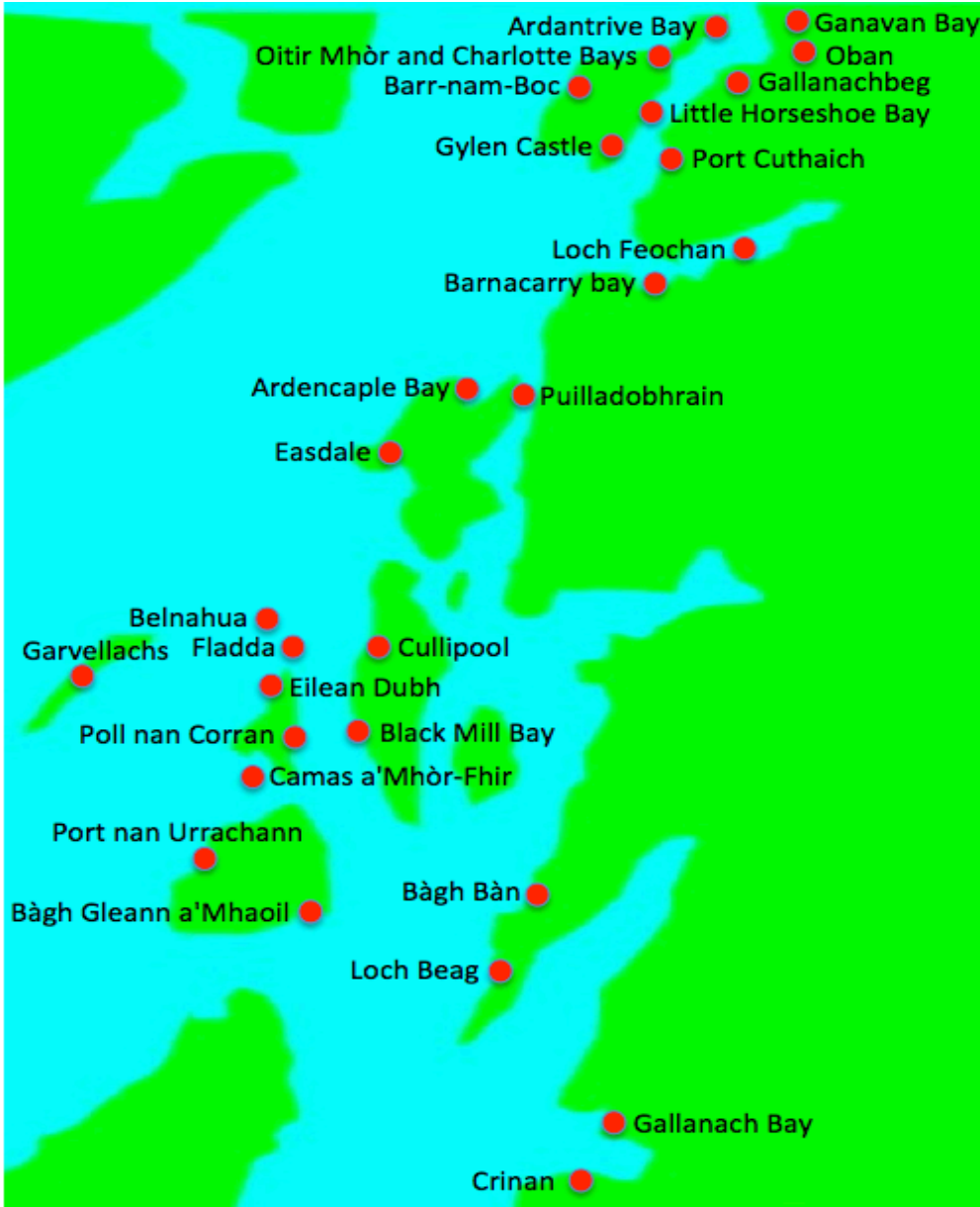


# Firth of Lorne

Last updated March 1<sup>st</sup> 2024



I am never exactly sure where the Firth of Lorne starts and finishes, but let's say it starts at Crinan at the top of the Sound of Jura to the east, stretches across to the Garvallaich Islands in the west, from where it extends north to Lower Loch Linnhe. So it will include Oban but not Dunstaffnage. It should of course also include the southeast coast of Mull, but that is described separately.

This whole area is steeped in history and pre-history, from burial cairns and cup marks, to defensive Duns and the occasional broch, to St Columba and the other Celtic Christian monks who brought their religion from Ireland, the first Kings who made their capital at Dunadd near Crinan, the Vikings, and the Lords of the Isles. Robert Buchanan was more poetic in 1871 when for him the

Firth of Lorne was *“a glorious sheet of salt water, fed by the mighty tides of the Atlantic, and forming, both on the islands and on the mainland, a line of sea-coast not easily matched for loneliness and beauty. Numerous islands, large and small, stud the waters, forming narrow passages through which the tide boils with terrific fury.”*<sup>1</sup>

### **Ardantrive Bay**

In times very long past this bay was regarded as the best anchorage in the Oban area. Now it is too full of the pontoons and moorings of Kerrera Marina (once known as Oban Marina)<sup>2</sup> (ph 01631 564533) to anchor. This marina has struggled over the years, but in 2017 new owners took over with great enthusiasm, so things were looking up and the place had a good buzz about it. But they gave up in 2021 and more new owners have taken over — very good luck to them, Tim and Gill. You don't have to go across to Oban to eat out because the marina has its own very nice Waypoint Restaurant. If you do want to go to Oban for provisions and so on you will need to summon the water taxi.

From the marina you can explore the same places as from Oitir Mhòr bay (see below). The walk between the two anchorages takes you through a rather nice farmyard, great for kids, with hens, ducks, pigs and highland cattle. Plus you can buy their farm produce, eggs, beef and so on.

The spelling of this place varies, sometimes it is Ardentrive Bay, irritating for someone like me who has enough trouble with ordinary spelling.

### **Ardencaple Bay**

This bay may not be as totally enclosed but it is much quieter than Puilladobhrain (see below). Indeed, anchored just east of Ardfad point one can see all the many masts in Puilladobhrain and wonder what makes the human race cluster so closely together.

On Ardfad point there are several rocky outcrops on one of which — the one with the ash tree — is the very ruined remains of Ardfad castle,<sup>3</sup> more like a fortified house. Another McDougall construction. Ardencaple House is a bit further to the west, a rather fine late 18th century laird's house, once lived in by the late Mrs Frances Shand Kydd, Princess Diana's mother, now by James Taylor. He runs the surrounding sporting estate and is also into conservation. There has been a lot of deciduous tree planting, and new wildlife ponds in front of the house. It is all rather private with a big sign 'No access by vehicle or on foot' and a lot of fences (to keep the animals away from the young trees apparently).

The whole place is awash with wild flowers, and seals haul themselves out on the small skerries to stare at you. It is a good spot for children to be let loose in the dinghy — lots of little islands to row around and land on.

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<sup>1</sup> 'The Land of Lorne including the cruise of the Tern to the Outer Hebrides'. Robert Buchanan, Chapman and Hall, London, 1879. This is possibly the first account of west coast of Scotland sailing, written by a quite well known Scottish poet, novelist and dramatist. This was, however, his only book about sailing, and in large part it is a panegyric for the area.

<sup>2</sup> <https://kerreramarina.com/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://canmore.org.uk/site/22589/seil-ardfad-castle>

## **Bàgh Bàn**

This is easy to miss as you sail to and fro concentrating on the tidal times at the Dorus Mòr. Although there is nothing that special to do ashore, and there is a lot of litter around the bay, there are grand views from the anchorage to Scarba and the Corryvreckan. A surprisingly large roofless old boathouse (if that is what it is) sits on the southwest shore of the bay. So you don't have to inflate the inflatable, just sit back and enjoy the view — gin and tonic in hand. But then there are a large number and variety of prehistoric cup marks in some rocks up the hill to inspect (marked on the OS map)<sup>4</sup>.

## **Bàgh Gleann a'Mhaoil**

The bay itself does not have much to offer other than remoteness and a rather broken-down cottage. But the walk north to Kilmory Lodge is terrific, high up above the Sound of Luing (Scarba Sound on older maps), almost as though you are in an aeroplane, with views across to Mull, Easdale, Luing, Loch Melfort, Shuna, Crinan and Kintyre. A truly spectacular walk. You pick up a Land Rover track just above the cottage and head north up the hill to the right.

Everyone who has sailed through the Sound of Luing must have noticed Kilmory Lodge, so conspicuous up on the hill, the only inhabitable house on the island. Close up it is bigger than it appears from the sea, with extensive steadings, and it seems very well maintained and appointed. Presumably the owner, Shane Cadzow whose family invented the Luing breed of cattle, comes here from time to time, maybe to shoot things. But I have never seen a soul moving on Scarba<sup>5</sup> on the many occasions I have sailed by. It is essentially uninhabited.

