

# Sound of Mull

Last updated 29<sup>th</sup> January 2024



Who cannot fail to be charmed by the Sound of Mull? C.C. Lynam certainly was in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, which must be why he spent so many of his holidays sailing in the Hebrides far away from his home in Oxford: *"What more delightful cruising ground can there be than these waters? Old ruined castles, Ardtornish of the Lords of the Isles, Duart with its grim tragic stories, Aros, Conn, and Mingary; lovely Loch Aline, and Loch Sunart winding far amongst the mountains can be explored ..."*<sup>1</sup> For me, the charm is the cuckoos in the spring, ever so familiar CalMac

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<sup>1</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 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."

ferries steaming up and down, snow on the hills in the late spring, views of Ben More, and the prospect of Ardnamurchan point and the open sea as I turn the corner off Tobermory. And, despite some fairly impressive squalls, it is a safe place for sailing, even when the weather is bad elsewhere; there are hurricane holes like Loch Aline and Tobermory which can both be entered in the dark if necessary, and always Loch Sunart to escape to.

With a coastline of nearly 300 miles and a population of slightly under 3000, Mull<sup>2</sup>, has a lot going for it notwithstanding the increasing number of second homes. The tourist industry is certainly booming with particular emphasis on wild life — marine, and in the air. To give you a good idea of the island, have a look at the charming film the islanders put together in 2020 during the first lockdown of the Covid pandemic.<sup>3</sup> And checkout the extraordinarily comprehensive Arts Trail website.<sup>4</sup>

### **Ardtornish Bay**

Given the direction of the prevailing wind, it isn't often sensible to anchor here although it is definitely worth a visit in the right conditions. The bay is surrounded by high cliffs with — after rain — waterfalls cascading down into beautiful deciduous woods (on a stormy day the waterfalls go upwards and back over the top of the cliffs!). These falls are known as the Morvern hags or witches. The cottage by the shore is wonderfully placed and is now a holiday home (I think only available to friends of the Ardtornish Estate<sup>5</sup>). There is a short and pretty walk to the remains of the very ruined Ardtornish Castle<sup>6</sup>. Not a lot left of this late 13th/early 14th century stronghold of the Lords of the Isles perched on a bright and breezy spot with fine views up and down the sound. In his usual understated way 'Pevsner' describes it as '*architecturally unrewarding*'<sup>7</sup> but then he may not have been looking at the view.

### **Aros Bay (Tobermory)**

You will be blissfully unaware of the fleshpots of Tobermory if you anchor in Aros Bay which is in the southeast corner of Tobermory Bay, although it can difficult to get an anchor to hold and there is a mussel farm partly in the way. Although sadly the old stone pier is gradually collapsing, you will find yourself enclosed by the beauty of Aros Park with its walks, woods, birdsong, waterfalls, lochan and unexpected remains of pumps and mills once belonging to Aros House which was built in 1825 and demolished in 1962. The old walled garden, now overgrown, is a reminder of the grandeur of an almost forgotten era (notwithstanding all those costume dramas on TV, Downton Abbey and the like). Perhaps it is just as well to forget the exploitation of the servants in the Victorian and Edwardian eras, and just enjoy the peace and beauty of the woods. There is also a lovely path<sup>8</sup> through those woods to Tobermory. And there are otters around.

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<sup>2</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Isle\\_of\\_Mull](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Isle_of_Mull)

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1e0YAfjajGk>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.mullandiona.art/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://ardtornish.co.uk/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://canmore.org.uk/site/22449/ardtornish-castle>

<sup>7</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.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.walkhighlands.co.uk/mull/aros-park.shtml>

