

The 2018 David Boyd Event

Part 6 : South to Eriskay



On towards the south of South Uist and to Eriskay



The South coast of South Uist. Eriskay on the horizon



The Standing Stone at Pol a Charra



The weather could not have been better! We decided to visit the very south coast of South Uist before driving over the causeway to Eriskay. The rocky foreshore beside the Polochar Inn is home to several colonies of thrift. Most were over but a few pink flowers remained. An ancient Standing Stone by the water's edge may have been put there to guide sailors home from the wild Atlantic. [my supposition]. It isn't Stonehenge but it is a reminder that people have lived here for centuries. I have little doubt that Viking longships like the one at Chill Donan once anchored here. There are innumerable beaches on the west coast of the Hebrides suitable for beaching boats. These flat sandy shores slope gently down to the ocean and are mostly protected by headlands. Until Victorian times or even later most people travelled from place to place by sailing or rowing round the coasts. They would walk for shorter distances but roads were few. The old Hebridean churches with their cemeteries are built near the sea. When people died their body would be taken by boat to the cemetery. The nearest land to the west is America. Did Vikings leave Uist to discover America? Rocks, stones, flowers, waves, islands, birds, everything combines to make this a perfect spot. It is a place for contemplation. In olden times the island provided everything that the people needed.



Eriskay and Barra



The Pollochiar Inn



The Standing stone beside The Pollochar Inn



Iris pseudacorus



Armeria maritima



Lychnis flos-cuculi

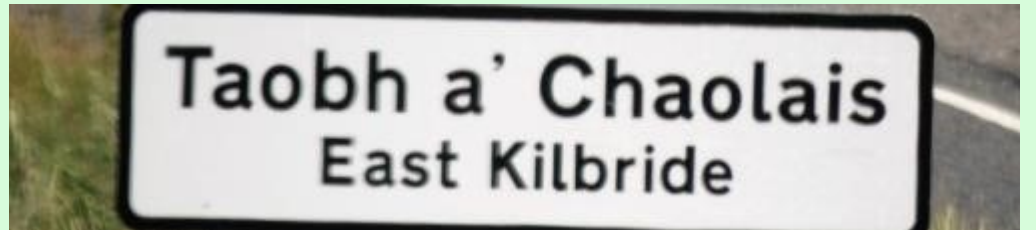


Cakile maritima





At the village of Taobh a Charolais, which apparently translates as East Kilbride, we watched a Peregrine falcon as it sat on a rocky outcrop. At a corner in a relatively sheltered dip in the road a gardening enthusiast had transformed his patch. He had cut down the vegetation and had planted a few 'foreign' shrubs to enhance the bell heather which naturally grew among the rocky outcrops. Escalonia, Olearia, Fuschia, Cordalines, Phormium and a fine clump of Lysimachia flourished just over the hill from the wild Atlantic.



Garden shrubs thriving in South Uist



Bell heather (*Erica cinerea*)



Escalonia



Lysimachia vulgaris



Phormium tenax



Olearia



Cordyline



Fuchsia



Another causeway, another island! This time our most southerly, Eriskay; the smallest of our trip. A rocky skerry in the middle of the straight to the east of the causeway is marked with a navigation light. This is the reef which the S.S. Politician hit and where it sank during the war. The whisky on board was the saviour of many dry lives on Eriskay. Sir Compton Mackenzie based his novel "Whisky Galore" on the shipwreck. Amazingly we had watched the modern version of the film a fortnight before we left for the Uists. I think the original black and white version captured the essence of island life at the time more than the modern one did. We were bound for the Am Politician which, as you can read on the sign to the left, is a Taigh-osta.



Centaurium litorale



Thymus serpyllum



Lotus corniculatus

Eriskay is the town and the island. The ferry for Barra sails from a modern pier outside the town. There are only a few miles of paved road on Eriskay. We saw a nice rock garden above the town on our way to the pier. Alongside Bird's-foot Trefoil and Thyme there were a few plants of Seaside Centaury.

We drove to the ferry terminal on Eriskay and watched the Sound of Barra ferry make its way towards us. Just north of the terminal is the beautiful Coilleag a' Phrionnsa, the Princes Strand. On July 23rd 1745 Princes Charles Edward Stuart arrived here on his ship Le Du Teillay. The Prince is reputed to have stepped on shore, onto the rocks in the foreground. He had come to rally support for his father - "The Old Chevalier" - James Stuart and to regain the throne of Great Britain on his behalf. This was the start of the second Jacobite uprising. The spot is botanically interesting as well because the pink convolvulus (*Calystegia soldanella*) which grows there is said to have grown from seeds gathered by the Prince while he was waiting on the French Coast at Saint Nazaire and which dropped from his pocket when he landed in Eriskay.

