

# The Small Isles and North of Ardnamurchan

Last updated 3<sup>rd</sup> March 2022



It is said to be a something of a challenge going north round Ardnamurchan Point, but if you pick your time with a nice wind on the beam it is a piece of cake (Do remember you have to get back against any contrary wind which might have got a whole lot stronger). Indeed it was so easy on my first attempt that the crew renamed it 'Softnamurchan point'. So far I have not yet included many anchorages in this area except the so-called Small Isles, the wonderful quartet of exotic and strange names: Muck is small, pastoral and well farmed; Rum is much larger, mountainous and wild; Eigg is more of a crofting sort of a place; while Canna is both rural and wild with one of the best harbours in the Hebrides. And with a few other anchorages on the mainland I have added Loch Scavaig, the most dramatic anchorage in the UK apart from St Kilda, and perhaps Foula although I have never been there.

## Arisaig

It is a long way in to Arisaig<sup>1</sup>, maybe an hour or so, and it is not a good spot to get out of in a strong westerly wind. *"If the sea rover wishes to enter Arisaig harbour he had better obtain local help. It is an abominable place for a stranger"*. But perhaps short of cash Frank Copwer goes on to write *"With such help as the Admiralty Plan, No 2817, gives, however, it is quite possible to enter, and the chart is a good deal cheaper than a pilot"*. It is a reasonable place to change crew — there is a railway station for trains to Fort William. Otherwise I don't see a lot of point in coming here, while others take a completely opposite view and really love the place.

Of course there are nice sunsets over Rum to enjoy, and I am told a good boatyard — Arisaig Marina<sup>2</sup>, a family-run friendly business, with a small café and gift shop (ph 01687 450224). You will find a shop in the village, a restaurant in the Arisaig Hotel<sup>3</sup> (ph 01687 450210), and I have had very good reports of the Old Library Restaurant<sup>4</sup> which sounds to be the place for a meal ashore (ph 01687 450651). If you fancy a walk then head south for half-a-mile along the main road to Larachmore Gardens<sup>5</sup>, unkempt but lovely, free, and — surprisingly — looked after by the Botanic Gardens staff in Edinburgh. The gardens were planted in the 1920s by John Holmes, a Glaswegian millionaire stockbroker, and well known eccentric.

And for the golfers, Traigh links a couple of kilometres north of the village has nine holes, a grand view, and is the most westerly golf course on the UK mainland<sup>6</sup>. While the golfers golf, the rest could walk a bit further on to explore the wonderful sandy beaches before ending up at An Camas Darach where much of 'Local Hero'<sup>7</sup> was filmed (that never-to-be-forgotten feel-good Scottish movie made at the height of the oil boom).

## Canna

*"The harbour of Canna is small, but pretty well sheltered, and commodiously situated for vessels bound either northward or southward; and on that account is more frequented than any of the harbours in that neighbourhood"*. So wrote Murdoch Mackenzie in 1776<sup>8</sup>, and he would have known because he was busy making the first proper charts of the Hebrides at the time. The same is true of Canna<sup>9</sup> today. It has not only a magnificently safe and attractive anchorage, but it is also very special for me from the first time I sailed in on a chartered yacht in 1975. What a wonderful serene and scenic anchorage I found on that quiet evening in summer sunlight. Out at sea it may have been blowing hard, but once in the anchorage it was pastoral, surrounded

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.arisaig.uk.com/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://arisaig.co.uk/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.arisaighotel.co.uk/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.oldlibrary.co.uk/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.wildlochaber.com/mallaig-glenfinnan/attractions/larachmhor-gardens>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.traighgolf.co.uk/>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.scotlandthemovie.com/movies/flocalhero.html>

<sup>8</sup> Murdoch Mackenzie was an Orcadian cartographer and hydrographer, and the first to produce recognisable charts of the seas around the British Isles, as well as sailing directions, while working for the Admiralty. You can find many of the charts in the National Library of Scotland, and the book on line — 'Nautical Descriptions of the West Coast of Great Britain from Bristol Channel to Cape Wrath' 1776.

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.theisleofcanna.com/>

by farmland so lovingly tended by the MacKinnon family who still farm it today. Years later I read Robert Buchanan's very similar feelings on his first visit in 1871: "*It is a difficult job indeed to pick our way among the rocks, in the teeth of wind so keen; but directly we round the corner of the cliffs, the little landlocked bay opens safe and calm, and, gliding into five-fathom water, we cast anchor just opposite the Laird's house*"<sup>10</sup>.

Canna was also special in 1988 when I sailed my first young family there in our newly acquired Contessa 32. And it was very special for family holidays in the 1980s and 90s when Ben, Margaret and Oli were growing up. Year after year we rented Tighard<sup>11</sup> from John Lorne Campbell who had owned the island from 1938 until he gave it to the National Trust for Scotland<sup>12</sup> in 1981. Sometimes just the family, sometimes with friends. It is the Edwardian house peeping through the trees above the big laird's house. There are not many places on the west coast where you can rent a place to park the family with easy access to a safe anchorage for day or longer trips by boat, and Canna was then the best. We made up Canna Tig around Tighard; the hunter stood at the front door with their eyes shut to the count of 20 while everyone else dispersed to hiding places around the outside of the house. The idea was to get to the front door without being caught. Great fun on a summer evening. Now Tighard is a bed and breakfast establishment — which may have its uses for cold, wet and disgruntled crew who want a comfortable night ashore. The couple who took over Tighard in 2013 left in 2021, so the B&B future looks uncertain.