And what a surprise! Who would have thought to find an active and successful theatre here? A miracle of artistic survival, run on a shoestring and threatened with closure on more than one occasion. The theatre<sup>9</sup> was founded in 1966 by Barrie and Marianne Hesketh, a couple of actors who had settled on Mull. They bought Druimard House in Dervaig and started to produce plays in the barn, with just the two of them as cast — and so the legendary Mull Little Theatre was born. It continues to this day as the Mull Theatre, from 2008 in a purpose-built home near Tobermory on the Salen road, although without the Heskeths since 1985. For a while it was celebrated as the smallest professional theatre in the world. Its success is due to the dedicated people who run it, a lot of media coverage over the years, a supportive local population, subsidies, and — of course — well-produced plays which not only tour to almost every theatre, city, town, village and island in Scotland but also have landed up in London. You can catch the tours in the most unlikely places such as Muck, Arisaig and Craignish, but don't blink — these are generally one-night stands and the company are packed up and off in the morning for a performance that evening somewhere else. Book now (ph 01688 302211)! It is a 40-minute walk from Tobermory along the coastal path and through Aros Park, but much quicker from the Aros Bay anchorage itself, skirting the lochan on your left and taking the path up towards the main road at Druimfin. Definitely do not walk along the main road from Tobermory.

### **Aros castle**

This castle can be visited from a small and surprisingly sheltered anchorage just off the pier by the White House (conspic. as it says on the chart). The trouble is when I visited the owner clearly did not like folk stepping off their boats into what turns out to be his back garden (not that you would know from the Sailing Directions, or indeed by a casual look from your boat). The estate was on the market in 2022 for £2.9 million. If whoever owns it now seems to be around it is less hassle and more polite to anchor off the castle itself which is rather scenic, albeit a longer row to the shore, and less shelter, but OK for a visit.

In fact the 13th century originally McDougall castle<sup>10</sup> is not all that interesting. It is fairly ruined and overgrown, having become derelict by the start of the 18th century. It does not seem to be looked after by, I understand, the owner of the White House. Although there is more left of it than of Ardtornish castle the position is not so exciting, but the views from the castle are lovely (there is a public access circular path through the woods). It is in a very strategic position halfway up the Sound of Mull, commanding the direct land route through Salen to the west of the island. The castle itself is only really worth visiting if you collect castles and wear the hood up on your anorak.

There is a bit of a beach below the castle — not much, gravel rather than sand, but enough to satisfy indiscriminating children. I suppose you could walk round to Salen (see below), but it is a bit far along a road for not a lot. There is a ruined medieval chapel, Cill an Ailein<sup>11</sup>, a couple of kilometres west-northwest of the castle which I have not seen, but it must be difficult to find in the forestry plantation.

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.antobarandmulltheatre.co.uk/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://canmore.org.uk/site/22272/mull-aros-castle>

<sup>11</sup> <https://canmore.org.uk/site/22264/mull-glen-aros-cill-an-ailein>

## Craignure

Not many boats seem to anchor at Craignure<sup>12</sup>, the tourist gateway to Mull. It is, however, convenient and sheltered, and easy to anchor with good views up Loch Linnhe. There is not too much of a wash from the Oban ferry, although ferries and other ships in the Sound do make waves so you still have to watch the crockery. It reminds me a bit of many of the Irish anchorages — in season there are a lot of tourists around, camping, children in the play park, grown ups in the Craignure Inn, folk fishing off the pier.

This anchorage can be useful for crew changes off the ferry, and apart from Oban, Fort William and Bowmore it has the only swimming pool within reasonable reach of an anchorage (quite a nice walk from the old pier — take the path off the road signed to Java, it is nearer if you anchor in the north part of the bay). The pool opened in 2008 as a joint venture between the local council and the Isle of Mull Hotel and Spa<sup>13</sup> (an extraordinarily ugly construction with a dull interior which seems far too big for where it is, but the scones are good and it has recently been refurbished — moorings have been promised too). Indeed, ‘a brand new coastal resort’ is also promised. The pool is only 17 metres long and nowhere is too deep to stand up in (1.2 metres). The views from the water are great if you have never mastered the crawl and only do the breast stroke like me — across to the entrance to the Sound of Mull and the Lismore lighthouse (mind you the trees are beginning to obscure the view now). It is a nice facility for sure. And if you are in to such things, there is a spa where you can enjoy, amongst a large variety of other treatments, the benefits of the ‘detoxifying and nourishing effect of the purest seaweed gel’ and ‘the luxurious scent of nurturing rose geranium to aid stress relief relax (sic), soothe and balance a tired mind and body’. Many people believe in this stuff.