There is a ruined 14th century chapel and burial ground somewhere down by the shore below Kilmory Lodge that I have not seen — Cille Mhoire an Caibel. I suspect it is difficult to find.

## **Barnacarry Bay**

Not anything really to see and do here, except go for a walk and sit on the beach (black and slightly gravely sand). The farm above the beach looks very spick and span, as does the farmhouse. If you are in to duns, there is one on the point of the east arm of the bay<sup>6</sup>.

## **Barr-nam-boc Bay**

An odd name — ridge of the roebucks, in translation. Rather a good spot in an easterly wind. The trouble was when I was there the wind was so strong I couldn't get ashore safely enough to explore. However, there is a lovely walk on a track round to the Kerrera Tea Garden described under the Little Horseshoe Bay anchorage — about a mile (see below). And there is a pretty good view to the west which majors on sunsets. Once upon a time cattle were landed here from Mull and then

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<sup>4</sup> <https://canmore.org.uk/site/22582/achanarnich-1>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.southernhebrides.com/isle-of-scarba/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://canmore.org.uk/site/22992/dun-mhic-raonuill>

driven over the hill to Ardantrive Bay from where they were persuaded to swim to the mainland, and so to market

## **Belnahua**

After 30 or more years of sailing straight past this tiny misshapen island (misshapen by the hand of man), I finally anchored there one sunny early spring day<sup>7</sup>. It is certainly fascinating — and thought provoking — to wander around the ruined workers' cottages, and the flooded quarries, from where the slate roofs of so many Scottish homes once came (one cottage is being restored, a bit of a surprise)<sup>8</sup>. There are well-made stone walls to keep the sea out of the quarries. At its peak in the 1880s, the Slate Islands were producing about 9 million slates per annum (from here along with Luing, Seil, Easdale, Shuna and Torsa).

It is difficult to imagine that about 150 people once lived here, there was a school and even a shop. And how they lived, and how they sustained themselves — maybe the Christian religion with the hope of better things after death did the trick. Apparently there was not even a reliable source of water, only an artesian well. Sometimes water had to be brought over from Lunga, Luing or Eilean Dubh. The working, and living, conditions must have been terrible.

No more slate mining now of course, it all vanished from here after the First World War, as did the local population. Instead of wearing out the young slate miners in Scotland we are probably doing much the same to the even younger slate miners in China.

Off the slate beach on the east side you will find what appear to me to be the very best skimming stones in Scotland. And definitely walk to the top of the hill for the all-round panoramic view, and of the tide swishing boats through the Sound of Luing.

In 1936 a Latvian ship heading from Liverpool to Blythe to pick up coal to take to Riga was wrecked here in a storm, the Helena Faulbaums<sup>9</sup>. Her SOS message was picked up in Northern Ireland. As the telephone lines had been blown down, the BBC was asked to broadcast a message over the wireless (aka the radio these days!) for the Islay lifeboat. Four survivors were eventually found by the lifeboat on the by-then uninhabited island, and later 16 bodies were washed up on Luing. Rather poignantly, a personal connection is still kept up between Luing and Latvia.

## **Black Mill Bay**

This is a slightly sad place because once it was a hive of activity with steamers between the Clyde and Oban calling at the now very ruined pier to take on passengers, animals and — not surprisingly — loads of slate. Puffers came too, carrying coal for the island. The ticket office still remains, now I guess a fisherman's store. But, it is a good place to search out a Luing cow<sup>10</sup> or two, the breed which was started here by the Cadzow family in the 1950s, a cross between Highlander and Beef Shorthorn cattle. And if you fancy renting a luxurious-sleeps-seven-lodge<sup>11</sup> there is just the job on the hill above the bay (another Cadzow family enterprise).

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<sup>7</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Belnahua>

<sup>8</sup> <https://canmore.org.uk/site/22639/belnahua-slate-quarries>

<sup>9</sup> <https://canmore.org.uk/site/102565/helena-faulbaums-belnahua-sound-of-luing>

<sup>10</sup> <https://luingcattlesociety.co.uk/the-luing>

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.isleofluingcottages.co.uk/>

## Camas a'Mhòr-Fhir

There are two anchorages on Lunga and this one is by far the most dramatic. What is more it is very easy to get into and out of. The bay is amazing, almost completely blocked off from the open sea by the great lump of Scarba. Anchored here gives one the feeling of being surrounded by rocky mountains, green in summer and purple with heather in the autumn, although nowhere is very high. Nonetheless, terrific for the Inner Hebrides.

The name is very apt — the bay of the giant. There is a stony beach which invites a barbeque although driftwood is hard to find, At low tide there is sand enough for sandcastles. Unfortunately there is far too much plastic litter thrown up on the beach to the high water mark, and no one to cart it away. Just maybe there are otters in the steep burn that comes down into the bay.

In October 2016 what looked like prefabricated bits of house were being unloaded in the bay by two men in kilts. Then, by 2018, a strange hut-like structure appeared on the shore. It has a wooden deck with up-lighters, a wind generator, a diesel generator, a single bed and a bean-bag, and a wood-burning stove, all tied down with a ratchet strap to stop it all being blown away in a gale. Someone's summerhouse I suppose, for someone who likes to be far away from it all.

It is not easy walking around Lunga<sup>12</sup>, but not impossible. There are no paths, and in the summer the bracken is extremely thick. It is of course possible to walk to the Little Corryvreckan (the Grey Dogs Channel) but this is easier from Poll nan Corran (see below). I am not sure if at low tide you can get across to the islands in the north — possibly not, and nor whether there is anything special to see and do if you can — probably not. By and large Lunga is a place for scenery and views of other islands.

I have never found it, but there are the remains of a well at Tobar a Challuim-Chille<sup>13</sup> (the well of St. Columba's church), northwest of Bidean na h-Iolaire (the island's highest point), which was once used by the slate miners on Belnahua (see above).

The island is owned by the Torquil Johnson-Ferguson family who used to run the Rubha Fiola adventure centre, a not inexpensive place to dump your children for a week or two in their holidays (my wife was dispatched there by her parents). It was closed down after the manager was jailed for sex offences. Lunga is now used for grazing animals and I don't think there are any permanent inhabitants, notwithstanding the few houses at Poll nan Corran (see below).

## Crinan

Even the dire architecture and roof-top excrescences of the several times rebuilt Crinan Hotel cannot detract from the charm of the canal basin (but beware midges under the trees). As ever 'Pevsner' gets it bang on: '*A unique intimate place of green grass, white walls and black lock gates*'<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lunga,\\_Firth\\_of\\_Lorn](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lunga,_Firth_of_Lorn)

<sup>13</sup> <https://canmore.org.uk/site/22550/lunga-tobar-challuim-chille>

<sup>14</sup> '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.

There always seems to be something going on at Crinan, at least in the summer, and you can join in with the main occupation which is to watch the boats making a cock-up of getting in and out of the locks, or being hurled around the sea lock as the water is allowed in. This is a great place to lounge, have an ice cream, and generally hang out. The new toilets are a welcome addition.

Lock 16, the small café in the early 19<sup>th</sup>-century old post office, is nice but pricey (did my eyes or memory let me down, were the cappuccinos really £3.50 in 2014? Yes they were, I re-checked in 2016 (presumably much more now). If you really want to spend more money, then dine in the Westward on the ground floor of the Crinan Hotel<sup>15</sup>(ph 01546 830261). It's good food, but maybe not so good to stop you feeling uncomfortable as a scruffy yachtie. Their Seafood Bar does excellent fish and chips for £10.50 (2015), and other more expensive stuff (linen napkins too). The public bar next door is small and cosy, but no real ale last time I asked.

The hotel — and indeed the café — is very keen on hanging and encouraging original art<sup>16</sup>, not surprising as Frances MacDonald, a well known Scottish painter, is the widow of Nick Ryan. They ran the hotel since 1970, and now she carries on running it. She has also made something of a secret garden behind the hotel, and it is I think open to the public.

I have never had to call on the services of the Crinan boatyard<sup>17</sup>, or their chandlery, but they are I believe very good, and they have visitor moorings if you can't be bothered to anchor off the hotel where there is a convenient slipway (ph 01546 830232).