Notwithstanding the tiny population of around 19 people, there is a surprising amount to see and do on Canna and the immediately adjacent island of Sanday which is connected by a newish bridge (the old one blew away in a gale). First up from the anchorage is the small church with the round tower<sup>13</sup> — not as old as it looks, completed in 1914. It is rather pretty inside, but I am not sure about the ornate 1996 gate to the churchyard. Currently funds are being raised to restore it, so please help. It is used for occasional Church of Scotland services.

The larger late-19th century Roman Catholic Church of St Edward the Confessor<sup>14</sup> on Sanday — a seamark if ever there was one — had been sadly neglected for years until the National Trust for Scotland tried to restore it and turn it into a Gaelic Study Centre. Despite a grand opening by Princess Anne in 2001, the roof soon leaked, the building has never been used, it has been vandalised, and there was dispute between the National Trust, the Hebridean Trust, the architect and the contractor over responsibility for this terrible waste of nearly £1million<sup>15</sup>. It was then rebranded as the Camus Arts Centre, so we await developments, if any.

The small Roman Catholic Chapel<sup>16</sup> on the track to the farm is the only active church on the island. It has been lovingly restored and is quietly attractive. Behind the chapel a track runs

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<sup>10</sup> The Land of Lorne including the cruise of the Tern to the Outer Hebrides. Robert Buchanan, Chapman and Hall, London 1879. Perhaps the first account of west-coast sailing, surprisingly by a quite well known Scottish poet, novelist and dramatist. This was his only book about sailing, and in large part a panegyric for the area.

<sup>11</sup> <https://canmore.org.uk/site/137813/canna-tighard>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.nts.org.uk/>

<sup>13</sup> <https://canmore.org.uk/site/76044/canna-church-of-scotland>

<sup>14</sup> <https://canmore.org.uk/site/76049/sanday-roman-catholic-church-of-st-edward-the-confessor>

<sup>15</sup> Restoring Canna's Chapel, Alasdair Ross McKerlich, 2007.

<sup>16</sup> <https://canmore.org.uk/site/137809/canna-the-square-roman-catholic-chapel>

up to an old burial ground and the remains of an 8th or 9th century Celtic cross, and the so-called punishment stone<sup>17</sup>. It has a small hole into which the thumb of a miscreant was apparently wedged to persuade him — or her — to improve their ways.

The impressive big house — Canna House,<sup>18</sup> circa 1865 — contains an internationally-renowned collection of Gaelic literature, collected by John Lorne Campbell. His American heiress wife, Margaret Fay Shaw, was a renowned photographer and folklorist of all things Hebridean<sup>19</sup>. The house is now occasionally open to the public, mostly by appointment (presently closed for refurbishment I think). You can walk round the walled garden any time. A bit further along amongst the farm buildings is the 'Old Laundry' which has a small display of various crofting bits and pieces.

Much longer walks are to the souterrain and remains of a Viking grave near Tarbert in the centre of the island, but you need the OS map to find them.

More or less all the Scottish cliff-nesting seabirds can be found on Sanday. About half-a-mile east of the lighthouse there is a stack with loads of puffins, fulmars, shags, kittiwakes, razorbills and guillemots. It is second only to the Harp Rock in the Treshnish Islands for looking at nesting seabirds in this part of the west coast. Take binoculars and on the way be prepared to be bombed by great skuas (bonxies).

There are two delightful beaches, facing in opposite directions and therefore good in all winds. Facing south, what we used to call the pirate beach (black sand and great views of Rum) just over the hill behind the round tower church (with the sadly deteriorating barn and the now almost inaccessible and very tiny 17th century Coroghan castle<sup>20</sup>, once apparently a prison). Facing north, the white sandy beach just over the bridge to Sanday on the right.

Amazingly, there is a small café cum restaurant<sup>21</sup> just along from the round tower church. In 2008 it closed after Wendy Mackinnon moved to Mallaig so her children could get to secondary school easier, an all too familiar problem in the remote parts of Scotland. However, in 2010 it reopened with Amanda McFadden and Aart Lastdrager in charge. Sadly in 2012 they too left. However, it then reopened again, had a licence and did evening meals (ph 01687 482488, but if no signal use VHF channel 8, call sign 'Café Canna'). But in 2018 it was up for grabs — again. I don't know how things are now.

