' and his wife Maggie. Who at one time owned the Serrifmuyir Inn near Dunblane. He wrestled with Andy and Hercules got parts in films. He escaped on location in North Uist. John Campbell, a former patient of mine helped to recapture him. John had worked with polar bears on Canada. Unfortunately we did not know about the statue till our return trip to catch the ferry home. ( newspaper reports are on the next page)

There were fish farms, operated by The Scottish Salmon Company on a few of the lochs by the road. Their lochs were the only ones with name signs.

East of the road south from Lochmaddy two imposing hills dominate the view. We sailed past the eastern side of them on our voyage into Lochmaddy. The northern rounded one is Li a Tuath ( North Lee) the southern conical peak is Li a Deas ( South Lee). The walkthehighlands web site says "the rugged slopes are tricky to reach across a hinterland seemingly more water than land". This describes the countryside of the east side of North Uist pretty accurately. Are there are more islands than lochs or is it vice versa? I think the islands win. Look at a map and decide for yourself.

An old abandoned cottage by a Loch at the foot of South Lee looked like a good project for Grand Designs. The scenery was fascinating, quite unlike that of other parts of Scotland—endless views across the peatlands to one side and glimpses of beaches to the other. The hills and they are just hills, are imposing because they rise out of the flat water-filled landscape. In sunshine it is magnificent in dull, wet weather it will be intimidating.





## Hercules statue unveiled on North Uist

from The Scotsman & The Daily Mail

Monday 26 August 2013

A large wooden sculpture of Hercules - a bear that evaded capture in the Outer Hebrides - has been unveiled. The statue has been erected in North Uist, the island where he went on the run, sparking a massive land, air and sea search. For 24 days, the bear evaded the army, police and hundreds of volunteer searchers who scoured the hills and moors after he took off when swimming in the sea in August 1980. Hercules, owned by Andy and Maggie Robin, was starring in an Andrex advert being filmed on Benbecula when he disappeared.

Fears the bear would kill to stave off hunger saw petrified islanders refusing to venture out after dark. Some villagers stacked furniture against their doors to avoid being hunted down. Brothers Alasdair and Ronald Iain Maclean eventually spotted Hercules on Alasdair's croft in Balemartin, some 20 miles from where he escaped. Ronald Iain's son was dispatched to drive to a phone box to raise the alarm. The bear was shot with a tranquillizer dart from a helicopter and airlifted off the moor to Lochmaddy where ferry company Caledonian Macbryane gave him a lifetime ticket for free travel.

Hercules starred in Disney movies and in the James Bond movie Octopussy, alongside Roger Moore, among a raft of TV appearances. He graced the cover of Time magazine and even met ex-Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and ex-US President Ronald Reagan.

The much-loved grizzly died in 2000. He was buried in the garden of the home he lived in alongside ex-wrestler Andy Robin and his wife Maggie in Clackmannanshire, Scotland. After the Robins sold their home they decided to have the bear's remains disinterred and reburied beneath the life size statue erected in his honour in North Uist, the island in the Outer Hebrides. The low key burial saw the grizzly's remains lowered into the ground inside a giant coffin with the help of a JCB just next to the wooden bear statue visited by thousands every year. Speaking about the logistics of moving Hercules, Mrs Robbins said: 'He was still a big, heavy bear. It was quite a challenge.' Nobody on the island is aware Hercules is actually there apart from a handful of people - including George H Macdonald, the factor of North Uist Estate who took the photo.







Clachan church



From Clachan to the West



From Clachan to the West



Soon we reached the first causeway and once across it we were in Benbecula. Most houses are well separated so the communities are sparsely populated and spread over a wide area. The village of Creagorry was real village with one the few supermarkets on the island. This Co-op sold everything. Nearby Creagorry Motors sold petrol and diesel. Creagorry has two hotels, the Isle of Benbecula Hotel and The Dark Island Hotel. Either would make a good base. There are also several bed and breakfast places. But remember, **BOOK WELL IN ADVANCE OF YOUR VISIT.**

Cockle pickers were working hard in the sands at low tide, as we crossed the next causeway. Now we were in South Uist. Second road on the left, then first left and in a mile we were at the Orasay Inn, our comfortable base for the adventures to come. Roma had arrived before us. Anne Chambers arrived after dinner. We became known to management and staff as 'the five' as in "you'll be one of the five" and "the table for the five is over there".

The Inn is a modern building with comfortable rooms and friendly staff. Our room had a balcony which we scarcely had time to use. We had good views to the east and South. There was a 12 foot tall Cordalene in the garden, testament to the climate. Escalonia and Olearia seemed to stand up to the winds which can get very fierce. In the distance the Community Wind Farm's three giant white turbines stood in stark contrast to the surrounding peatlands and distant Mountains.

The food at the Orasay Inn is excellent. It was worth the drive just for the first course. Our meals were extraordinarily good. Isobel, the cook and owners wife, could win Masterchef with her eyes closed! My Hebridean fish soup was a wee aquarium of prawn, scallops, mussels and other things which I could not identify. It was wonderful.

The seafood platters could have fed a household rather than just Anne and Andrew. The wine was priced very reasonably and the quality top notch the beer in the bar was in bottles rather than draft but the wee bottles of Innes and Gunn were just what the dentist needed. Friendly lady guests from Dundee were good company and happy to exchange stories.





From Benbecula looking to South Uist



Scattered communities



The causeway from Benbecula to South Uist



Tea, coffee and biscuits were supplied in the unlikely event you might be hungry during the night. I did try a novel snack, butter-scotch shortbread biscuits dipped in gin and tonic. It could catch on.

The food at the Inn was extraordinarily good. Isobel the cook and owners wife could win Masterchef with her eyes closed! My Hebridean fish soup was a wee aquarium of prawn, scallops, mussels and other things which I could not identify. It was delicious. The seafood platters could have fed a household rather than just Anne and Andrew. The wine was priced very reasonably and the quality was top notch. The beer in the bar was in bottles rather than draft but the wee bottles of Innes and Gunn were just what the dentist needed. Friendly lady guests from Dundee were good company and happy to exchange stories. It was a wee bit 'Agatha-Christie-esque' without the murders.

In the morning we met fellow SRGC member Ian Mathieson at our hotel. Ian was excellent company and shared table for our picnic lunch. His wife is a proficient player of the harp and was visiting Benbecula campus of Lewis College, Stornoway. It is famous for the study of Gaelic music.

Breakfast was insurmountable. There was a good choice on the "Scottish Breakfast". Too many choices for me to read them all. I said I did not want potato scone, fried bread nor beans, without realising just how many items were left. Isobel rubbed it in by serving me 2 sausages, a Lorne sausage slice, 2 rashers of bacon, 2 sausages, heaped sautéed potatoes as well as mushrooms, black pudding, white pudding and because I asked for an extra egg, I got 2 fried eggs. Luckily I had fruit salad with yogurt to start with and mixed toast to accompany the feast. The pot of tea was very welcome. Did I mention the orange juice? At home I would only have had tea and a bowl of Special K or muesli. It's funny how after just a few hours, a distant hotel becomes home and just how much good food you can eat for breakfast.





**Our views from the Orasay Inn**

**Above to the South**

**Right to the East**





The Orasay Inn, South Uist \*\*\*\*\*