For the modestly energetic, a walk along the canal towpath is a pleasure at any time of the year, from primroses in the spring to the colours of autumn. The 200+ year old canal<sup>18</sup> is of course a treat all of its own, built to connect the Clyde with the West Coast without ships having to round the Mull of Kintyre. At first it was used by coastal vessels, fishing boats and colliers, then rich tourists travelling by steamer from Glasgow to the West Coast and the wonders of Staffa, now it is almost entirely for the leisure trade but the transiting steamers have long gone. The anonymous old quote 'Britain's most beautiful shortcut' sums it up just right. For those who don't like going to sea at all, follow Sandi Toksvig who, passing through the Crinan Canal while being sailed round Britain, decided she liked "*sailing in places where you have land on either side of the boat. You can choose to sail or walk or ride a bike as you pass some of the most invigorating scenery in the world.*"<sup>19</sup>

The early sailors had no engines of course, so towed their boat with or without a hired man, or used a horse like the Rev. C Wilkinson in 1892: "*A horse covered with more or less skin tows you through at trotting speed for half-a-sovereign*".<sup>20</sup> The problem then was stopping in the locks, particularly if the wind was from behind. The technique was to throw a stern rope round a hook on or by the lock gate as you went in (the hooks are mostly still there — and used by those in too much of a hurry!).

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<sup>15</sup> <https://www.crinanhotel.com/>

<sup>16</sup> [https://www.crinanhotel.com/en/crinan-fine-art\\_46913/](https://www.crinanhotel.com/en/crinan-fine-art_46913/)

<sup>17</sup> <https://crinanboatyard.co.uk/>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.scottishcanals.co.uk/canals/crinan-canal/>

<sup>19</sup> 'Island Race, an improbable voyage round the coast of Britain'. John McCarthy and Sandi Toksvig. BBC Books, London. 1995.

<sup>20</sup> By Ocean, Firth and Channel. Amateur Cruising on the West Coast of Scotland and North of Ireland. 1994. By 'Diagonal White' (aka Rev C Wilkinson). Late 19<sup>th</sup> century quite matter-of-fact description of cruises from Northern Ireland to the Clyde and up to Skye.

If you walk along the towpath from the Crinan basin to the first bridge, cross over and turn left you soon come to a way marked track up the hill to the right. It leads to a charming walk constructed by the Woodland Trust<sup>21</sup> who own the land here. They are restoring many broadleaf woods in the UK, here a remnant of Scotland's remaining temperate rain forest. The walk takes you back to the canal basin in an hour or so, allowing for dawdling along the way, sitting on rustic benches to admire the view and all of that. Or do the walk the other way round, from the canal basin.

Another walk is from Crinan Harbour, where the road ends, towards Ardnoe Point where in 1km you should find the gravestone of a 19th century skipper who died of cholera. Do not take the main path up the hill but the narrow, boggy, rough and generally rubbish and poorly marked path through the woods along the shoreline. The gravestone is very hidden in the undergrowth and in truth I have not been able to find it! I rather hoped I would somehow trip over it amongst all the tree roots, in the same way as Rat and Mole found Badger's House in the Wild Wood in 'Wind in the Willows'. Possibly better to anchor in the bay if you can, rather than walk from the canal basin because there is too much road that way. And do what I didn't — use the OS map, and look for the ash tree over the gravestone at grid reference 773 945.

A longer walk of four miles, the so-called Crinan Trail, takes that uphill path I just mentioned<sup>22</sup>. Follow the waymarks and you will eventually come to Castle Dounie,<sup>23</sup> a ruined but still recognisable iron-age fortification, or dun, perched on top of a small hill. The views from there from way down Jura to the mountains on Mull and Ben Cruachan are truly stunning. On the way If you are wondering what the tall brick chimney is doing at the back of the houses in Crinan Harbour, it is part of a ruined 19<sup>th</sup>-century chemical factory where pyroligneous acid was distilled from birchwood.

If she is not in the basin, you may have spotted her under a smudge — or cloud — of black smoke — the VIC 32<sup>24</sup>, the last seagoing coal-fired Clyde 'Puffer'. She was built in Yorkshire in 1943 (same age as me!) and used in the war by the navy as one of the Victualling Inshore Craft (hence VIC) around Scotland. Keith Schellenberg, a former erratic owner of Eigg, got hold of her in the 1960s, then Nick and Rachel Walker bought her in 1975 and set about a complete restoration so they could use her to take passengers on scenic cruises around this part of Scotland. They eventually gave her to the Puffer Preservation Trust in 2002 so she could carry on where they left off. Long may she steam!

What to do if you find yourself stuck in Crinan on a wet, horrible and windy day, and have exhausted the local opportunities? West Coast Motors<sup>25</sup> run the occasional bus to Lochgilphead, or you could summon a taxi, and there are then two good places to go. First, the Kilmartin House Museum<sup>26</sup>, café and gift shop which majors on the pretty significant archaeology around the local glen, just reopened in 2023 with a major extension (another bus I'm afraid). The second, is to the Mid Argyll Community Pool (McPool)<sup>27</sup> in Lochgilphead.

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<sup>21</sup> <https://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/>

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.walkhighlands.co.uk/argyll/dounie-castle.shtml>

<sup>23</sup> <https://canmore.org.uk/site/39164/castle-dounie>

<sup>24</sup> <http://savethepuffer.co.uk/>

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.westcoastmotors.co.uk/>

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.kilmartin.org/>

<sup>27</sup> <https://macpool.org.uk/>

I am slightly surprised there is no plaque anywhere hereabouts to commemorate the shipwreck of the Comet. She was built on the Clyde in 1812 and provided the first commercially successful paddle steamboat service in Europe, initially between Glasgow, Greenock and Helensburgh, and later on the Glasgow to Fort William run through the Crinan Canal. But in December 1820 she didn't make it through the Dorus Mòr (the big door) and was wrecked off Craignish Point, not a good time of year to be out and about at dusk with wind against tide in a snowstorm, and not enough horsepower for her paddles. Fortunately all and crew survived the experience (there were no passengers)<sup>28</sup>. The ship itself split in two and was lost, despite efforts at salvage. Although her engine is presumably on the seabed somewhere, her earlier engine is now in the Science Museum in London.

Apparently one old Clyde skipper when he saw the Comet remarked: "Kneel doon and thank God that ye sail wi' the Almichtie's ain win', and no wi' the de'il's fire and brimstone, like the splutterin' thing there" which in translation is: "Kneel down and thank God that you sail with the Almighty's own wind, and not with the devil's fire and brimstone like the spluttering thing there".

## Cullipool

Cullipool<sup>29</sup> is yet another spot that I, and no doubt others, have sailed straight past countless times while hurrying with the tide either up or down the Sound of Luing, perhaps inhibited by the slightly tricky-sounding entrance and exposure to the west. But in fact it is a snug anchorage in an easterly wind, with stunning views across to Mull and the islands of Nether Lorne. Not so good when the wind swings round a bit to the south, even on the visitor moorings which I think are too exposed and too far out (possibly no longer there). There is a rather rickety metal pontoon you can land on rather than the slippery and rocky shoreline.

Ashore there is quite a large gaggle of early 19th century cottages built for the slate quarrymen. The whole place is steeped in slate — a still-solid slate pier, abandoned and flooded slate quarries (this would be a scary place to bring up young children), crazed looking cliffs left over from blasting, bits of slate all over the place. In the end it finally all closed down in 1965 (in 2022 there were very early plans to restart at least some minor slate quarrying). Walk north through the village as far as you can go. On your way, about 200 yards from the harbour, look out for a steel gate with a small sign proclaiming the 'Isle of Luing railway company'. Nigel Dyckhoff had set up a charming model railway in his garden, but sadly it is no more.

The new in 2015 Atlantic Islands Centre<sup>30</sup> is, quite rightly, getting excellent reviews. Although the exterior is a bit functional, inside it is calm, light and welcoming with a combination of social centre for the island, heritage exhibition, work-spaces, and a very nice café/restaurant with a tempting lunch menu (ph 01852 314096). I can only vouch for the coffee and cakes. Open late for dinner on Saturdays, but as ever check before making a detour, particularly in these post Covid days.

Otherwise there is nothing of great interest except the charm and friendliness of a small island with no pub or hotel, still without the controversial fixed-link across Cuan sound to Seil island, a population of roughly 200. Sadly the primary school is now mothballed and likely to close for good. The few children left on Luing now have to get themselves to Easdale primary school. And —

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<sup>28</sup> [https://www.helensburgh-heritage.co.uk/images/stories/pdfs/Wreck\\_of\\_the\\_Comet.pdf](https://www.helensburgh-heritage.co.uk/images/stories/pdfs/Wreck_of_the_Comet.pdf)

<sup>29</sup> <https://isleofluing.org/about-isle-luing>

<sup>30</sup> <https://isleofluing.org/atlantic-islands-centre>



amazingly perhaps — there is an amateur dramatic society. Also amazingly there is a bakery, Mary Braithwaite and Nigel Ings's Luing Bakery sells its cakes and other goodies in the island shop, up the road to the right after you go ashore (make sure to buy your provisions there, it needs your support)<sup>31</sup>. Which all goes to show where a PhD in archaeology and anthropology can take you.

