

Coll and Tiree

Last updated February 25th 2022



Frank Cowper got it wrong in 1896 when he wrote: "*As for Tiree and Coll, the less said about them the better*"¹. However, as John Knox had found in his tour 100 years earlier², the problem like Cowper's was the lack of safe anchorages which to some extent is still true today, even with our engines and chartplotters. Mind you it was to the safety of Loch Eatharna, then known as Lochiern and

where Arinagour now is, that Boswell and Johnson got blown during a dark and stormy night in 1773³.

Every island has its own character. Coll's⁴ is undoubtedly Outer Hebridean even though it is firmly part of the Inner Hebrides — similar forbidding eastern coastline, and similar delightful beaches on the western coastline. It has a population of around 200, with about 30 in the primary school. Something like a third of the houses are holiday or second homes these days. Interestingly, Coll too had a 'Whisky Galore' second world war moment when the Nevada⁵ ran aground in Struan Bay

¹ 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 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.

² *A Tour through the Highlands of Scotland and the Hebride Isles in 1786.* John Knox, James Thin, Edinburgh 1975. This was not *the* John Knox, but a Scottish philanthropist eager to set up fishing stations to exploit the untapped — at the time — potential for fishing. He clearly had huge sympathies with the impoverished natives, constantly thinking of ways to improve their lives.

³ *A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland*. Samuel Johnson, 1775, Ed RW Chapman, Oxford University Press, 1970. 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 viewpoint of a Londoner in his 60s. 'The Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides with Samuel Johnson, LL.D.' James Boswell, 1785, Ed RW Chapman, Oxford University Press, 1970. Longer than Johnson's account, it focuses much more on Johnson than on Scotland. 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.

⁴ <https://visitcoll.co.uk/index.php>

⁵ <https://www.fynepioneer.co.uk/sites/wreck/Nevada-II-s-31.html>

northeast of Rubha Mòr — quite an easy walk from the Sorisdale anchorage — and deposited thousands of cigarettes for the islanders to squirrel away. In 2013 the island was awarded Dark-Sky status, although you would have to be sailing here early or late in the season to appreciate it.

Coll is probably best known outside Scotland as the home of Project Trust⁶ which sends young people in their gap year between school and university all over the world. And inside Scotland as the earlier home of Mairi Hedderwick⁷ who wrote the lovely Katie Morag children's stories. She also wrote a rather nice account of how most of Coll was once owned by a family who latterly farmed it and eventually by 1991 had sold most of their estate to the islanders, the RSPB and incomers⁸.

Tiree⁹, the final inhabited Hebridean island I got round to sailing to, is completely different to Coll, or anywhere else. It reminds me of Connemara — flat with occasional mountains poking up in the distance, although unlike Ireland the mountains here are on different land-masses (Jura, Mull, Rum and Skye). Tiree is so flat and low that global warming and a slight rise in sea level could do for it; imagine the chart in a hundred years, no Tiree just a couple of rocks — Sgeir Hough and Sgeir Hynish.

The island is not much visited by boaties, I guess because there is no all-weather anchorage, indeed there are only three anchorages of any sort in the Sailing Directions and the main one — Gott Bay — is exposed to the south and east, and not all that attractive. However, take a windsurfer, Tiree is famous for wind and waves (and sunshine). Strangely, given about 800 people live on Tiree, there seems to be remarkably little in the way of good cafés or pubs within easy reach of the anchorages. The two hotels do not seem as welcoming as the Coll Hotel. Maybe nothing changes because even back in 1695 Martin Martin complained that *"The ale that I had in the inn being too weak, I told my host of it, who promised to make it better"*.¹⁰ He didn't. The Ceabhar Restaurant at Sandaig¹¹ is too far away from an anchorage although it certainly looks attractive from its website.