Back in Craignure, put your head into the church<sup>14</sup> by the old harbour and pier. A bit too surrounded by modern houses, but it is a charming building. The two galleries can only be reached by outside stairs (locked these days), convenient for late worshippers presumably although they were originally built for the lairds. Inside is very wooden, and rather ship-like (it must be the pitch-pine pews that give this impression). It was built in the late 18th century and repaired in the 19th century, porch 1967.

The 18th century Craignure Inn<sup>15</sup> is a cosy place for standard pub grub, and real ale in the summer (I am told), if you can find a seat and get your order in at the height of the season (ph 01680 812305). Here they chase the midges away with fans, a neat idea which seems to work. Arlene's Coffee Shop<sup>16</sup> was new in 2011, right opposite the ferry pier, and is winning awards. Quite right too, try the lemon drizzle cake.

Interestingly, Craignure was, and maybe still is, the only place on Mull where the police can test your alcohol level. So if you are going to do a bit of drunk driving make sure it is a long way from here. By the time the police get you to Craignure your alcohol level might be acceptable!

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<sup>12</sup> <https://www.isle-of-mull.net/locations/craignure/>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.crerarhotels.com/isle-of-mull-hotel-spa/>

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.mull-historical-society.co.uk/churches/churches-2/torosay/>

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.craignure-inn.co.uk/>

<sup>16</sup> <http://arlenescoffeeshop.com/>

## **Doirlinn (Tobermory)**

Peace and quiet, but only a short step away from the Tobermory fleshpots. You can row across to Calve island where there is not a lot to see other than the rather nice views of the Sound of Mull.

## **Drimnin**

Drimnin<sup>17</sup> is literally at the end of the road, if you are coming by land, and a very long, single-track road it is too curling round the remarkably isolated and unpopulated part of Scotland called Morvern<sup>18</sup>. You can appreciate why people once connected up by sea in these parts, it is a mere three miles by boat to Tobermory. These days boaties seldom anchor here, Tobermory has a greater magnetic attraction. But the walks as ever are lovely, and if you can avoid the Highland Bull it is good to do the 15-minutes walk from the ferry slipway with its friendly notices, first left, up a track to the restored, by Derek and Louise Lewis of the Drimnin Estate,<sup>19</sup> St Columba's Roman Catholic Chapel perched on its rock looking out to Ardnamurchan. As well as providing a place for non-denominational Christian worship, it is a venue for music and the arts. It was locked when I was there so I don't know what it is like inside. It seems a strange location such a long way from any habitation, not many Roman Catholics in the area anyway, but not so strange for a castle which once stood on the same spot. Until in 1838 Sir Charles Gordon, a Banffshire landowner, bought the estate and pulled the castle down to make way for his own private chapel. The estate has now built a distillery with the first products on tap in 2020, so maybe another reason to anchor here.<sup>20</sup> The estate website is highly attractive, holiday cottages to let, guided walks, all that sort of thing.

## **Duart Castle**

I must have sailed past Duart Castle<sup>21</sup> a hundred times, maybe even two hundred, before I first anchored by the small stone jetty under the cliff. It is worth a stop, not for the tearoom or the shop which are a bit dull, but for the view from what is known as the Sea Room which Fitzroy Maclean built on to the side of the keep after he bought the castle as a ruin in 1910, and then restored it. Sit on cushions covering a wide window-seat and look north up Loch Linnhe to a great panorama of mountains, including Ben Nevis. The foreground stretches from Morvern to Lismore.

In 1549 the castle was described by Dean Monro as "A strenthey place, bigged on a craige at the sea syde."<sup>22</sup> The restored castle, which is still owned by the MacLeans, although like so many castles round here was built by the MacDougalls in the 13th century, is certainly domestic in feel if a bit run down in the public areas, even though it was clearly once a substantial fortress. The photographs of what it was like before the restoration make one wonder whether similar ruins could today be made to look as good, or would the

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<sup>17</sup> <https://www.undiscoveredscotland.co.uk/lochaline/drimnin/>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.westhighlandpeninsulas.com/about-the-peninsulas/morvern>

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.drimninestate.co.uk/>

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.drimninestate.co.uk/distillery>

<sup>21</sup> <https://duartcastle.com/>

<sup>22</sup> 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 first 'Haswell-Smith' perhaps.

preservationists prefer ivy-covered crumbling walls like Aros castle (see above)? Whatever, Duart is a great success as it stands on its point, Saltire flying in the wind, well known to all west coast sailors as they take the tide in or out of the Sound of Mull. It is particularly wonderful on a dark and stormy night with a single lighted window — one imagines vampire bats flying in and out.