## Easdale

Easdale sound may be shallow and a bit tricky, but it is definitely worth stopping here to look round Easdale Island<sup>32</sup>. This tiny car-less island once held a community of several hundred who were involved in slate mining, as they were at Ellenabeich across the short ferry ride to the mainland. Until in 1881 a storm breached the rock and masonry wall between the main quarry at Ellenabeich and the sea. By the time of the First World War all slate production had ceased, and the island community gradually disappeared, down to just four residents. But, gradually since the 1950s, the ruined workers' cottages have been taken over and restored by a new local community who are working hard to restore many of the island facilities, such as the drying harbour. And they are encouraging others to join them, in part by producing a short film<sup>33</sup> on YouTube in 2015. Now apparently over half the population is resident.

Everywhere you go there is slate — walls, piers, jetties, roofs, and under your feet. The early 19th century quays and jetties built of vertically orientated slate are particularly notable — and beautiful. Not surprisingly, given the whole place is made of slate, the annual world stone skimming championships<sup>34</sup> have been held here since 1983. Twenty countries were represented in 2015, including Zimbabwe and Pakistan, with up to a maximum of 350 competitors in total — so called 'chuckers'. But unless they understood colloquial English, I doubt if the non-English speakers would have appreciated the innuendo of being called 'tossers', or indeed of the final 'toss off'. I would qualify as 'an old tosser'. Entry £10 for adults, £5 for under 15s. Dougie Isaacs from Blairgowrie was the men's World Champion in eight out of 12 years, until in 2017 a Japanese man was the surprise winner (he was the Japanese champion so hardly a beginner). Then a Hungarian won the men's in 2018, and again in 2019! The organisers are trying to buy the venue, a flooded quarry, from the island's owner who at the moment charges the championship organisers a hefty fee.

The new(ish) community hall is a bit of an architectural mishmash — a combination of slate, wood, and lead roofing does not guarantee aesthetic success. I have not however seen the inside. Nonetheless, incorporated into this modern building, the Puffer Bar, Restaurant and Tea Room<sup>35</sup> is a good combo (ph 01852 300022), but its future is uncertain (the pub is to be converted into a home). You were able to sit outside at tables admiring the view to Mull while eating cream teas, and watch the children swing on the swings The bar was small and cosy, but with no real ale which is no great surprise given the small population to drink it up before the barrel goes off.

Make very sure to walk round the island to see the flooded quarries which are separated from the sea by just a few feet of rock. There are loads of blackberries everywhere. The old cottages seem mostly restored now, and very charming they look too, many with gardens stuffed with flowers and shrubs. An old lamppost on the green seems to have been taken or stolen from 'The City of Lincoln'.

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<sup>31</sup> <https://isleofluing.org/atlantic-islands-centre/isle-luing-home-bakers>

<sup>32</sup> <https://www.easdale.org/index.htm>

<sup>33</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SvXcZ110ngk>

<sup>34</sup> <https://www.stoneskimming.com/>

<sup>35</sup> <http://pufferbarandrestaurant.co.uk/>

The small folk museum is a treasure and a delight<sup>36</sup>. It was set up in 1980, and gradually put together lovingly over many years by Jean Adams who received an MBE for her efforts, much more deserving than the rather higher honours dished out to politicians and indeed to various colleagues, often for no discernable reason other than doing their job well. She retired in 2006 and since then the museum has been owned by Eilean Eisdeal, the island's community development group set up in 1997. There are lots of original letters, objects of various sorts, and clippings from the Oban Times. Great!

Ellenabeich (Isle of Birches) is in fact no longer an island, it was quarried away. But the name lives on as the village on the Seil island side of the sound. Here there was once a vast emporium of interconnecting caverns of tartan tat, the amazing and unique Highland Arts Centre. However, in 2017 the building was sold to Seafari<sup>37</sup> who plan to convert it into a boat shed, maybe with other facilities too. They run many of those tourist RIBs you see dashing round the nearby islands and are based here, a rather successful business it seems. They must be the successors of the *"very able, extremely dextrous, and willing clever seamen"* that The Hon Mrs Sarah Murray came across here at the end of the 18th century when writing probably the first travel guide to Scotland<sup>38</sup>.

The Arts Centre was started by the late C John Taylor, an Englishman, with I would say dubious artistic talents, and a self-proclaimed poet as well as composer. When a coach rolled into the car park an elderly gent shouted, in a Yorkshire accent "ere coums a bous"! And a kilted youth stopped putting a ball on the green, picked up his bagpipes and let out a blast to welcome the tourist throng who were then disgorged from the bus into the emporium to emerge later with Scotland tea towels and plastic models of Robert the Bruce.

The cottages in the village are charming, presumably mostly holiday homes and lets. In one you will find the Slate Islands Heritage Centre<sup>39</sup> run by a trust with a very informative website. Started in 2000, it is small but packed with interesting stuff, not just slate-related, so donate generously. Quite a lot of the village is now owned not by some distant landlord but by the Seil and Easdale Community Council.

The Oyster Bar and Restaurant<sup>40</sup> does pub grub and real ale (maybe), but it seems to change hands rather frequently so it's hard to keep up with how it's doing or even whether it is still there in these difficult post Covid/cost of living crisis days (ph 01852 300121).

There is also a beautiful garden created in the 1930s — An Cala<sup>41</sup> — just along the road out of the village. It is small, charming and domestic. A lovely waterfall tinkles down a cliff and there is a wonderful summerhouse or temple with walls covered in patterns of pine-cones from all over the world. And look out for the flock of wire sheep. The house itself is actually a combination of three 19th century cottages which were converted into a single very nice looking house in the 1930s giving *"an almost incongruous anglicised intimacy"* according to Pevsner<sup>42</sup>. Thank you Mrs Downie

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<sup>36</sup> <https://www.easdalemuseum.org/>

<sup>37</sup> <https://www.seafari.co.uk/>

<sup>38</sup> 'A companion and useful Guide to the Beauties of Scotland, and the Hebrides' first published in 1803 was probably the first travel guide to Scotland, written by a quite posh but very adventurous English lady, the Hon Sarah Murray. Characteristic of her period, she rather overused the word 'sublime'.

<sup>39</sup> <https://slateislands.org.uk/the-heritage-centre/>

<sup>40</sup> <http://www.oysterbareasdale.com/>

<sup>41</sup> <https://www.parksandgardens.org/places/an-cala>

<sup>42</sup> Pevsner ibid

for sharing all this with us for a mere £5 a head — so unlike the owners of Torosay Castle on Mull, Achnacloch on Loch Etive and Jura House who have closed their gardens to the public.

And finally, much of the film<sup>43</sup> of Gavin Maxwell's famous otter book, 'Ring of Bright Water', was filmed around here.

### **Eilean Dubh**

Columba landed on many of the islands in Argyll, so we are told, but not on this pair as far as I know — Eilean Dubh Mòr (i.e. big black island) and Eilean Dubh Beg (i.e. small black island). Maybe there are no suitably uncomfortable monastic caves although there is a rather snug and more-or-less invisible cave under the bracken just under the crags south of the anchorage, and another one near the shore overlooking Scarba. The two islands are covered with heather and bracken, with a great all round view from the top of Eilean Dubh Mòr, the more varied of the two — from the cliffs of Mull, up the Firth of Lorne, across to Easdale and Cullipool, over Lunga to Luing, across to Scarba, Colonsay in the distance, and finally to the Garvellach Islands in the foreground. There always seem to be seals in this anchorage, and in the spring you have to avoid treading on the great black backed gull eggs and chicks.

### **Fladda**

With care, this can be a surprisingly reasonable anchorage out of the tide, at least on the flood, off the north of the island from where you can dinghy across to the old landing slip. And then explore. But don't leave your boat unattended for too long, and almost certainly don't stay the night — the ebb could land you on the rocks. Not that there is much to explore. The large walled garden is overgrown, and the lighthouse cottages rather run down. Of course the views all around are great. I never knew why sometime in the 20th century, the name of the island changed from Pladda to Fladda until the present owner told me the Northern Lighthouse Board was responsible — to avoid confusion with their lighthouse on the other Pladda, off the south tip of Arran in the Clyde.

### **Gallanach Bay**

This bay opposite Crinan is a nice spot in northerly weather, always much quieter than off the hotel, and there is a pleasant walk to the dramatically situated Duntrune Castle,<sup>44</sup> still showing much of its 15th and 16th century origins (the website is exceptionally friendly). It is privately owned by the chief of Clan MacCallum. There are holiday lets, and it is possible for interested people to look around the castle by appointment (ph 01546 510271). It claims to be the oldest continually inhabited castle in Scotland.