Finally, an unlikely difference between the two islands, this time from Daniel Defoe in 1761: *"The inhabitants are Protestants. They have a notion here, that Tyre-ty breeds more women than men, and Coll more men than women; so that they may people each other without the assistance of their neighbours"*¹²

⁶ <https://projecttrust.org.uk/product/project-trust-50th-anniversary-polo-regular/>

⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mairi_Hedderwick

⁸ The Last Laird of Coll. Birlinn, 2011,

⁹ <https://www.isleoftiree.com/>

¹⁰ A Description of the Western Isles of Scotland called Hybrides. Sir Donald Monro High Dean of the Isles, Birlinn, Edinburgh, 1994. The first description, albeit brief and in places difficult to follow, of 209 islands in the 16th century (the original Haswell-Smith perhaps).

¹¹ <https://ceabhar-restaurant-and-bun-dubh-brewery.business.site/>

¹² From the 1761 edition of 'A Tour thro' that part of Britain called Scotland', originally by Daniel Defoe, later editions and additions by Samuel Richardson

Arinagour

The visitors' moorings are too far out, too spread out, and anyway are no longer free, maybe because CalMac owns them. I reckon it is better to anchor near what is called the middle pier if it is not too shallow. Over the years, the three piers were built increasingly far away from the village, of course with increasing utility too but also with decreasing charm. The old pier in the 19th century, then in the 1960s the middle pier, and finally the 1987 new pier. This last is much in evidence in the Katie Morag stories written and illustrated by ex-local resident Mairi Hedderwick¹³, and much loved by Scottish children who no doubt will all look out for Grannie Island driving her tractor and Grannie Mainland arriving on the CalMac ferry. The village was founded in the early 19th century by Alexander Maclean of Coll, so explaining the row of very similar — and charming to modern eyes — cottages along the main street. In recent years quite a few new houses have been built to accommodate a population which is now increasing.

The attractions in Arinagour include the shop for modest supplies, and the child and yacht extremely friendly Coll Hotel¹⁴ for a shower, laundry which they will do for you, bar and excellent food (ph 01879 230 34). It is not cheap but then it would be a lot more expensive in London to eat lobster and scallops, and they would not be as fresh as they are here. Sit outside in the garden in good weather, and let the kids run free. Three generations of the Oliphant family have owned and cherished this hotel since 1984 — and it certainly shows.

There is a good café in the main street but not open every day; a rather nice general store and post office with of course the Katie Morag books and various crafts; a small play-park (now sadly closed as unsafe, but maybe soon or already back in action); and a craft shop/gallery. Don't miss the Parish Church on the hill which although a not very inspiring early 20th century Gothic confection has a fabulous wooden roof described in 'Pevsner' as *"This triumph of joinery is a wholly unexpected delight"*¹⁵ (sadly it is a bit spoiled by the electric lights strung from it — please Minister get rid of them, although in 2017 there was no Minister and may still not be).

There is a golf course at Cliad, but that is over two miles from the anchorage.

This is another of those anchorages with moorings, like Canna and Craighouse, which attract a lot of boats in the late afternoon, but most are gone in the morning, without anyone bothering to go ashore. Very strange, they miss a lot. However, the new Community Centre — An Cridhe¹⁶ — has been up and running since 2012 and has 24-hour showers, toilets and laundry facilities so there should be more incentive for boaties to step ashore. It is a lovely airy and clean building with amazing facilities — a gym, stage with lighting, sports hall/exhibition space, meeting room, small library, IT facilities, and DIY teas and coffees. The wood carving around the reception desk was designed by — who else? — Mairi Hedderwick.

¹³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mairi_Hedderwick

¹⁴ <https://collhotel.com/>

¹⁵ 'Pevsner' is my generic term for all those wonderfully detailed books about the buildings of England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales which were started by Nikolaus Pevsner, the architectural historian, and written between 1951 and 1974. The two volumes you need are Argyll and Bute by Frank Arneil Walker, Penguin Books 1992, and Highlands and Islands by John Gifford, Yale University press, 2003.

