

Wigtown Bay CRC

Cruising Log

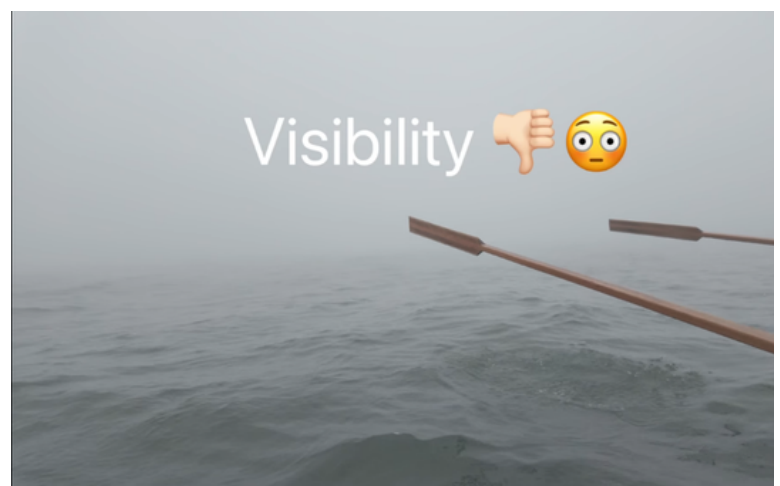
25th April 2026

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From the Isle of Whithorn to Ramsey, Isle of Man 57-mile round trip on the same day.

This cruising log begins months before the actual event itself, with crews training in pretty much every weather imaginable, from torrential rain and hailstorms to very rare sunshine. On one particularly memorable training day, a 40mph squall had us surfing up Loch Ryan in Stranraer, doing 8.9 knots with nobody rowing. Probably the only time my job in the cox's seat was more strenuous than that of the rowers. On another occasion a strong test of my navigational skills occurred when we became completely and unexpectedly enveloped in thick fog. A crew member, who shall remain nameless, thought my hand-held Garmin was a portable tv 🤪! The reality of being unable to see further than the ends of the oars really gave the crew a chance to experience how isolating it can feel when losing sight of the land.



We spent many months planning what we knew was going to be an epic adventure for all of us. With input from both Shaun McGuire (club trustee, local Harbour Master and fisherman) and Philip Robertson (experienced rower and sailor) I drafted a comprehensive risk assessment using all my 30+ years' experience as a fisherman in these waters, trying to ensure I had covered every base and thought of every possible eventuality that might arise on the water. I ensured that our crew spent time studying man overboard and capsize drills. Liaising with SCRA's Andy Rendle and Topher Dawson, I created a specific MOB Training Manual which I delivered to our crews in a classroom setting. I'm proud that this has now been adopted by SCRA as part of their training library.



With crew safety obviously being the priority, we had 2 RIBS organised to accompany us. Newton Stewart Sub Aqua Club provided one of theirs, kindly crewed by Chris Harrison and Richard and Karen Lucas. Dive club member Baz Slater joined us in his own RIB accompanied by his wife Jani and club member Gibby Kelly. The third boat in the fleet was my own yacht, Pegasus 800, which was to carry the second crew of rowers across and bring the first crew home. I drafted in help from North Berwick rowers and friends, Philip and Sheena Robertson, both of whom are originally from the Isle of Whithorn. They were able to bring a wealth of experience on the water and Philip was named our Safety Officer leaving me free to focus solely on the skiff and the rowers. As our first two dates, scheduled for late March and early April, came and went due to bad weather, we were all getting twitchy with the third and final date fast approaching. Thankfully the weather gods were smiling down on us and, on what can only be described as a “Carlsberg day”, we set off at 06:00 with a crew of Becki, Jacqueline, Big Simon and Tracy, launching from the Isle of Whithorn on water that resembled a mirror.



We set off an hour before high water, initially moving at a steady 4.5knts with a moderate cross tide pushing west. The excitement rippling through the skiff was palpable, with the realisation that we were finally on our way on an open water voyage. With much joviality we made it to the first mandatory hydration stop one hour in and quickly cycled through the crew with each rower stopping briefly to take on fluids. Once everyone fell back in we pushed on with the tide starting to kick from the east, we altered course slightly further up the Solway. I noticed timing slipping a little and lifted the stroke rate from the steady 22 strokes per minute to 26 for a few minutes to recalibrate everyone's focus. Soon enough the second hour was upon us and the rowers got the chance, one at a time, to ship their oar and have a strictly timed 3-minute break. A welcome opportunity to stretch out muscles and take on some sustenance in the form of healthy homemade energy bars, peanut butter stuffed medjool dates and the odd pork pie. There were of course a few chancers in the crew attempting to steal a few extra seconds here and there.

At this point the tide was really starting to run hard from the east and our speed over ground dropped to 2knts as we steered further into the running tide. As we approached the Point of Ayre, we were joined by a few seals with numbers increasing the closer we got and with over 200 basking on the shore below the lighthouse, it was a sight to behold.