Across the road away from any salt water spray you will find the castle's charming small garden to meander in, with classical statues and tinkling water, looked after by Christophe Lefevre (donation expected). Here you will see an early 20th century heliochronometer, an instrument which was used to tell the time from the sun (before the BBC time signal which started in 1924). It is far more accurate and reliable than conventional sundials apparently, and you can still buy them.

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<sup>43</sup> <http://www.scotlandthefilm.com/movies/fring.html>

<sup>44</sup> <http://www.duntrunecastle.com/>

## Gallanachbeg

There is no yachtie subculture here, rather a diving subculture. The Puffin Dive Centre<sup>45</sup> dominates the bay so if you want to hire diving kit, be taught how to dive, go diving from one of their boats, buy stuff from their dive shop, or top up your own cylinders, this is your place. More usefully for us, they would also retrieve a stuck anchor — for a fee. In truth it is a pretty dull spot and I don't see much point in anchoring here.

## Ganavan Bay

Ganavan bay seems to be a magnet for folk who sit in their cars and watch the sea, or take their dogs for a walk. It is an anchorage of sorts but I have never anchored here, or ever seen any other boats anchored here — it is too exposed to the west, and there are far handier places nearby. And although this must be a lovely town beach for Oban, and very clean, it is hardly worth the bother for anyone with a boat who can get to much nicer places. Actually I am not sure it is so lovely now. Since I first started this guide a developer has sprinkled really horrible glaring-white houses around on the larger — more northerly — of the two beaches. They look awful and seem to have almost no gardens. The memorial to coastal command in the 2nd World War has been nearly pushed into the sea by this dire creeping development (Sunderland and Catalina flying boats were based in Oban Bay and used to track down German U-Boats in the Atlantic). In January 2012, to add climatic insult to architectural injury, most of the sand got washed away by a major storm, but it returned naturally without the help of human hand or digger. Nowadays there is a threat of even more housing.

The rather nicer, smaller and southern beach has some historical interest (so-called Little Ganavan beach). Like many other places along this coast, there was a lot of activity here during the Second World War — an anti-submarine indicator loop<sup>46</sup> ran along the seabed to Craignure on Mull. The idea was that enemy submarines passing over it would induce an electric current which would be picked up on the shore. A few concrete huts from that period are still there, one of which can be seen from the sea just south of the main beach.

## Garvellach Islands

On old charts the Garvellach Islands<sup>47</sup> are called 'The islands of the sea', a more romantic name for this string of small uninhabited islands in the Firth of Lorne. It seems as though the sun always shines on them, but this is simply because one never lands unless the weather is settled. And well worthwhile it is too. The all-round views from the top of Eileach an Naoimh<sup>48</sup> (Isle of the Saints), where the main anchorage is, are fantastic, as though you are on the bridge of a ship steaming up the Firth of Lorne (from Ben Nevis to Ben More to Ireland to the Paps of Jura).

And there are some wonderful piles of old stones — early Christian bric-a-brac (St Columba and all of that of course, apparently the oldest Christian buildings in Scotland, and possibly the UK). First up, very close to the anchorage you will encounter a double beehive where monks were supposed to have lived and prayed. It is all well signed by Historic Environment Scotland. Further up the hill

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<sup>45</sup> <https://www.puffin.org.uk/>

<sup>46</sup> <http://indicatorloops.com/obanbay.htm>

<sup>47</sup> <https://www.southernhebrides.com/the-garvellachs/>

<sup>48</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eileach\\_an\\_Naoimh](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eileach_an_Naoimh)

to the left there is a large monastic site<sup>49</sup> — most impressive and peaceful, said to have been founded by St Brendan the Navigator in the 6th century. Sit here and brood on how those early Christians survived on such a remote island. There is a well for water, but what did they do about food, and heating? Your children should search for and explore the underground cell (through the gate in the metal fence, 50 metres)!

There is a burial ground — Cladh Dhuban — just by the somewhat minimal anchorage on Garbh Eileach.

And finally, there is clearly an old castle, 13th century, on Dùn Chonnuill,<sup>50</sup> the most northerly of the islands. This is an anchorage only for the calmest of days and even then just for a lunch stop and brief explore ashore if you can cope with the awkward landing. Near the natural harbour on the east side there is some evidence of an abandoned settlement, however the most interesting remains and views are found at the top of the island. It is a bit of an awkward scramble up the steep bracken and nettle-strewn hillside, but once on top there is evidence of the ancient fort marked on the chart. You can see why it was such a good military spot with a commanding view across the southern reaches of the Firth of Lorne.

### **Gylen Castle Bay**

Gylen Castle Bay in other than southerly winds is a very pleasant anchorage with views down the Firth of Lorne. A particularly rugged 16th century castle is set high on a cliff. It was reduced to a ruin less than a century later, as a result of yet another of those violent Hebridean clan arguments. It has fairly recently been sympathetically stabilised and is looked after by Historic Environment Scotland. There are excellent garderobes to fascinate the children, and a lovely oriole window above the main door — with interesting carvings, and a removable floor so that boiling oil, or whatever, could be poured on to the heads of the attackers. But the intrusive in-your-face signage on the landward side is terrible, it destroys the view as you approach. The Kerrera Tea Garden<sup>51</sup> is even closer from here than from Little Horseshoe Bay (see below). There are plenty of other anchorages to escape to if the wind gets up. This is just one more of the several anchorages on the very attractive small island of Kerrera<sup>52</sup>.

### **Little Horseshoe Bay**

This is a better anchorage than it once was because back in the 1930s it was obstructed by the pontoons of lobster fishermen. Long before that the Vikings gathered just north of here, in Horseshoe Bay, on their way to the Clyde and their final comeuppance at the hands of the Scots at the Battle of Largs in 1263.

The old decaying wooden hulk on the beach enhances the scene in a rather nice way, and doubles up as a wrecked pirate ship with treasure (what on earth happens to plastic hulks, there must be thousands of them somewhere?). From the anchorage, scramble up to the site of an old iron age fort at the top of a little flat knoll on the south arm of the bay. A few grassy lumps on its south side

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<sup>49</sup> <https://canmore.org.uk/site/22361/garvellachs-eileach-an-naoimh>

<sup>50</sup> <https://canmore.org.uk/site/22374/garvellachs-dun-chonaill>

<sup>51</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/kerrerateagarden/>

<sup>52</sup> <https://www.undiscoveredscotland.co.uk/kerrera/kerrera/>

presumably cover the remains of the defensive walls.<sup>53</sup> From here there are charming views up and down the Sound of Kerrera.

One of the small cottages by the anchorage was once taken over by the only parrot sanctuary in Scotland — one was not surprised to hear distant squawks more reminiscent of Treasure Island than the Hebrides when you anchored. In 2010 there were 60 birds in various stages of distress, or well-fedness, courtesy of Yvonne MacMillan who was clearly passionate about looking after them. The trouble was that by 2011 the sanctuary was full and she could only take more birds if one of her resident birds died. This is the same classic capacity problem we have in medicine — to see more new patients in out-patient clinics we have to discharge follow-up patients to make space, otherwise no new patients get seen. Not surprisingly some discharged follow-up patients become disgruntled, and with good reason if their GP cannot provide the sort of care they were getting in hospital. Sadly, in 2015 it looked as though the sanctuary was going to be closed and the parrots rehoused on the mainland. By 2016 it was all gone.

On a windless day with no sailing you could walk the circuit around the lower two thirds of the island.<sup>54</sup> It is seven miles and takes about three hours or so, more if one stops off at the excellent Kerrera tea garden<sup>55</sup> which is only about a mile from the anchorage. Strangely the owners have removed the outside tables, and closed the atmospheric sitting room in an old barn. Instead, they take your orders at the gate and the you go and sit up on the hillock by the bunkhouse (in the open). There is a nice free-standing toilet to try, twinned with a toilet in Pakistan. The bunkhouse is where my son Oli and his friends celebrated his 21st birthday — certainly an unusual venue.

Because no one comes to the tea garden by car, and most have to walk the two miles from the ferry, one wonders how it makes enough money to keep going, but maybe that is not the point — it certainly has nothing of the feel of a mere money making operation, about as far away from those awful casino banks and their bonus-waving bankers as one could imagine (ph 07951 964231). As ever beware certain days it may be closed, and I think it usually opens 11-4.

This anchorage was clearly a favourite of CC Lynam's who even on Christmas Day 1901 "*bathed and found the water quite warm*"!<sup>56</sup> But in 1904 he complained that "*the loveliness of the pretty spot is not enhanced by the row of three new cottages just built on the shore*". These days we of course find them rather charming.