¹⁶ <https://ancridhe.com/>

Eilean Mòr (the Cairns of Coll)

I have not anchored amongst this group of small islands and skerries off the north tip of Coll. Although they have been a navigational hazard for centuries ("*remarkable for their fatality to sea-faring men*" wrote Martin Martin in 1695)¹⁷, they sound idyllic. So idyllic that they were bought by Alexander McCall Smith¹⁸, the well-known and extraordinarily prolific Scottish author, in 2013. He intends to leave them in trust to the nation after his death, a generous and rather different attitude to some others who have bought Scottish islands recently and attempted to keep people off them — Shuna in Loch Linnhe, and Sanda, come to mind. He has been quoted in The Scotsman as saying "*I do not own these islands as I own my clothes, I am the person to whom the legal system of Scotland has given custody of this sacred spot, and that is something quite different. I want them kept in perpetuity as a sanctuary for wildlife — for birds and seals and all the other creatures to which they are home*".¹⁹ Good on you I say.

Gott Bay

Large roll-on roll-off ferry piers are not an attractive feature in any anchorage, particularly in Gott Bay where the pier so dominates the flat landscape. But if you have bothered to sail here it is worth getting off the boat, at least for a bit of a wander to admire the meadows full of wild flowers in the summer, corncrakes squeaking away. This is fertile farming land. Some visitor moorings appeared in 2017, if you don't want to anchor.

Scarinish, the main village, is a 15-minute walk, and has an excellent Co-op and even a butcher (but how long will he survive if even Mull can't support a butcher?). It was developed by the Duke of Argyll as a fishing village in the 18th century. You will find the Scarinish Hotel²⁰ by the small and quite scenic old harbour. I have not been inside but it does not look very promising from the outside, more promising on their website (ph 01879 220308). However needs maybe must as the only other hotel, and bar, is about 30 minutes walk around the bay (the Tiree Lodge Hotel²¹). It did seem run-down, there was no real ale, and the barmaid was unfailingly glum but that was back in 2011 (ph 01879 220329). In 2013 it was under new management so things may be looking up, so go and see for yourself. It is odd that there are no other bars, cafés or restaurants within easy reach of the anchorages on such a well-populated and seemingly reasonably prosperous island. You will find a couple of medieval chapels and a burial ground to explore behind the hotel.

If you have a morning to spare and could do with a longish walk there is a good circuit to take in the Ringing Stone (a large rock covered with cup marks on the northwest shore which when hit with a stone sounds hollow) and the 2nd-century Broch at Vaul²² which is in better condition than Tirefour on Lismore, but still only a few stone courses high. On the way, you will find the nine-hole golf course where, because it is essentially open meadow-land, the greens are enclosed so the

¹⁷ A Description of the Western Isles of Scotland circa 1695. Martin Martin, Birlinn, Edinburgh, 1994 is really the first good account of the Hebrides, and other islands. Written by a local ('a gentleman of Skye') in his 30s, who clearly travelled round all the places he wrote about, describing everything from the people, their religion, what they ate, farming, anchorages and lots more.

¹⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alexander_McCall_Smith

¹⁹ <https://www.scotsman.com/news/mccall-smith-vows-give-cairns-coll-back-1531108>

²⁰ <https://www.tireescarinishhotel.com/>

²¹ <https://www.facebook.com/tireeluggers/>

²² <https://canmore.org.uk/site/21524/tiree-dun-mor-vaul>

animals can't get in to ruin them (apparently you have to chip the ball over the fences to reach the holes). There are fabulous beaches and the open farmland is most attractive. It is also good to see the sympathetic way many of the old cottages have been restored, so much nicer than the modern houses (but I suppose darker inside without all those picture windows with views, and less convenient to live in). And unlike many of the other islands, the houses have been painted white, much more cheery than the ubiquitous grey.