Shortly afterwards we did our first crew swap with Pink Simon being brought over on the RIB and switching into Becki's seat while she relocated to the bow as a passenger. The pass over went unencumbered with all the dry runs in the harbour during training coming to the fore. Once we were underway, I realised I had made a slight miscalculation, the tide I had anticipated helping us along the shore to Ramsey was running the opposite way. I had managed to find a back eddy close to shore running the wrong way, however with hindsight I should have stood off once we had passed the Cardinal buoy at the Whitestone Bank and found a more beneficial tide wider out.

Around six and a half hours in I demonstrated over the stern the answer to the often asked question about nature's call on a marathon rowing trip. As the safety RIB came closer many threats were made to the approaching photographer who assured me, he didn't have a big enough lens for anything to be visible! The rowers were really starting to feel fatigued now as it seemed to take an age to close on Ramsey but as we drew nearer, two skiffs from Laxey Rowing Club joined us offering a welcome lift for the rower's morale knowing we were so close. We made the final approach flanked by the two Manx skiffs who raised their oars in salute as we navigated between them. What happened next ranks as one of the most emotional experiences I've encountered in a skiff. Alan from Laxey pressed play on the skiffs music system and "Flower of Scotland" blasted out as our keel finally rested on the Manx shore, it even brought a tear to this hardened fisherman's eye and will be memory I cherish for the rest of my life. We can't thank the members of both Laxey CRC and Ramsey Sailing Club enough for the most hospitable welcome. The sailing club's facilities were available to us, along with hot drinks, bananas and encouraging words.



With the first leg taking longer than anticipated the crew turn around was short and after only 30 minutes ashore the second crew limbered up ready for the return leg. With cheers ringing in our ears the crew of Sue, Phil, Elaine and Ann, with me again in the cox's seat, we set off for home with me telling the crew that "the good thing with a full crew change means I can rehash the same stories told on the way here". The first few hours passed with nothing of note happening although many comments were made about how unusually good the weather was, which, of course would come back to bite us later on. We were waved passed the Point of Ayre by several people congregated on the beach, giving morale a boost as we set off across open water once again.

With the shore an hour behind us and the tide running hard I felt we were under powered on the stroke side and made the decision to swap Elaine with Pink Simon, this was going to be more of a test as Elaine has some mobility issues, but with a well drilled crew and extra hands aboard the RIB she was passed over without any problems. It was here that I made the rookie error of blindly following the outward line on my Garmin, heading about 30 degrees off course. Sheena, using binoculars aboard the yacht, found the white tower called the Cairn on the headland that marks home and with our course quickly altered and thanks given for Sheena's alertness, we pushed on. As the sun started dropping, we were treated to some fantastic views as the light started fading, creating an amazing sunset with a vivid orange hue to the sky. As conversation ran on in the skiff we came to the realisation that this crew was what could be proudly termed "veteran" with my 3 oldest rowers in the skiff at the same time (legends each and every one of them).



As the sun finally dropped from the sky it was in near darkness that the tide started running really hard from the east and progress became slow. With only a couple of miles to go I used my experience of the local waters to angle into the shore as much as possible. In darkness and with fatigue after rowing for over 8 hours continuously, the safety boat offered us a tow, which was promptly refused with crew expletives and my explanation that once I closed the shore the tide would be slacker and, if I'm honest, it would have broken the rowers to get so close and have to abort. As it became even darker the temperature drastically dropped and layers of clothing were added to keep the chill off, and we made land fall about a mile down the coast from the harbour. This is where I work my lobster pots, so I was able to use my knowledge of these waters to navigate as close to the shore as I dared. It was here that I realised that my pole mounted navigation lights were stored in the bow and with the force of the tide I couldn't afford for anyone to stop rowing. The RIB running outside us with its spotlight fixed ahead showed us the way as we forged on for home.



Every now and then came the eerie experience of a cacophony of seagulls screeching through the darkness as we passed their nesting sites. It was here that the wind veered into the east at the same time as the half tide ebb started running towards the village, with the wind and tide against each other it kicked up some short choppy waves, but the rowers showed amazing resilience and dug deep to keep us moving. With the village in sight timing faltered with the choppy conditions, and the amazing Sue in stroke seat started calling the timing out allowing me to keep full focus on the reef known as the screen rocks that runs partway across the entrance to the bay. All of a sudden, we lost our way and swung to port. I quickly realised we were caught up on lobster pots, and, in ice cold water up to the elbow, I quietly cursed my father, who was the owner of the offending buoy. Once clear and underway, and inside the shelter of the bay, fireworks heralded our arrival and a large crowd gathered on the pier to give the rowers a thoroughly well-deserved hero's welcome. It was to raucous applause and over 16 hours in the cox's seat that our keel gently touched again on Scottish soil. After 57 miles of hard work, some damn fine rowing, terrible jokes and a few tears along the way, we were home. Like every good seafaring story, it ended in the local ale house for well earned drinks, where we surprised the entire crew with locally hand-crafted slate medals to commemorate what can only be seen as an extraordinary achievement for each of them.



Upon reflection, if we were to attempt this journey again, I would probably aim for Peel rather than Ramsey, even though it's six miles further in distance, the tide would be more in our favour allowing us to keep the speed up.