Well, more amazingly still, there is a roll-on roll-off ferry pier even though there are no proper roads on the island! Well done somebody in 2006 for being generous to remote and rural communities. Before it was incorporated into this new pier, there used to be an entertaining rock which attracted the occasional boatie. It had been well known for years, indeed it was described by Murdoch Mackenzie in the first Sailing Directions in 1776 as being "*about a pistol shot from the shore*".<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> <https://canmore.org.uk/site/10708/canna-a-chill>

<sup>18</sup> <https://canmore.org.uk/site/76045/canna-canna-house>

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.nts.org.uk/stories/margaret-fay-shaw-the-shadow-in-the-corner>

<sup>20</sup> <https://canmore.org.uk/site/10709/canna-coroghan-castle>

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.cafecanna.co.uk/>

<sup>22</sup> Murdoch Mackenzie *ibid*.

Ten moorings were laid in 2013 although they do not seem really necessary to me, the kelp is not that bad if you take care, and there is already plenty of custom for the restaurant from anchored boats in the harbour overnight. The silver lining is there is loads of space to anchor because the moorings are in a semicircle around the old anchoring area. In fact a few of the moorings are too exposed in my view.

The National Trust for Scotland has tried to attract families to live on the island but this has not been easy. Many come with great enthusiasm but then soon leave, apparently 20 left after only two years. I guess you have to be a very accommodating person to live here, willing to muck in, not too eccentric, and able to face the problem of your children having to go to the mainland for secondary schooling. Some blame the Trust for poor management, others the resident population. Whatever, it is very sad to see the population dwindle to — at times — single figures.

John Lorne Campbell wrote the most authoritative book on Canna<sup>23</sup>. He nurtured the island for decades before gifting it to the National Trust for Scotland and continued to live in Canna House until his death in 1996. There is a nice biography if you want to read more<sup>24</sup>. And if you want to see more without going there, take a look at the National Trust for Scotland's 3D virtual tour<sup>25</sup>.

## Eigg

The Eilean Chathastail/Galmisdale Bay anchorage has always struck me as rather unsatisfactory because it is shallow north of the pier and roly south of the pier. This is a pity because Eigg is an extremely interesting island to visit, for the walk up the Sgurr among other good things. Eigg was once notorious for its awful lairds<sup>26</sup>, greedy or bonkers or both, and here we are talking 20th century not the very old days. However, there was a celebrated community buyout in 1997 — for £1.5 million — and the island is now a much more harmonious place, as you can see from its very good website<sup>27</sup>. Indeed, the population has increased from about 60 before the buyout to just over 100 in 2017. According to one commentator in 2017 "*Eigg's success has come from genuine fusion of Hebridean culture and mainland counterculture*"<sup>28</sup>. Well, maybe. The island now even has its own electrical grid fed<sup>29</sup> by its own renewable energy sources (wind, water and sunshine), most impressive. And on Eigg you will find the doctor for the Small Isles, if you should need one.

The Galmisdale Bay Café and Bar<sup>30</sup> is on the old jetty, and open on some evenings for straightforward home-cooked meals (but check opening times on their website or phone

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<sup>23</sup> Canna, the Story of a Hebridean Island'. John Lorne Campbell. Oxford University Press, 1984

<sup>24</sup> The man who gave away his island, a life of John Lorne Campbell of Canna. Ray Perman. Birlinn,, Edinburgh. 2010

<sup>25</sup> <https://sketchfab.com/3d-models/virtual-canna-sanday-bcda7aea48e549be88c88346f0a6d707>

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/1999/may/20/jamiewilson1>

<sup>27</sup> <http://isleofeigg.org/>

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/sep/26/this-island-is-not-for-sale-how-eigg-fought-back>

<sup>29</sup> <http://isleofeigg.org/eigg-electric/>

<sup>30</sup> <https://galmisdale-bay.com/>

01687 482487). There is also a toilet block, laundry, craft shop, bike hire, and camping pods have sprouted.

The Poll nam Partan anchorage is certainly sheltered but seems to me rather too shallow, certainly at springs, but with the Antares chart I imagine a good spot can be found. There is a bit of a volcanic sandy beach for the bucket and spade members of the crew, but the beach behind the new pier is better if a little overshadowed by the pier itself — an overlarge roll-on roll-off confection. Walking up from Poll nam Partan you will find the 1790 Old Manse<sup>31</sup> which I and a few families rented for a holiday in 1981. Sadly it was then left to rot for many years until in 2014 a new owner started to restore it — hurrah! And it looks good judging from his blog<sup>32</sup>. A bit further on across a small valley you will find the remains of Old St Donnan's Church, 16th century<sup>33</sup>.

The Singing Sands are in Camas Sgiotaig, the bay just north of Laig Bay, which can be anchored off. But they didn't sing or even squeak for me when I walked on them — maybe I walked in the wrong way in the wrong place at the wrong time. However the beach is great and the cliffs behind impressive with their amazing shapes best seen in a low evening light, and the view of Rum is even more impressive. And , up the hill a bit, even more impressive again I understand is Lageorna, a B&B with a restaurant which welcomes non-residents (ph 01687 460081)<sup>34</sup>.