### **Eilean Rubha an Ridire**

A neat little anchorage to tuck into, more or less out of the tide. There is nothing really to see or do ashore. Better to sit in the cockpit, gin and tonic in hand, admiring the view, and the seals, and the sea eagles.

### **Fiunary rocks**

Only for settled weather, no more than a lunch-stop really. There does not seem to be much special to do ashore. There is a rather discrete caravan and campsite (unlike the in-your-face one at Castle Sween, see Loch Sween) and along the road to the right is a satisfactory bridge for playing Pooh Sticks.

### **Inninmore Bay**

A nice spot. The restored cottage is not for rent these days, but if there is no one there I am told you are welcome to go in and dry out. And apparently there is a visitors' book. Like good friends many years ago who did rent the place, you have to be pretty robust to get here by land i.e. you walk carrying all your gear and food, presumably from the farm at Ardtornish point. Or of course you could arrive by boat which would be a lot easier. Behind the cottage are the remains of some ruined cottages. It is all delightfully remote.

The beach below the cottage is shingle but there are lots of interesting rock pools by the isolated rock that doesn't cover, and deer come down to the shore to feed. There is a fish trap<sup>23</sup> by that rock. And of course watch out for sea eagles. And for the wash from the occasional ships in the Sound — not good for the wine glasses. The deciduous woods between here and Ardtornish are fabulous.

### **Loch Aline (loch ath a'linne — the loch of the ford of the pool)**

Frank Cowper got it exactly right in 1896: *"This is really an ideal anchorage. Beautiful scenery, perfect safety, a good inn close by, and mail steamers every day except Sunday. To be anchored in such a place goes far to reconciling one to the miseries of the W. Highland climate. Loch Aline is almost perfection"*<sup>24</sup>. It really is a much more promising place than the first impression you get from the silica quartz sand mine<sup>25</sup> just beyond the narrow entrance. This opened in 1940,

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<sup>23</sup> <https://canmore.org.uk/site/267129/inninmore-bay>

<sup>24</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.

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

was closed down in 2008 as being 'uneconomic' with the loss of 11 full-time jobs, but reopened in 2012 and is now working flat out. By 2018 the work force was up to 23. And off goes the high quality sand by ship to Runcorn, and much of it then on to Italy to make glass for solar panels. Watch the film!<sup>26</sup> You might strike lucky and catch one of the tours which run during the Morvern highland games<sup>27</sup> in July, or you could try a polite phone call to 01967 421324.

The village itself is not much of a place but there is a basic shop, and right next to it there the Whitehouse Restaurant which closed in 2021 but then reopened under new ownership (01967 421356).<sup>28</sup> It is said to be very good, and so it should be at £60 per person for dinner cheaper for lunch). Pontoons<sup>29</sup> arrived in 2011, with excellent showers and toilets, and all very friendly (ph 07583 800500). It's a pity they were not installed right by the old harbour, but maybe it is too shallow there. So it is a short walk to the village along an illuminated path, past the silica mine so you do get a lot of sand on your boots. The visitor moorings are even further away. This was all put together by the Morvern Community Development Company<sup>30</sup> to encourage more business and employment after the silica mine closed down.

The Loch Aline Hotel passed into new ownership in 2023 and has great reviews on Tripadvisor.<sup>31</sup> It is down on the shore with views overlooking the Sound of Mull (ph 07555 203624). Last time I was there I was astonished to find a helicopter outside — not a visiting Russian oligarch, just a couple of blokes carrying stuff around for the fish farms. I don't know whether there is still a bar and restaurant open to non-residents.

Below the village by the stone pier you will find the well-known Liz's (was Jean's) Lochaline snack bar selling what snack bars sell, just £2 for a coffee and scone sitting out in the sun (or rain) about five years ago I think.<sup>32</sup> After 27 years, Jean sold the business and retired — let's hope her successor is just as successful. In 2016 she was awarded the BEM for her efforts — well deserved, unlike so many higher up the Honours List. This pier was once called the Relief Pier because it was constructed in 1843 to provide work for the local population which had been decimated by the potato famine and the clearances. Instead of money they earned food. The pier was restored in the late 20th century. It is worth reflecting that it was to here and around about that the St Kildans were evacuated in 1930. It provided their first sight of trees, let alone of roads and cars.