By 2019 the population of the island had risen to 65, including 19 children, encouraging. And attempts are being made to convert the now redundant school near the ferry terminal into a

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<sup>53</sup> <https://canmore.org.uk/site/22949/kerrera-the-little-horse-shoe>

<sup>54</sup> <https://www.walkhighlands.co.uk/argyll/kerrera-gylen.shtml>

<sup>55</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/kerrerateagarden/>

<sup>56</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."!

community centre. By 2021 a new 'road' (in truth a forestry-grade Land Rover track) had opened, so connecting the communities in the north and south ends of the island.<sup>57</sup>

## Loch Beag

There is nothing particular to do or see here, although walking to Craignish point is a possibility — for great views south to Scarba and Jura. There are otters around below the old ferry house next to a broken-down jetty and crane (maybe the crane has gone now). I think a ferry used to run from here to Jura. Up the loch you can see the architectural muddle of Craignish castle, but it is not worth a visit. It is privately owned and has been converted into apartments. 'Pevsner' regards it as '*a clumsy confection concocted by repeated conversions*'<sup>58</sup>, so there you have it. The building ranges from 15th century through the 19th to the 20th. What is of more interest, but it is bit further, is the old parish church of Kilmarie, on the road towards Ardfern, but this is nearer to the Bàgh Dun Mhuilig anchorage on Loch Craignish.

## Loch Feochan

There really seems little particular to do or see around this loch. Furthermore, the main road between Oban and Lochgilphead runs along one shore which makes it noisy. But the entrance is quite fun, much easier since it was buoyed some years ago. In the old days, as Frank Cowper put it "*As this loch is barred in two places, and twists considerably with a very narrow channel, I don't think it is suitable for a general cruise.*"<sup>59</sup>

On the port side, just before the suddenly shallow bit, the single white cottage was used for the film of Ring of Bright Water<sup>60</sup> (based on the classic otter book by Gavin Maxwell). It is now a pricey holiday cottage. Ardoran Marine<sup>61</sup> in Ardentallen Bay is a smallish boatyard and there are visitor moorings (ph 01631 566123). You can walk from here up to 'The Barn'<sup>62</sup> — through the farm, up the road, and then up a track to the left, just over a mile. It is a slightly eccentric pub in a converted cattle byre with good food, and holiday chalets (at Cologin on the OS map) (ph 01631 564501)

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<sup>57</sup> <https://isleofkerrera.org/overview>

<sup>58</sup> Pevsner. Ibid.

<sup>59</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".

<sup>60</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cvop3ayFwBA>

<sup>61</sup> <http://www.ardoran.co.uk/>

<sup>62</sup> <https://www.cologin.co.uk/>

## Oban

I personally like the brassy breeziness of Oban<sup>63</sup>. It is of course very much a holiday town, as it always has been since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, but it is also a ferry terminal with the feel of people coming and going to both the Inner and Outer Hebrides. Since the pontoons<sup>64</sup> appeared in 2017, it has become much more yacht friendly than it had been for years. But I would not want to be on those pontoons in a south-westerly gale, they are not exactly cheap, and you can feel as though you are in a bit of a goldfish bowl. There is now quite an informative harbour website.<sup>65</sup>

Personally, I prefer the visitor moorings<sup>66</sup> with a loading pontoon which are near the Oban Sailing Club, but maybe they are a bit far from the station and shops —15 minutes walk into town for all your provisions at Tesco, Lidl, Aldi or Marks and Spencer which are clustered together to the south of the Railway Station. These moorings are good, but not all that sheltered in a blow. At the moment, I don't think there is anything to stop you anchoring off the Corran Esplanade, but here the problem is wash from the CalMac ferries which dominate the bay, and it is not easy finding a good spot. I can sympathise with CC Lynam who back in 1904 lamented "*Oh, why oh why do I ever stay a night on the Oban side?*"<sup>67</sup> But in those days he had the options of anchoring over in Ardandrive bay (see above) long before there were any pontoons or mooring charges, or off the 'Brandystone' which is now full of private moorings near the Oban Sailing Club. You might prefer to base yourself at Kerrera Marina<sup>68</sup> (ph 01631 565333) across Oban Bay. However that does require the inconvenience of a water taxi to get to the town.

Oban is a good place for shops. There is a butcher, Watt and Son fishmongers on the railway pier, outdoor shops, galleries for arts and crafts, Highland Fasteners tool shop on Stevenson St, Screwfix in Mill Lane, as well as the supermarkets. It is after all the second biggest town on the west coast after Fort William. It is also handy for meeting crew off the train or bus, and catching up on civilisation. But sadly there is no chandlery since Nancy Black's closed in 2017. Unfortunately, Oban has form in self destruction — those of us old enough to remember the airy, glass-roofed late 19<sup>th</sup> century railway station will not forgive its replacement in the 1980s with such boring modern buildings. Tobermory is an alternative for provisioning, after all it is likely to be on your way to or from Oban.

There are some very good restaurants in Oban. My own favourite is The Waterfront Fishhouse Restaurant<sup>69</sup> (ph 01631 567415) on the Railway pier. Really excellent for robustly cooked fish. "From pier to the pan as fast as we can" is their slogan. The menu is simple and fairly brief, and the food is brilliant. Roy Stalker has been head chef since 1999. It may be in a very unpromising looking building, up some stairs in what was once the Mission to Seafarers, but there are great views across the north entrance of Oban Bay. So book a table by the window overlooking the pier and watch the Isle of Mull Ferry come and go while you eat. But be careful, it can get very busy and noisy on some evenings, and they don't take children in the evening. Ee-Usk on the North Pier (ph 01631 565666)<sup>70</sup> is a more upmarket fish restaurant (again, no children in the evening). Next door is the

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<sup>63</sup> <https://www.oban.org.uk/>

<sup>64</sup> <https://www.northpierpontoons.com//>

<sup>65</sup> <https://obanharbour.scot/>

<sup>66</sup> <https://obanbayberthing.co.uk/>

<sup>67</sup> C C Lynam *ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> <https://kerrera marina.com/>

<sup>69</sup> <https://waterfrontfishhouse.co.uk/>

<sup>70</sup> <https://www.eeusk.com/>



more family-orientated Piazza<sup>71</sup> with excellent pizzas, not too big, and good for kids. They will do any pizza as calzone which gets you some salad too, at the same price (ph 01631 563 628). From both restaurants the views over the bay and of the ferries are great (mind you the architecture on the North Pier is legolandish, best seen from the inside out). Coast<sup>72</sup> is another good restaurant, but suffers by having rather dull decor and no view of the sea (ph 01631 569900). Again no children in the evening. The Manor House Hotel<sup>73</sup> is the attractive Georgian building by the visitor moorings, for a slightly formal and more expensive candle-lit dinner (ph 01631 566429). Their bar is open to non-residents. The lovely view of the bay is somewhat constricted by some unsympathetic modern houses on one side, and by the much more attractive buildings of the Northern Lighthouse Board<sup>74</sup> on the other.

For a delicious seafood sandwich you can do no better than the so-called 'Green hut' on the railway pier — known as the shack — just by where the CalMac ferries berth (opened in 1990 by legendary Oban character John Ogden who died in 2023). There is a separate and more recent operation opposite the station entrance. For coffee and a bun there is, among many, many other cafés, Julie's<sup>75</sup> opposite the distillery. And somewhat slimmed down, the Oban Chocolate Company along the esplanade.<sup>76</sup> In 2014 Costa Coffee opened near the station with the usual rhetoric about employing local people (and the usual really boring decor and furniture). You have been here hundreds of times already, in airports and shopping malls. Let's hope they don't force out the local cafés.

The War and Peace Museum<sup>77</sup> (ph 01631 570007) opened in 1995, and at times has teetered on the brink of insolvency. However, it is now more secure and worth a visit — and a donation because it is free — if for no other reason than to get an idea of how surprisingly important Oban was in the Second World War, mostly as a base for antisubmarine flying boats (the museum features war rather more than peace). Many of the volunteer staff seem to be ex-servicemen, and they are always keen to yarn about the old days — and very informative they are too, much better and of course more interactive than one of those audio machines that museums now give you to talk you round their exhibits. As volunteers they do come free, at least for as long as they remain standing (in the meantime someone should be and probably is recording their stories).

The Atlantis Leisure Centre<sup>78</sup> has good facilities for the family on a wet day. There is an adult 25-metre pool which is a bit cold (and has a flume), a toddlers' pool which is a bit warm, a bouldering cube, a soft play area, tennis, squash, Badminton, table tennis, basket ball, a gym and of course a café (ph 01631 566800).

There is also a cinema for a wet day — the Phoenix<sup>79</sup>. It too rose from the ashes after it burnt down in the 1950s, closed in 2010, but in 2012 it reopened as a community-owned arts venue. In 2013 a second screen was added. Terrific. Use it. And don't wait, in 2024 it had to reduce its opening times to save money.