### **Hyskeir (Òigh Sgeir — maiden rock)**

Yes you can indeed anchor here, at least on a calm day (the Antares chart will get you there clasp your iPad). Go in to the gut from the north, leaving the lighthouse<sup>35</sup> to port. It is so long ago since I did this that the light was still manned, but stupidly I never took any photographs — I must revisit. The three keepers were delighted to see us and took us right up to the light. What a view, like from an aeroplane. Everything was incredibly clean, not a speck of dust, brass gleaming. I wonder what the inside looks like now in these automated days. I also wonder what happened to the visitors' book which went right back to when the light was established in 1904, as well as the war book with instructions of what to do in the event of an outbreak of hostilities. Again, it is a Stevenson light, David and Charles this time. As well as the lighthouse, make sure to enjoy the wild flowers and the hexagonal stones on the island, and note the overgrown vegetable garden.

### **Inverie**

Knoydart is not what it once was. In the 18th and 19th centuries the population peaked at about 1000, far too many for the land to support. People left voluntarily, or were cleared out by the sheep- and deer-obsessed landlords. The population dwindled to about 80. By the second half of the 20th century everything was almost over as somewhere for ordinary people to live. The estate was by then owned by crooks who ended up in jail. But in 1999 came the

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<sup>31</sup> <https://canmore.org.uk/site/81906/eigg-old-manse>

<sup>32</sup> <http://manseadventure.blogspot.com/>

<sup>33</sup> <https://canmore.org.uk/site/22152/eigg-kildonnan-st-donnans-church-and-burial-ground>

<sup>34</sup> <https://lageorna.com/>

<sup>35</sup> <https://www.nlb.org.uk/lighthouses/hyskeir/>

Knoydart Foundation<sup>36</sup> community buy-out of the estate that covers about one third of the peninsula. Now the whole place has busily recreated itself as the last wilderness in Britain, with the inevitable result. It is a honeypot for not just the real intrepids, but also the pseudo-intrepids who arrive by cruise ship. There is self-catering, even with hot tubs. However, this all brings in an income to support the population of about 120 who are now mostly incomers of one sort and another, along with income from the walking and mountain bike trails, ranger-guided as well as mindfulness walks (got the idea?), photo-stalking with cameras as well as deer-stalking with guns, team-building activities, the bunkhouse, and the rather temporary-looking but fun sculptures scattered around the place. The £6 million new-in-2006 pier must have helped all this to happen, along with a regular ferry from Mallaig.

So what to do? Walk about in the lovely woodland of course, in among the native and foreign trees. Stroll to the campsite on the Long Beach. Look at the sculptures. And of course visit the Old Forge<sup>37</sup> which has become more of a restaurant than the cosy local pub it was a few years ago (ph 01687 462267). The visitors in the summer vastly outnumber the locals and you need to book a table, but I am not sure how when there is no mobile phone reception. It bills itself as the most remote pub on the mainland of Britain, and I guess that is right — 16-or-so rough-walking miles from the road end, if you don't come by your own boat or the ferry from Mallaig, or helicopter. It was put up for sale in 2021, offers over £425 000. Quite quickly the local community raised over £250 000 and the rest has come from the Scottish Land Fund, so hopefully a deal will soon be done. There is also a small but nice tearoom with pottery (ph 01687 460191)<sup>38</sup>.

I have not been there, but across the river by the Long Beach there is an old burial ground<sup>39</sup> at Kilchoan, with graveslabs and a stone cross, unusually with a hole in its centre.

If you don't fancy one of the pub's moorings, and want peace and quiet, then you can anchor further up the loch at Tarbet which is pretty remote, or just to the west of the moorings in Glaschoille Bay

## **Loch Moidart**

Notorious for its tricky pilotage, rocks to the north and south of Eilean Shona guard the entrances, above water and below water. But once you are in it is great, except you do have to get out again. As ever, Antares charts come to the rescue.

The biggie attraction is the ruined Castle Tioram<sup>40</sup> on the south shore. Started in the 13th century, then modified, it fell into disrepair in the early 18th century. You can walk around it but not into it, too dangerous. Since 1997 it has been privately owned by the mysterious-sounding Anta estates whose boss, Lex Brown, wanted to convert it into a private home. After well more than a decade he was and maybe still is for all I know in discussion with Historic Environment Scotland who opposed the restoration, and with local landowners. How this will end we do not know, but in the meantime the castle crumbles while the Caisteal Tioram Trust

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<sup>36</sup> <https://knoydart.org/>

<sup>37</sup> <http://www.theoldforge.co.uk/>

<sup>38</sup> <https://en-gb.facebook.com/KnoydartTea/>

<sup>39</sup> <https://canmore.org.uk/site/22719/knoydart-inverie-st-comgans-church>

<sup>40</sup> <http://www.moidart.org.uk/datasets/tioram.htm>

continues to agitate for a solution<sup>41</sup>. Personally I don't see why any restoration could not be as good as it was for Castle Duart and Iona Abbey, both had been wrecks and both are now iconic buildings.