Definitely take a walk up the hill behind the village to Kiel Church.<sup>33</sup> (This is where St Columba decreed a church should be built, Kiel is an abbreviation of Cille Choluimchille, meaning the cell of St Columba of the church.) The church itself, probably built in 1898 on the site of the very much earlier St Columban chapel, is not that interesting but two other things are. First, the graveyard with a lovely view across the gravestones up the Sound of Mull (with deer last time I was there on a quiet evening). In the southeast corner you will find an interesting 18th century gravestone commemorating the 11 children of John and Florans

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<sup>26</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uU9q5LDaxCs&t=84s>

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/morverngamesandgalaweek/>

<sup>28</sup> <https://thewhitehouserestaurant.co.uk/>

<sup>29</sup> <http://www.lochalineharbour.co.uk/>

<sup>30</sup> <http://www.morvern.org/>

<sup>31</sup> <https://lochalinehotel.com/>

<sup>32</sup> [https://www.facebook.com/lochalinesnackbar/?locale=en\\_GB](https://www.facebook.com/lochalinesnackbar/?locale=en_GB)

<sup>33</sup> <https://www.wildlochaber.com/ardnamurchan/attractions/carved-stones-of-kiel>

Cameron — 11 little heads all in a row. Second, the small building next to the church, once a school built in 1774, contains a wonderful collection of medieval Scottish graveslabs and free-standing crosses decorated with swords, warriors, churchmen and birlinns<sup>34</sup>. These are very well displayed with excellent information about them.

Back by the loch, the walks along either side are wonderful, particularly I would say on the east side. At first coming from the south you will find a sign to Tennyson's waterfall, apparently he visited in 1853. Then a burn with 200-million-year-old mollusc-like fossils, and a small long-abandoned lime kiln. Eventually at the head of the loch you pass an old boathouse before arriving at the gates of Ardtornish House, a late 19th century neo-Gothic pile with an amazing clock tower. In fact close-up it doesn't have quite the fairy-tale impression it gives from a distance, being in a curious way rather plain and dull. Maybe this is because it is now all or mostly holiday flats, and because it is of concrete construction, albeit faced with red sandstone. But the grounds and gardens are really nice to wander around with lots of lovely trees and, in season, 200 different types of rhododendron in flower (£4 entrance). And there is a small gift shop. The estate website is certainly enthusiastic and informative. And you can get married here<sup>35</sup>.

More architecturally interesting is just next door, the now very reconstructed and restored 15th century — and sort of orange — Kinlochaline Castle<sup>36</sup>, built for the MacLeans of Duart as a tower house. You cannot get in but even the outside is worth a view. There is a high keep, and perched on top what looks like a small highland house. It peeps out just above the trees as you sail up the loch.

From the anchorage in the southeast corner of the loch, there is another great walk with wild flowers and views, not round the loch but along the coast to Ardtornish Bay with its castle (see Aros Bay above).

## Salen

This seems a bleak anchorage to me, but why? Perhaps it's the broken-down original pier which is now just a few sticks poking out of the surface of the sea. The later 1905 'new' pier was last used by the Oban ferry in 1964, after which it too fell into dereliction. However, a new owner set about a restoration in 2007 which was finished by 2013, complete with a restored waiting room. The boring modern house by the pier is for rent, sleeps 13. Others seem to feel the same bleakness, or maybe it is sadness, because there hardly ever seem to be any boats anchored here except for the one day in May where it is the first stop for the Scottish Islands Peaks Race<sup>37</sup>.

It is a bit of a walk, maybe 15 minutes, to the village<sup>38</sup> where there is a reasonable shop, and an excellent cafe and tearoom, the Coffee Pot (ph 01680 300555)<sup>39</sup> in the nicest old building in the village (1803). I had not seen a bench with a hinged pop-up table in the middle before,

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<sup>34</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Birlinn>

<sup>35</sup> <https://ardtornish.co.uk/>

<sup>36</sup> <https://canmore.org.uk/site/22432/kinlochaline-castle>

<sup>37</sup> <https://www.scottishislandspeaksrace.com/>

<sup>38</sup> <https://www.undiscoveredscotland.co.uk/mull/salen/index.html>

<sup>39</sup> <https://www.argyll-house.co.uk/the-coffee-pot>



perfect for resting your latte. You could carry on to Aros castle but it is not a very exciting walk (see Aros Castle above).