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<sup>71</sup> <https://www.piazzaoban.com/>

<sup>72</sup> <http://www.coastoban.co.uk/>

<sup>73</sup> <https://obanmanorhouse.com/>

<sup>74</sup> <https://www.nlb.org.uk/>

<sup>75</sup> <http://www.juliescoffeehouse.co.uk/>

<sup>76</sup> <https://obanchocolate.co.uk/>

<sup>77</sup> <http://www.obanmuseum.org.uk/>

<sup>78</sup> <https://www.atlantisleisure.co.uk/>

<sup>79</sup> <https://www.obanphoenix.com/>

The Corran Halls<sup>80</sup> host various groups and acts, and there is the Skipinnish Ceilidh House which may offer something more than tartanry of an evening — I don't know.

The Oban distillery<sup>81</sup> is right in the middle of town and takes up a surprising amount of space behind the main street. It is not wildly interesting architecturally. It does tours, of course.

It's hard to find a really decent pub, at least where you can get good real ale in comfortable and congenial surroundings without feeling threatened. Not bad is The Lorne<sup>82</sup> in Stevenson St, across the main road from Tesco. The bar is rather nice, and they do have Caledonian ales. The Cuan Mòr restaurant and bar<sup>83</sup> overlooking the bay, is where you can get Oban beer on draft (it is more of a restaurant than what I would call a proper pub) (ph 01631 565078). If you can cope with the cavernous Corryvreckan<sup>84</sup> by the ferry terminal, they at least have a selection of real ales (but it is a typical Wetherspoon's). In 2017 and again in 2022 it was awarded the platinum Loo of the Year award — worth a thought if caught short. But the best, I think, is the fairly recently reopened — after many derelict years — Oban Inn<sup>85</sup> circa 1790 just behind the north pier, right next to the new pontoons (01631 567441). Cosy, traditional, real ale, good food, harbour views from the upper bar, and music.

The late 19th century Colosseum-like 94-arch McCaig's Tower<sup>86</sup> is the most obvious feature from the sea, Oban's signature really. It is built of granite from the Bonawe quarry. Its originator and funder and designer, John Stuart McCaig, born on Lismore, a banker, died in 1902 before it was completed. It has been left as it was then, best seen from afar, although close up it is rather tidier than it once was, with good views across the bay, no litter and nice shrubs. There are steps up to it from the end of the road by the Skipinnish Ceilidh House. McCaig must have been some sort of pre-Keynsian because it is said that in part his idea was to provide work for local stonemasons in the winter. However, CC Lynam visited "*the strange new round building*" in 1896 and thought he had built it "*in memory of himself*"<sup>87</sup>. Which is indeed true because in his will he instructed that there were to be statues of himself, his five brothers, four sisters, and his parents. But this never happened.

You can walk to the less ivy-covered than it once was, atmospheric and rather spooky ruin of Dunollie castle<sup>88</sup> on a 7th century site in lovely woods, just at the north entrance to the bay. Actually without the ivy it looks more naked than spooky. 'Pevsner' gets it just right as usual "*Ravaged by time, crag and castle alike struggle to resist the green grasp of parasitic vegetation.*"<sup>89</sup> Most of the ruin dates from the 15th and 16th centuries. It was abandoned in the 18th century. The interior is now open again after stabilisation in 2013-6, which graciously avoided disturbing the European cave spiders which apparently live in the castle walls. There are good views from the courtyard (and now from a second-floor viewing platform), over the bay just as

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<sup>80</sup> <https://liveargyll.co.uk/facility/the-corran-hall/>

<sup>81</sup> <https://www.obanwhisky.com/distillery>

<sup>82</sup> <https://thelornebaroban.co.uk/>

<sup>83</sup> <https://www.cuanmor.co.uk/>

<sup>84</sup> <https://www.jdwetherspoon.com/pubs/all-pubs/scotland/argyll-and-bute/the-corryvreckan-oban>

<sup>85</sup> <https://obaninn.co.uk/>

<sup>86</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/McCaig's\\_Tower](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/McCaig's_Tower)

<sup>87</sup> Lynam *ibid.*

<sup>88</sup> <https://canmore.org.uk/site/23027/dunollie-castle>

<sup>89</sup> Pevsner *ibid.*

Jules Verne described in *The Green Ray*: "*Nothing could have been more lovely than the panorama formed by the indentation of the bay of Oban, the wild appearance of Kerrera, the isles scattered in the Hebridean sea and the large Isle of Mull, whose rocky western coasts receive the first onslaught from the storms arising from the western Atlantic.*"<sup>90</sup>

The museum in Dunollie House<sup>91</sup> is next door to the castle, opened in 2011. It is small but growing, and has a café. It majors on domestic life in a laird's big house, with some MacDougall family history thrown in and a wonderfully eccentric collection of domestic this and that from the late Hope MacDougall (check out the international wooden spoons!). Started in the 17th century, the T-plan north range was built in 1745, and the main parts of the house were added in the 19th century. In 2013 a six-metre high dome made from willow, along with a seven-metre high tower, was planted. The idea is that it all takes root, flowers, and grows — and grows. Which it is. The lovely deciduous woods behind the house have been leased by the MacDougall family to the Woodland Trust for 99 years at a peppercorn rent.

On the way to the castle you walk along the Corran Esplanade with all its hotels and the truly architecturally awful Corran Halls; the 1957 Christ's Church now a nursery (grade B listed but hardly worth saving); and St Columba's Roman Catholic Cathedral which is a serious landmark but very austere, a Sir Giles Gilbert Scott design from the 1930s (he of Liverpool's C-of-E cathedral, and the red telephone box too). Further on, past various stray bits of volcanic lava plug, past posh-looking 20<sup>th</sup> century villas with cannons guarding the front door of one, you get to Ganavan Bay and the town beach (see above).

There was no town of Oban when John Knox visited in 1786, but he realised its potential: "*Oban is formed by nature, and by a combination of favourable circumstances, for being a principal harbour, a place of trade, a central mart for the South Highlands, and the numerous islands that lie in its vicinity.*"<sup>92</sup> And so it is now and, like much of the Highlands, it became a fashionable 19th century holiday destination, egged on by visits from Boswell and Johnson, Wordsworth, Mendelssohn, JMW Turner and Sir Water Scott. So much so that in 1896 Frank Cowper wrote: "*Now we are once more in the presence of beauty and fashion, or the world, the flesh and the devil, as the Catechism neatly puts it.*"<sup>93</sup> I am not sure this is still the case but then he added, "*No one stops here, at least not for more than a few days. It's whole season is one of panting, restless bustle. Everyone comes here to go somewhere else.*" Henry Reynolds felt much the same in 1895: "*The town is prettily situated. Rank and fashion were so much to the fore that we could not but be somewhat conscious of the shortcomings of our garb, even when the capabilities of our restricted wardrobes were utilised to their full extent. The only drawback to the place is the great depth of its waters.*"<sup>94</sup> But there is no pleasing

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<sup>90</sup> 'The Green Ray'. Jules Verne, Luath Press, Edinburgh, 2009. A 19th century romantic novel based on the author's journeys in Scotland, culminating in derring-do on Staffa. Also reads like a travel book, and as such is extremely accurate.

<sup>91</sup> <https://www.dunollie.org/>

<sup>92</sup> 'A Tour through the Highlands of Scotland and the Hebride Isles in 1786'. John Knox, James Thin, Edinburgh 1975, is what it says on the tin. 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.

<sup>93</sup> Cowper *ibid*.

<sup>94</sup> *Coastwise Cross-seas, the tribulations and triumphs of a casual cruiser*. Henry Reynolds, J D Potter, London, 1921. Although based on the Deben in Suffolk, the schoolmaster author spent his summer holidays cruising — with no engine — all round the UK, including up to Orkney and Shetland, and round the west

everyone — a couple of decades later, Claud Worth, the London ophthalmologist and sailor, complained that *"...the approaches to Oban have been given such a superfluity of beacons and buoys that there are none left for any other part of the west coast of Scotland."*<sup>95</sup> And in 1932 Heckstall Smith wrote that although Oban *"has few attractions as a town, it is a most wonderful centre from which to radiate into the finest parts of the Highlands, both inland and by sea as far as the Hebrid Isles."*<sup>96</sup> I would say much the same today. Finally, in 2010, Shane Spall — wife of actor Timothy — in her lovely two books about their seagoing barge trip round the UK wrote of Oban as *"a small compact place with handsome seafront shops selling postcards, tartan scarves, kilts, haggis, shortbread, umbrellas, pocket mackintoshes and miniature bottles of single malt whisky; not in every shop, just most of them. The others sold ice cream."*<sup>97</sup> Go and see for yourself!

## Oitir Mhòr and Charlotte Bays

On a sunny day the views across to Mull and Lismore are spectacular, but on a bad day I find the inner Oitir Mhòr anchorage more than bleak, and a fish farm does not exactly enhance Charlotte Bay, a feeling that has been heightened by the arrival of an incredibly dull house where once there was nothing. No doubt 'architect designed' as they say. The outer anchorage between Eilean nan Gamhna and Kerrera is much nicer.