In a different way, car-free Shona<sup>42</sup> is just as good providing as it does a lovely woodland walk around the north and east sides with spectacular views up the loch. Past a ruined reservoir but above that a very well-preserved reservoir which looks as though it might be stocked with trout, past chopped-away rhododendrons, past the small pier with a couple of driftwood sculptures and a rather expensive-looking marble sculpture, and past the big house surrounded by gardens — the very big Lorimer-designed house indeed. It is available fully-catered at £250 per person per day the last time I looked, has nine bedrooms, sleeps 16, boasts a billiard table, a grand piano, an Aga, and a dining room which seats up to 20. I think only two people actually live on the island, the various cottages are holiday lets. So a bit odd to find a village hall, but that is probably for the people renting the cottages and the house. There is clearly a lot of outside money looking after this estate (Vanessa Branson owns the place, a familiar surname). J M Barrie of Peter Pan fame once holidayed on the island, but long after he had dreamed up the well-known story, it was not I think his inspiration for 'Neverland'.

Eilean an Fheidh (Deer Island), the very small wooded and uninhabited island with no amenities or house just southeast of Shona, was sold for £311 000 in 2021, four times the asking price.

## Loch Scavaig

If any of your crew are climbers, this is where to head for — the awesome back-door to the Cuillins, without doubt the most dramatic anchorage in the Hebrides. I can't better Frank Cowper's 1896 opinion: "*For those delighting in wild, extraordinary scenery this district is well worth exploring, and for doing it comfortably there is nothing like a yacht*".<sup>43</sup>

As you approach from the south the climbers will all be vying with each other to name the various peaks along the ridge, and to retell their most dramatic exploits from being helicoptered off after trying to cross the ridge without enough daylight to their fastest traverse in winter. But draw their attention back to sea level, and take a look at the seals on Sgeir Doigich on your way in (you may have to look back if they are sheltering from a southerly wind). And divert the climbers from discussing the niceties of rock climbing to

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<sup>41</sup> <http://www.tioram.org/>

<sup>42</sup> <https://www.eileanshona.com/>

<sup>43</sup> Frank Cowper, *Sailing Tours: the yachtsman's guide to the cruising waters of the English and adjacent coasts*. Part V. The west coasts of Scotland, the Orkneys and the west coast of the North Sea. Upcott Gill, London.1896. There is more here than just sailing directions, but little information about what there was ashore, and he did not much describe many human interactions. But his descriptions of sailing with no engine in strong tidal streams are pretty hair raising, particularly bearing in mind he was often single-handed. A lot of the pilotage information could be used today. His obituarist in *Yachting Monthly* wrote in 1930: "From his earliest days Mr. Cowper took cruising to heart and probably did more to popularize this particular way of life than any man of his day. It is almost inconceivable to us now the prejudice which then existed in the public mind against the man who did not employ hands aboard his yacht. But it was through this veteran singlehanded sailor's adventures and writings that the public began to recognize small yacht cruising as a sane man's pastime".



watch out for that much more interesting piece of rock underwater as you turn in to starboard, hit by several yachts every year because it is closer to the island than you think.

These days the anchorage is more crowded than it was not so long ago, as well as yachts at anchor there is a steady stream of boats bringing tourists from Elgol. Even in the late 19th century a steamer used to call from Oban for tourists to take a look: *"Thousands have been thereby enabled to see this out-of-the-way part of the kingdom who would never otherwise have had that pleasure"* wrote John Inglis in 1879<sup>44</sup>. And why not? The short walk up the river to Loch Coruisk and a view of the ridge is terrific. But, as Inglis rightly observed *"It is not as one among a throng of excursionists, gentle reader, that you will to the full enjoy Coruisk"*. Indeed not. Probably the first to popularise Loch Coruisk was Sir Walter Scott in his 1815 narrative poem, *The Lord of the Isles*: *"A scene so rude, so wild as this, yet so sublime in barrenness, ne'er did my wandering footsteps press, where'er I hopped to roam."* Followed on by Robert Buchanan in 1871; *"Coruisk, though so accessible, is comparatively neglected; it is nevertheless the most marvellous picture in the British Isles, and one of the scenic wonders of the world"*.<sup>45</sup> Clearly an inspirational place

On a very hot day, take a shower in the waterfall that cascades down into the sea. But don't get trapped here in a southerly gale, or indeed in any sort of gale. As John McClintock opines in 1938: *"Not that wind direction matters much in Scavaig, for be it north, south, east or west, if the wind be strong at all, terrific squalls, born on the mountain tops, will roar down from all points of the compass, and blast you and your boat with a broadside of venomous fury"*<sup>46</sup>. And even earlier, in 1863 R T McMullen anchored here and later in 'Down Channel' wrote: *"Gladly as I was to have been there, I was more glad to have got free, and determined that no amount of curiosity should tempt me into such a prison of shrieking little whirlwinds again"*.<sup>47</sup>

## Mallaig

Pretty, like Tobermory, this is not. Mallaig<sup>48</sup> was founded by Lord Lovat, the local landowner, as a fishing community in the mid-19th century. It is a much rougher and tougher sort of a place than Tobermory, a working place, literally at the end of the railway line which arrived in 1901, a once thriving fishing port as recently as the 1960s but then sadly in decline, and unfriendly to yachts. But from 2012 with the arrival of pontoons<sup>49</sup> things have definitely looked up for boaties. There is even a harbour seal to amuse. And from 2016 a spanking new

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<sup>44</sup> A Yachtsman's Holidays or Cruising in the Hebrides. John Inglis, Pickering and Co, London 1879. Another early account of cruises in the Hebrides, fairly posh chaps with a skipper and paid hands. Much drinking and eating, but also interesting verbatim conversations and good accounts of the sailing.