The walk down was steep and our legs decided to let us down! Matt had told us that *Calystegia soldanella* still grew here but being a bit tired, instead we had a drive round to Acarsaig harbour, or rather to the harbour and back round the hill behind it. Fishermen were working on their boats so we did not linger. Rows of creels indicated that lobsters might be the main catch. We did see thyme, birds-foot trefoil, ferns, juniper, honeysuckle and dwarfed willows in a natural rock Garden where the road had been blasted out.





I always like to read about the plants and people who crop up in my 'adventures' both in real life and via the computer. I like Wikipedia because it can lead to unexpected facts, most of which are interesting. Here is a bit about Bonnie Prince Charlie. "**Charles Edward Louis John Casimir Sylvester Severino Maria Stuart** (31 December 1720 – 31 January 1788) was the elder son of James Francis Edward Stuart, grandson of James II and VII and after 1766 the Stuart claimant to the throne of Great Britain. During his lifetime, he was also known as "**The Young Pretender**" or "**The Young Chevalier**" and in popular memory as "**Bonnie Prince Charlie**".



It horrifies me that it has taken me 70 years to visit North and South Uist, Benbecula and Eriskay., although I have made several visits to Lewis & Harris. More remarkable is that I have learned so much about a core of Scottish history, namely just how important the Uists and Eriskay are to the story of Bonnie Prince Charlie and flora MacDonald.



I must thank Anne Chambers for sending me this photograph of *Calystegia soldanella*. It is a beautiful flower and its leaves seem to be more waxy than common bindweed



Barra and the ferry

The shrine to the Virgin Mary protected by a white picket fence reminded us that until recently these islands kept the sabbath. Perhaps we were enjoying ourselves too much? Undeterred, after a busy day what would you do? We parked beside the Am Politician restaurant and went for an easy walk.



The Eriskay Rock Garden



Juniper, Willow in seed and Honeysuckle on Eriskay





Eriskay and Beinn Sciathan 185 m



We walked past the old cemetery on the headland above the Sound of Barra. I have never seen as many crosses in a cemetery as here.

Soon we started to look for more orchids. This time *Dactylorhiza incarnata* subsp. *coccinea* which Matt had shown us on Saturday. Sure enough there were several orchids flowering in a wet seep just above the sandy beach.



Am Politician restaurant and public house



Our Lady of Fatima marks the site of the original Catholic church on Eriskay



One of our last finds was the native form of red poppy, *Papaver rhoeas*. It has longer seed capsules than the 'usual' form. A large number were growing along with a fumitory in a patch of machair in which someone was growing potatoes. Nearby Marsh marigolds and nettles grew with forget me nots. A strong purple Hebe grew in a garden looking over the Sound.

Am Politician We were a bit early for dinner but still we decided to retire to the restaurant's conservatory. Some of our fellow members had already made themselves at home. The lady owner was happy to chat about her life on the island then on the mainland and how she and her partner returned to the island and bought the Am Politician. She talked about the thousands of bottles of whisky rescued from the stricken vessel and



***Dactylorhiza incarnata* subsp. *coccinea*, on Eriskay**







how they were hidden all over the island. She brought out from behind the bar two bottles which came from the Politician. Both had whisky in them. I don't know if the whisky was original. One bottle had been found in a peat bog, the other while excavating foundations for a new house. One bottle had in raised letters "Kings Ransom Scotch Whisky" on one side and "Round The World Blend" on the other. The other was "Spey "Royal" with an interesting bit of writing, "Federal Law forbids the sale or reuse of this bottle"! It would seem to be O.K. for Americans to consume the contents.

Our meal that Sunday was as good as every other we had enjoyed. I had learned from my previous repasts that I should be careful when ordering food on the islands. This time the portions were more restrained and the cost a bit less but every bit as delicious. I had lentil soup, smoked salmon salad and Meringues to finish with.





Our group had coalesced into a group of friends, each of us having shared the beauties of these Western Isles and enthused over the plants and birds which make their home here. This companionship is what makes the SRGC a very friendly and welcoming club.

Reluctantly we left Eriskay and took the long road home to the Orasay Inn. In the evening sunshine the Eastern hills were tinged with pink.

A perfect end to a perfect weekend.



The light on the skerry in the Sound of Eriskay where the S.S. Politician foundered in February 1941



"Dynamiting whisky. You wouldn't think there'd be men in the world so crazy as that!"