If you are very swanky your rich friends could land at the Glenforsa airstrip in their private plane in front of the Glenforsa hotel (about 800 landings and take-offs a year).<sup>40</sup> It is maybe a bit too far to walk for a meal

The Salen agricultural show in August is said to be very good.<sup>41</sup>

## **Tobermory**

The fleshpots of Tobermory!<sup>42</sup> Undoubtedly the prettiest village — or town — on the West Coast. Not to be missed. It has almost everything, particularly after a stormy day off Ardnamurchan: pubs, hotels, restaurants, showers, laundry, distillery, shops, walks, water, diesel, just hanging around. Once upon a time not so long ago when I was youngish there was only an anchorage. Then came the Tobermory Harbour Association<sup>43</sup> moorings (a not-for-profit community enterprise), and then the pontoons (at a very reasonable price but avoid in northerlies) complete in 2008 with a parading otter named Elvis, sadly now no more. In 2012 another otter appeared for a few months before dying in 2013. This end of the bay has certainly been tidied up by the harbour development, and it has made it much easier to find an anchoring spot under the trees in the old anchoring area which used to be hellish crowded and worryingly deep, provided private moorings don't go on encroaching — which they seem to be (Tobermory harbour master please note). Of course if you want peace and quiet in Tobermory Bay then do your shopping and push off to Aros Bay or Doirlinn (see above). But, wherever you go, don't get too near the trees on a still night — midges!

Tobermory was toiling with Balamory fever in the early 2000s, inundated during the summer school holidays with families whose young children wanted to see all the sights from the popular BBC Scotland TV programme. That was fine up to a point, but it was not the real Tobermory until they all went back to Oban on the ferry. I am told they didn't bring much to the economy because they just came for the day, looked at the sights, ate their picnic lunch, and went away. Even now there are still the last remains of Balamory fever to be seen in the shops selling colouring-in books and such like. PC Plum still lives, just!

Right above the pontoons you will find, to my eyes if not to those of many others, a less than attractive modern building (Taigh Solais) looking like a cross between a lighthouse and a church. However, inside you will discover excellent toilets and showers, a laundry, and the Mull Aquarium (although it will be closed in 2024 pending a move to more suitable premises<sup>44</sup>. It contained lots of interesting stuff, including the skeleton of Elvis. The staff were charming, and for kids there was a touch-pool where they could handle marine creepy-crawlies, crabs and the like. It boasted Europe's first catch and release aquarium where local fish (36 varieties) and other sea creatures were caught and returned to the sea after four weeks. The jellyfish tank, the movie, and particularly the topographical display made of

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<sup>40</sup> <https://www.glenforsa.com/>

<sup>41</sup> <https://salenshow.wordpress.com/>

<sup>42</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tobermory,\\_Mull](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tobermory,_Mull)

<sup>43</sup> <http://tobermoryharbour.co.uk/>

<sup>44</sup> <https://mullaquarium.co.uk/>

shifting sand and clever computing were musts. Let's hope it is just as good in its new location.

MacGochan's pub<sup>45</sup> is nearby, right in the path of visiting yachtsmen for beer and grub (ph 01688 302350). It was relaunched in 2012, then in 2020 restored after a fire, and is much more cosy than it once was. And it is big on live music. After that comes the garage which can fix boat engines, and then you can't miss the Tobermory Ledaig distillery<sup>46</sup>. There are tours, of course, and a shop. It was founded in 1798, right at the beginning of Tobermory as a town, but the present buildings date from 1822. The rather magnificent bond warehouse across the road, now flats, is late 18th or early 19th century. The small building opposite the distillery on the shore was once a Baptist chapel, built in 1862.