<sup>45</sup> Robert Buchanan *ibid*.

<sup>46</sup> 'West Coast Cruising'. John McLintock, Blackie and Son, Glasgow, 1938. Another between-the-wars account of not so much the cruises in chronological order, but of the author's experiences on the west coast. There is too much history, fairy tales and misty Celtic legends for my taste, all dressed up in purple prose. Nonetheless, it gives a good idea of what the anchorages were like, along with some pilotage information. Curiously we are told nothing about what sort of boat he sailed, or about the people he met along the way, or about himself.

<sup>47</sup> R.T. McMullen. 'Down Channel', third edition. Horace Cox, London, 1903.

<sup>48</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mallaig>

<sup>49</sup> <https://mallaig-yachting-marina.com/>

shower and toilet block, all pretty good news as long as there is not a good going gale from the north.

Some years ago, Armadale on Skye was the best place around here for changing crew who could come by train to Mallaig and then jump on the ferry to Skye. However, I am biased because I used to charter from there for years in the 1970s/80s, in the days of Charlie Barrington and his Rival 34s. His successor, the very well thought of Isle of Skye Yachts, closed in 2021, and has not been replaced. So now, with the pontoons by the railway station, Mallaig is the best place to change crew who can arrive off the train (Sleeper from London to Fort William, change for the lovely Mallaig line which is thankfully still open.).

Mallaig is also good for restocking with a large Co-op, fresh fish at Andy Race fish merchants by the garage, a brilliant bakery on the harbour, an outdoor sort of a shop, and a chandlery at Johnston Brothers. But sadly no butcher, and the bookshop has gone. However, I am told there is a community-run second-hand bookshop with an excellent selection in the Fishermen's Mission, and a café. Check it out. And of course there are several places to eat and drink, which I have not properly explored. Finally, there is the community-run swimming pool<sup>50</sup>.

## **Muck**

The south anchorage on Muck<sup>51</sup> is the easy one, even easier since it was buoyed making the old leading line involving the plantation on the skyline redundant. Although the roll-on roll-off ferry pier is rather large and lumpish, it does allow visitors to be landed more safely, and for livestock to be moved around without so much hassle. So maybe the anchorage is not as pretty as it once was — and there can be swell, but it still retains its charm, as does the whole island, very much so. It is still on the edge of the world though. There has never been a post office or shop, or doctor. There was no telephone until 1956, and direct mail didn't arrive until 1965, 24/7 electricity not until 2013.

The whole island is extremely pleasant, organised and well farmed, probably because it has been in the careful and loving hands of the MacEwan family since 1896. It has been spared the chaos of the fast-changing ownership of Eigg at the end of the last century, and the degradation of Rum by the Edwardian nouveau riche from Northern England. Nowadays Muck has a population of about 40. (At its height in the early 19th century it was in the 300s, before the people were 'cleared' in 1828 and set sail from Tobermory to the St Lawrence.)

Just up from the pier is the delightful tea room<sup>52</sup> crammed with interesting bits and pieces, and serving home-made scones, buns and so on — come to think of it, these things could hardly not be home-made given the island's isolation. And they do evening meals, by arrangement (07470 711799). There are a couple of craft shops nearby, presumably reflecting the number of tourists who can come across from Arisaig on the Shearwater for a day trip. Just up the hill you can buy eggs, crab and lobster when available (maybe not anymore). Also there is a burial ground, and it is perhaps a surprise to find a war grave there, and further up an abandoned village — A'chille.

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<sup>50</sup> <http://www.mallaigleisure.org.uk/>

<sup>51</sup> <http://isleofmuck.com/>

<sup>52</sup> <http://isleofmuck.com/>

Do walk across the island, the views of Rum and Eigg are excellent. On the north side you will find Gallanach Lodge<sup>53</sup> where you can get what sounds like excellent dinner, bed and breakfast. You might get dinner as a non-resident if they have room and you phone before 4pm (01687 462365).

The north anchorage is altogether much more sporting with a leading line requiring the identification of the correct barn of two, a wall which looks more like a cliff, and with little room to spare between two reefs. Moreover, the chartplotter does not seem to get the entrance line quite right — beware! But, as ever, it is not as bad as it sounds in the Sailing Directions and the views of Eigg and Rum from the anchorage, and the wildlife, are terrific. There are always seals around, and the usual selection of seabirds, with terns and oystercatchers making the most noise. Ashore, just to the east of the lovely beach (ideal for small children who are prepared to share with the cows and horses) is a narrow gut between two reefs with an old jetty and some rail tracks (what were these for I wonder?). Along the reef is a good spot for seals. And of course one can always walk across the island to the tearoom — maybe half-an-hour, if that.