The walk to the north end of Kerrera is good, with great vistas out to sea. At the very tip, above the shingle beach in the northwest corner of Charlotte Bay, is a rather subtle historical site — Cladh a'Bhearnaig<sup>98</sup>, called Cashel on the OS map. Apparently there was once a monastery here, now there is just a grassed-over 60-metre-diameter broken circle of old stones which to the untutored eye could have been a big sheep enclosure. These archaeological sites are profoundly unphotogenic.

Continue the walk to a much more in-your-face sight, and that is the view of Oban Bay from the granite obelisk on the hilltop, raised as a monument to David Hutcheson<sup>99</sup> who died in 1880. With his brother Alexander, and David MacBrayne,<sup>100</sup> he pioneered the first steamship services to the Western Isles, the precursor of CalMac ferries<sup>101</sup>. The inscription proclaims *"by whose energy and enterprise the benefits of greatly improved steam communication were conferred on the west highlands and islands of Scotland"*. Sit up here on a sunny afternoon taking in the scene, with a slim volume of poetry perhaps.

Of course you can get just as easily to the Hutcheson monument and the archaeology from Ardantrive Bay (see above).

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coast, taking in Ireland too. Not much description of the few places he had time to call in on, but he gives an excellent feeling of what sailing was like 100 years ago.

<sup>95</sup> Claud Worth. 'Yacht Cruising, third edition', 2016. J.D. Potter, London.

<sup>96</sup> 'Isle, Ben and Loch, from the Clyde to Skye'. S Heckstall Smith, Edward Arnold, London, 1932. An account of gentlemen's yachting where the skipper and pilot were hired, and the Owner ruled the roost. It is very much about this patch of sea, albeit with little information of what there is to do ashore, and in purple prose too, often along with much romantic twaddle about Skye.

<sup>97</sup> 'The Voyages of the Princess Matilda', and 'The Princess Matilda Comes Home' by Shane Spall, wife of actor Timothy, is charming and funny — a delightful read. Ebury Press, 2012 and 2013.

<sup>98</sup> <https://canmore.org.uk/site/23070/kerrera-cladh-a-bhearnaig>

<sup>99</sup> <http://gdl.cdlr.strath.ac.uk/mlemen/mlemen046.htm>

<sup>100</sup> <http://gdl.cdlr.strath.ac.uk/eyrwho/eyrwho1205.htm>

<sup>101</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Caledonian\\_MacBrayne](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Caledonian_MacBrayne)

## Poll nan Corran

*"Old Mother Earth has sprinkled, as from a pepper-pot, I know not how many islands, islets, rocks and reefs, a veritable archipelago, criss-crossed by sounds, channels, gulfs and creeks, a few easily navigable, some only with great care, and others not at all"* wrote John McLintock in 1938.<sup>102</sup> Indeed true, there are so many small delightful islands around the west side of the Sound of Luing that it is difficult to prefer one to another.

The special thing about this anchorage on Lunga is the walk to the edge of the Grey Dogs Channel (Little Corryvreckan),<sup>103</sup> and there to gaze at the tide race and wonder whether to give it a go, as I have seen a 30-foot yacht do, on the flood, admittedly when the sea was calm. At springs the water really does run seriously downhill, and even on a quiet day the whole place has a very unsettling look about it. In fact very few boats seem to attempt this passage, and I certainly haven't. Nor did the tough Corinthian sailor R.T. McMullen in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century *"After dinner, landed on the island for a stroll, and looked down from a height of 150 feet on the current raging in the narrow channel which divides this island from Scarba; but the scene was neither entertaining at the moment nor a pleasant subject of contemplation for anyone who, if under way, might possibly be forced through it in a calm."*<sup>104</sup>

You can also get to the same point by walking from the Camas a'Mhòr-Fhir anchorage (see above), but it is more tedious. The view from the hill on the southwest tip of the island is particularly grand and panoramic and, of course, the wild flowers are fantastic. The anchorage itself is fine too, out of the tide, and you can watch the boats going up and down the Sound of Luing. A bit north of the anchorage there is quite a well-kept looking house, perhaps mostly unoccupied, I don't know. On the next island but one — Rubha Fiola — there was a well-established adventure school, now closed after the manager was jailed for sex offences.

## Port Cuthaich (Sound of Kerrera)

This is not in the Sailing Directions so be careful not to stray into the adjacent Port Làthaich where submarine cables are marked on the chart. Instead, aim for Port Cuthaich which provides a very pretty anchorage on sand, obviously only in the right weather conditions — not in a south-westerly gale where the translation from the Gaelic of 'Port Madness' seems rather apt. And watch out for swell. And a warning — beware there is some sort of mooring rope on the seabed fairly near the shore.

Looking southwest to where the horizon is open to the Atlantic, where better to bring ashore the first transatlantic telephone cable — allowing 36 simultaneous voice calls, quite a lot at the time? The first cable was laid over the Atlantic seabed to Newfoundland in 1956, and remained in use until 1978, a rather short time considering the cost and effort involved. It was a remarkable technological triumph of its day, now all but forgotten. The cables are long gone but the remains of

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<sup>102</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>103</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4yHbJEIwwic>

<sup>104</sup> R.T. McMullen. 'Down Channel', third edition. Horace Cox, London, 1903.

the concrete pipes which enclosed them can still be seen at low tide. Of the three cables on the chart, only the concrete pipe for the one to the northwest is intact, the other two have been broken up but are still visible.<sup>105</sup> Presumably one pipe housed the cable to Newfoundland, and another the cable from Newfoundland. But what about the third? There is yet another concrete pipe a bit further to the southwest, but what was that for? On the shore is the flat roofed and ugly derelict terminal building (apparently full of asbestos), and behind it the closed-off tunnels which took the cables through the cliff.

For a while in the Cold War this very cable was used as part of the hot-line between the USA and the Soviet Union. And you can hear a recording of a stilted and no doubt scripted phone chat between the Canadian Prime Minister and the Queen back in 1961<sup>106</sup>.

### **Port nan Urrachann**

Now here is a little hidey-hole on the coast of Scarba<sup>107</sup>, not in the Sailing Directions, but good for a lunch stop or waiting for the tide at the Corryvreckan, but not so good for swell. Go ashore and walk 215° and you will find two satisfactory caves to crouch in, or in which to light a fire, with bones. But when the bracken is fully-grown they might be trickier to find than in late May when a cuckoo calls.

### **Puilladobhrain**

Well, it is almost totally enclosed and modestly remote but hardly enough to justify the hyperbole of the Sailing Directions with the inevitable result — too many other boats, always too many other boats except perhaps in the dead of winter. And it will get worse after being voted the most popular West Coast anchorage in 2011. Actually you can strike lucky in the early spring when the banks around the anchorage are awash with early flowers, and herons stalk whatever herons stalk (we were the only boat on March 30th 2016 — sunny, a bit chilly). It is certainly a pretty place and you can potter on the small islands while the children row around safely in the inflatable.

In fact it is not as remote as it looks and feels because it is only a ten-minute walk along a marked track to Clachan Seil, a small community with two things to do: gawp with the trippers at the so-called Bridge over the Atlantic (in truth over Clachan Sound) and then repair to the 18th century Tigh an Truish pub<sup>108</sup> (ph 01852 300242). After being in the same family for 35 years, the pub was sold in 2014. It is cosy, but I'm a bit uncertain about the food these days, at least out of season when I was last there (this may well be an out of date view). And food is not available every night of the week even in season, so check. There is a wonderful old wooden bench around the bar, perfect for sitting and leaning on the bar and drinking their real ales. To a newcomer this pub explains why there is a steady stream of boaties leaving their inflatables on the shore and then heading over the hill.

Tigh an Truish is Gaelic for 'house of the trousers'. Kilts were banned after the disastrous 1745 Jacobite rebellion, so the islanders heading for the mainland are supposed to have stopped off here to change from their kilts into trousers — sounds plausible to me.

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<sup>105</sup> [https://www.theregister.com/2013/10/14/reg\\_man\\_talks\\_transatlantic\\_with\\_tat1/](https://www.theregister.com/2013/10/14/reg_man_talks_transatlantic_with_tat1/)

<sup>106</sup> <https://www.cbc.ca/player/play/1428321148>

<sup>107</sup> <https://www.southernhebrides.com/isle-of-scarba/>

<sup>108</sup> <https://tighantruish.co.uk/>

Outside the pub, and seemingly part of the pub operation, are a couple of small outlets for postcards and some local photographs. Self-service with an honesty box.

The bridge, built in 1792-3 with uncertain influences from Thomas Telford, is a very beautiful hump-backed stone structure which is well worth a look, and a photograph.