History of SS Politician from Wikipedia

On 5 February 1941, during gale force winds, she ran aground off the Island of Eriskay in the Outer Hebrides and later broke in two near the islet of Calvay. The crew were all unharmed and were looked after by the locals for a while. When the locals learned from the crew of the *Politician* what the ship was carrying, a series of illegal, and later well-organised salvage operations took place at night, before the customs and excise officials arrived. The island's supplies of whisky had dried up due to war-time rationing, so the islanders periodically helped themselves to some of the 28,000 cases (264,000 bottles) of Scotch whisky before winter weather broke up the ship. The men wore women's dresses on their "fishing trips", to keep their own clothes from being covered in incriminating oil from the ship's holds. Boats came from as far away as Lewis as news of the whisky spread across the Hebrides. No islander regarded it as stealing; for them the rules of salvage meant that once the bounty was in the sea, it was theirs to rescue. This was not the view of the local customs officer. Charles McColl was incensed at what he saw as outright thievery going on. None of the whisky had paid a penny of duty, and he railed against this loss to the public purse. McColl whipped up a furore and made the police act. Villages were raided and crofts turned upside down. Bottles were hidden, secreted, or simply drunk in order to hide the evidence.

Trials: McColl and the police caught plenty of locals red-handed, and they were sent to trial. On 26 April at Lochmaddy Sheriff Court, a group of men from Barra pleaded guilty to theft and were charged between three and five pounds. McColl was beside himself at the leniency of the sentence but the police (being largely locals themselves) were tired of harassing the locals who had not, in their minds, done such a bad thing. McColl continued on his crusade, and more men did appear in court, some of whom were sentenced to up to six weeks imprisonment in Inverness and Peterhead.

At sea, salvage attempts did not go well, and it was eventually decided to let *Politician* remain where she was. McColl, who had already estimated that the islanders had purloined 24,000 bottles of whisky, ensured that there would be no more temptation. He applied for, and was granted, permission to explode her hull.

The islanders watched this extraordinary action, their emotions summed up by Angus John Campbell, who commented, "Dynamiting whisky. You wouldn't think there'd be men in the world so crazy as that!"

Banknotes: At the time, the Crown remained very unforthcoming about the incident, the cargo and the salvage. The majority of its hold was taken up by the

whisky, but there was also an assortment of other cargo ranging from baths, plumbing fittings, pianos, art silks, motor parts, bedding, furniture, food and banknotes for Jamaica. Public Record Office files released in January 2001 show that *Politician* was also carrying nearly 290,000 ten-shilling notes (145,000 pounds), which would be worth the equivalent of several million pounds at current exchange rates. (To give an idea of how much that was worth, a corporal on full pay in the British Army received 35 shillings a week). The British government hoped that they would not get into circulation, but they started turning up at banks all around the world. Some sources suggest that these supplies were being sent to the colonies in case there was need of evacuation in the war. As soon as the weather allowed, Eriskay was besieged with customs officials, insurance agents and legitimate salvage companies. It is reported that the custom officials were not well received and one agent was refused accommodation by most of the townsfolk. In April 1941 Captain E Lauriston, who was in charge of the operation, claimed that the banknotes had turned up in Benbecula, 25 miles (40 km) north of the wreck. The salvage company stated: *It is reported that some of the children on the island have been playing with them and the locals, most of whom are known to be incriminated in the looting, are too wily to give anything away.*

In a memorandum, the Crown Agents noted: *The local police service is in no doubt on a very, very small scale but the nature of the place and its surroundings should tend to reduce the chances of serious loss through the notes being presented and paid.*

Suspicious only began to rise when an empty cash case was found abandoned in the hold of the ship. By June, the banknotes from *Politician* were turning up in branches as far away as Liverpool. By mid July, a hundred or so had been tendered in Jamaica and almost two hundred in Britain. By 1958 the Crown Agents reported that 211,267 notes had been recovered by the salvage company and the police and had been destroyed. A further 2,329 had been presented in banks in England, Scotland, Ireland, Switzerland, Malta, Canada, the US, and Jamaica. Only 1,509 were thought to have been presented in good faith. That still leaves 76,404 banknotes which have never been accounted for. Their fate remains a mystery.

The wreck of the *Politician* still lies off the coast of Eriskay, although it is below water line now as the winter gales destroyed the deck and cabins. In 1988 the island got its own legitimate pub, named The Politician (Scottish Gaelic: *Am Politician*)

Evening are long in summertime on the Outer Isles



Eilean oidhche mhath

Tapadh leat

[Good night islands. Thank you]