Finally, the name. Not muck as in dirt, but Gaelic for pig. Why pig? I don't know. However, it was not a name that was liked, at least not in the 18th century: Samuel Johnson noted "*It is commonly called Muck, which the proprietor not liking, has endeavoured, without effect, to change to Monk*"<sup>54</sup>. While Boswell his companion added: "*It was somewhat droll to hear the Laird called by his title. Muck would have sounded ill; so he (that is the laird) was called isle of Muck, which went off with great readiness*"<sup>55</sup>. If you want to know more of Muck, read Polly Pullar's 'A Drop in the Ocean, Lawrence MacEwan and the Isle of Muck', Birlinn 2014.

## Rum

Personally I have always found Rum<sup>56</sup> rather dark, daunting and gloomy, maybe because it just is dark, daunting and gloomy (in contrast, the island website is quite the opposite). Walter Scott clearly felt much the same in 1814 when he landed as a guest of the Commissioners of Northern Lights from their lighthouse yacht, Pharos — "*Rum is rude, barren and mountainous*"<sup>57</sup>. To my mind, the anchorage in Loch Scresort is too open, the newish pier is a blot on the landscape, the row to the shore too far, and the midges on land are vicious. And somewhere lurking in Loch Scresort is a very large chassis which we once found with our

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<sup>53</sup> <http://isleofmuck.com/>

<sup>54</sup> A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland. Samuel Johnson, 1775, Ed RW Chapman, Oxford University Press, 1970 is a real classic, and full of interest about the people, posh and not so posh, and on the nature of the Scottish as seen from the view of a Londoner in his 60s.

<sup>55</sup> The Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides with Samuel Johnson, LL.D. James Boswell, 1785, Ed RW Chapman, Oxford University Press, 1970. This is just what it says. Longer than Johnson's account, it focuses much more on Johnson than on Scotland, but nonetheless is a fairly easy read. It adds to Johnson's description of Scotland and the Scots, and has the advantage of being written by a Scotsman rather than a literary intellectual from London.

<sup>56</sup> <https://www.isleofrum.com/>

<sup>57</sup> In 'Voyage of the Pharos' Walter Scott describes his 1814 tour round Scotland as a guest of the Commissioners of the Northern Lights on their inspection cruise aboard their lighthouse yacht. Scottish Library Association, Hamilton, 1998.

anchor circa 1978, another minus point. However, in 2019, 10 visitor moorings appeared, so need to anchor if you can't be bothered. To compound matters, the island seems to catch all the cloud and rain on the prevailing wind, unlike Canna from where Rum really is so often enveloped in cloud.

The local population were horribly exploited by the lairds in the 19th and early 20th centuries, which you can read all about in 'Bare Feet and Tackety Boots'.<sup>58</sup> Later, in the 1930s, John McLintock complained that "*Unless you are a deer you are not welcome*".<sup>59</sup> For a long time it was known as the 'forbidden island'. None of the 30-40 present-day residents are indigenous, and they are all, or almost all, employees of Nature Scotland<sup>60</sup> (previously the Nature Conservancy Council and then Scottish Natural Heritage, curiously now badging itself as NatureScot) who have owned and managed the island as a nature reserve since 1957 (which of course is good if you are into nature, sea eagles and all of that). The land round the village is now in community ownership, the result of which has been opening a 20-person bunkhouse in 2014, then cabins, a heritage centre with gift shop, and a rejuvenated general store and village hall. Not surprisingly, the Isle of Rum Community Trust is trying to attract more people to move to live on the island in the new houses that are being built, and so increase its viability (at the moment there are only two children in the primary school).

I have not surprisingly been done over for my negative view of Rum by one of the long-term residents. So do please go there and judge for yourself, indeed you really *must* go there for the big, really big attraction before it falls completely to bits, an increasingly serious possibility.

That is the bizarre and crumbling Kinloch Castle<sup>61</sup>, bizarre more in its history and contents than in its structure which is neo-Tudor sandstone-dull. It was built at the very end of the 19th century by George Bullough who inherited the wealth of his father, a self-made Lancashire cotton magnate. Although it was only his 'home' for a few weeks every year he spent millions on it by today's standards to impress his hunting, shooting and fishing guests — and his French wife I should imagine too. Astonishingly, many of the original contents of the house are still there in an Edwardian time-warp, undisturbed since the family sold out, and seemingly just walked away in 1957. There is 100-plus-year-old furniture like the swivel chairs in the dining room, originally from Bullough's grand yacht the Rhouma; damask wall coverings gently mouldering; lion and leopard skin carpets; impressive showers with their array of taps and nozzles to direct water at whatever body part is desired; instruments left behind — it is said — by the musicians in the ballroom gallery; the full-sized billiard table with the rules framed on the wall beside it; the note-book with the list of injured treated on the Rhouma when she was used as a hospital ship during the Boer war; and the piece de resistance — the still-working orchestrion which was originally destined for Queen Victoria at Balmoral. To get a feel for the opulence and wastage of the posh Edwardians you can do no better than read 'Bare Feet and Tackety Boots' I mentioned earlier. Tours, are usually in the early afternoon<sup>62</sup>. When I went the guide was a New Zealander which added to the bizarreness of the experience, but then I am not sure there are many Scots on the island anyway.