Loch Breacachadh (or Breachacha)

Another anchorage for when the wind is in the north, and very pleasant it is too although it is a bit of a row to get ashore, obviously less at low tide but then it would be a long walk carrying the dinghy. However, it is worth it to examine the three large stone buildings which is just about all there is, other than the fine beach and the birds. No trees either. Pretty bleak when the sun isn't shining, fabulous when it is.

First the old castle²³, once a ruin but restored in the late 20th century and privately owned by Nicholas and Lavinia Maclean-Bristol (founders of Project Trust²⁴). Indeed, the owners regard the small patch of grass between their fence and the foreshore as part of their 'garden' so don't settle down there amongst the sheep poo and spent cartridges. It is a strange looking castle, essentially a tower house with something of a curtain wall, all covered in very dull, but perhaps authentic, grey harling. Apparently there were originally no fireplaces, so it must have been hellish cold in winter. It was built by the MacLeans of Coll in the 15th century, altered in the late 16th and 17th centuries, but then abandoned in the 18th century when the MacLeans upgraded to an even stranger looking concoction next door, the new castle. Part of the strangeness of the old castle is that one is not used to seeing castles on Scottish beaches, they look better on rocky outcrops where they can be more easily defended. Indeed 'Pevsner' likens it to '*a heavily iced cake planted on the machair at the head of Loch Breacachadh*'!²⁵

New Breacachadh Castle, just up the hill, is an 18th century mansion with wings which was then made ridiculous in the 19th century by the addition of a fourth floor with crenellated parapets and round corner turrets. Indeed Dr Johnson dismissed it in 1773 as '*a tradesman's box*'!²⁶ It had been falling to bits but in 2016 it was up for sale at £450 000, and now — astonishingly — it appears to be a hotel²⁷. It was hard not to wish the whole lot couldn't just be taken apart and the stone used for something far nicer, but you never know it may turn out fine as a hotel. Fine like, for example, by far the most attractive of the three buildings, the late 18th century farm steading²⁸, a delightful collection of buildings now being restored by I believe a group of five co-owners. A charming addition and complement to the landscape, not a foolish erection like the new castle.

²³ <https://canmore.org.uk/site/21576/coll-breachacha-castle>

²⁴ <https://projecttrust.org.uk/product/project-trust-50th-anniversary-polo-regular/>

²⁵ Pevsner *ibid.*

²⁶ *A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland*. Samuel Johnson, 1775, Ed RW Chapman, Oxford University Press, 1970. 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.

²⁷ <https://breachachacastle.com/>

²⁸ <https://britishlistedbuildings.co.uk/200399918-breachacha-steading-and-farmhouse-coll#.YerdzFjP31I>

You will find the birds — corncrakes etc — on the RSPB reserve²⁹ just to the northwest of the anchorage.

Sorisdale bay

With the wind in the northwest this makes a good little anchorage, and there is a nice sandy beach too (although last time I was there we had to christen it 'Dog Poo Beach' for obvious reasons). There are the remains of a few old houses and some new ones, including a rather large and I fear dull modern confection bang in the middle of the view from the anchorage. So if you are sensitive to these things you will have to avert your eyes and look at Ardnamurchan Point, or go elsewhere. In fact if you walk up the little rise to the north of the bay you get a quite spectacular view to Ardnamurchan, Rum, Eigg and Muck. I have not found what is meant to be a bowl cut in the rock³⁰ by some ancient tribe. One of the scenes in the 1960 film Bridal Path³¹ was filmed here. If you walk west along the road for about a mile you come to Struan Bay where the Nevada³² ran aground in 1942.

²⁹ <https://www.rspb.org.uk/reserves-and-events/reserves-a-z/coll>

³⁰ <https://canmore.org.uk/site/271143/coll-rhubha-bgh-na-coille>

³¹ <http://www.scotlandthemovie.com/movies/bpcoll.html>

³² <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/uk-scotland-19330702>