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<sup>58</sup> Bare Feet and Tackety Boots, a boyhood on Rhum'. Archie Cameron, Luath Press, Ayrshire, 1988.

<sup>59</sup> McLintock Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> <https://www.nature.scot/>

<sup>61</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kinloch\\_Castle](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kinloch_Castle)

<sup>62</sup> <https://www.isleofrum.com/things-to-do/kinloch-castle/>

But Sir George was not just a dilettante who spent his inheritance on frippery. For example he had the billiard room artificially ventilated to get rid of the cigar smoke, he built the hydroelectric dam which still powers the island today, and he planted the deciduous woodland which is so pleasant to walk in, full of birdsong in the spring and early summer — including cuckoos.

Just after the castle had been built, CC Lynam's view was: "*the new castle of Rum...might be imposing on the banks of the Thames, but is utterly out of place at the foot of Halival and Askeval*".<sup>63</sup> On the other hand John Betjeman saw the castle as the "*stone embodiment of good King Edward's reign, a living memorial of the stalking, the fishing and the sailing, the tenantry and plenty of the days before 1914 and the collapse of the world*". What the future holds for this building and its extraordinary contents is very unclear. In 2021 NatureScot put it on the market for £1. However, many millions would be needed to restore it to anything like its former glory. But better than spending those millions on weapons of mass destruction which the UK seems so keen on, and aircraft-less aircraft carriers.

Finally, Rum features highly in a wonderfully dated — and rather dull — derring-do novel by the well-known mountaineering writer W H Murray (*Five Frontiers*, J M Dent and Sons, 1959). This is not a patch on the very best derring-do sailing novel, the *Riddle of the Sands*.

## **Sanna Bay**

The anchorage is more off the rather suburban Portuairk than Sanna<sup>64</sup> itself. On a bad day Sanna beach is bleak, but on a good day it is sublime with the sand, rock pools, sunsets and a grand view from Sanna Point. But on any day it is sad because once there was a thriving community here captured in Alasdair Maclean's '*Night Falls on Ardnamurchan*'<sup>65</sup>. Now it is all gone, more-or-less just holiday homes.

It is best to stick to the beach and the extensive dunes behind, beyond them there is a large car park to accommodate those who come by land along the 34 miles of single-track road from Strontian. There are some rather aggressive 'don't do this and that' signs, presumably reflecting the pressure of tourism at the height of the season. And some undistinguished newish houses are scattered around (some of the ruined croft houses are still there). The water-tower landmark seems to have gone, or maybe I was just looking in the wrong place as I crept into this slightly tricky anchorage in the days before chartplotters and Antares charts.

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<sup>63</sup> *The Log of the Blue Dragon 1892-1904*. C C Lynam, AH Bullen, London, 1907. Amazing and amusing account of cruises in the Hebrides, often in winter and sometimes single-handed, with many groundings, cock-ups and near misses. The 25ft centre-plate engineless yawl was built in land-locked Oxford, sailed down the Thames, round Lands End and up to Scotland, and the author "never had a paid hand on board, and never but once signalled for a pilot"! He was an unconventional and no doubt inspirational headmaster of the Dragon School in Oxford, which is why his cruises were all in the school holidays (these days I like to think he would have taught in a comprehensive school). He didn't like Cowper's *Sailing Tours* at all: "His knowledge of the west coast and its people is gathered from two hurried cruises and merits rather the name of ignorance....contains nothing useful that is not taken from the official *Sailing Directions*."

<sup>64</sup> <https://www.undiscoveredscotland.co.uk/kilchoan/sanna/>

<sup>65</sup> Alasdair Maclean. '*Night Falls on Ardnamurchan*'. Gollancz 1984

## **Soay**

I have not been here for ages, indeed on the first and last occasion we were summoned into a house for a dram or two by a local man. When I noticed the shark fishing stuff hung on the wall I realised who our host was — the legendary Tex Geddes, Gavin Maxwell's shark fishing partner, who was then very much in charge of the island. There are still some remains of their shark fishery buildings by the harbour. Tex died in 1998. Now the permanent population is down to three but one of them, Anne Cholawo, has written a splendid and charming account of her life there.<sup>66</sup>

## **Whitesand bay**

With the wind in the south this is not a bad alternative to Sanna Bay. But, notwithstanding the name, the sand is not very white and there is not a lot of it, at least not at high tide. But the view across to Muck, Eigg and Rum with Skye beyond is magnificent and the summer sunset must be a sight to behold. Ashore there is the beach, but walk over to Sanna Bay for more satisfactory sand.

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<sup>66</sup> Island on the Edge, A life on Soay. Anne Cholawo. Birlinn, Edinburgh. 2016.