As you walk along the main street you will find the Isle of Mull Ice Cream parlour<sup>47</sup> in the (whisper it) converted public toilets. Try the whisky and marmalade flavour — proper ice cream. Delicious. Then on the old (fishermen's) pier (completed in 1814 by Telford), you will find the Tobermory chip van<sup>48</sup> which is well-renowned with its Les Routiers designation. It is run by Jeanette Gallagher and Jane MacLean, both fishermen's wives. The nearby 1905 town clock provides a good place to sit, it was designed by Charles Whympier, brother of the famous mountaineer (a charming chime on the hour). You will find the Hebridean Whale and Dolphin Trust<sup>49</sup> along the main street, to browse in and report your exciting sightings, if any.

Moving further along the main street, my own favourite pub is the bright yellow-painted Mishnish<sup>50</sup> (where live music can be found some nights) provided you don't mind playing at being a sardine with yachties (in yellow wellies, no in Dubarries these days), scuba divers (small and round with their origin blazoned onto their bulging T-shirts), and the local youth. This place has real atmosphere with walls adorned with flags and photographs, a pool table and cosy cubicles (for kissing I am told) if you can get a seat in one. There are a couple of real ales, including the 'local' Mishnish Ale (which is good but actually brewed by Belhaven). And the pub grub is good too. The restaurant is a bit too metropolitan in its decor for my taste, the musac too loud too (ph 01688 302 500). A second restaurant apparently appeared in 2023, for fine dining. In 2014 there had been traumas over ownership, and the hotel passed into the hands of Meg and Les MacLeod.

For afternoon tea, combined with a stunning view across the bay, the late 19th century Western Isles Hotel<sup>51</sup> should be the place to go (ph 01688 302012). However, it went through a very bad patch when the conservatory was made over, and the comfortable couches thrown out. It changed hands in 2009, and again in 2014, and things may have looked up but I haven't been back since.

The Galleon Bistro<sup>52</sup> is up a turning off the main street (ph 01688 301117). In 2019 it was up for sale so things may have changed. Reviews are very good.

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<sup>45</sup> <https://macgochans-tobermory.co.uk/>

<sup>46</sup> <https://tobermorydistillery.com/>

<sup>47</sup> [https://www.facebook.com/IsleOfMullIceCream/?locale=sy\\_SY](https://www.facebook.com/IsleOfMullIceCream/?locale=sy_SY)

<sup>48</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/FishermansPierTobermory/>

<sup>49</sup> <https://hwdt.org/>

<sup>50</sup> <https://themishnish.co.uk/>

<sup>51</sup> <https://www.westernisleshotel.com/>

<sup>52</sup> <https://thegalleontobermory.co.uk/>

At the end of the main street you will find Café Fish<sup>53</sup> on the first floor of the flash 1930s ferry terminal building on the new(er) mid-19th century ferry pier. It is brilliant for seafood (and desserts), really nice and I think the best place to eat (at reasonable expense) in Tobermory (ph 01688 301253). However, it is small, has two sittings for dinner, can be extremely busy and difficult to get a table, so book really early and you will not regret it. I believe they also do take-aways. I like their strapline: 'The only things frozen are our fishermen'. But, a big but, in 2018 it was up for sale for £500,000 which could be very bad news. However, it still seems to be in the same very capable hands.

Move on up the hill to An Tobar<sup>54</sup>, the arts venue and excellent café. It is definitely worth a visit, but normally closes at 5pm. It is in a converted primary school on Argyll Terrace above the main street with great views and outside tables, one of which has been created to look like one half of a small wooden boat (ph 01688 302211). There are all sorts of activities here — music, art classes, a gallery and so on. The Mull Theatre<sup>55</sup> is part of the An Tobar organisation and is an absolute must, described under Aros Bay above.

Back on the main street, do look at the Mull museum which had its origins not so long ago in 1972<sup>56</sup>. It is small, charming and interesting. Show your children the tawse to remind them what it was like in the (good?) old days. The tawse — if you don't know — is a strip of leather to beat naughty children over the palm of the hand, in front of the class, only outlawed as late as 1987 (I was merely beaten across the buttocks with a gym shoe or cane at my school). And check out the story of the Neptune, the Canadian sailing ship which landed up off Ardnamurchan instead of Newfoundland. Have a look at the bits of a crashed Dakota aeroplane. Brood on the map of shipwrecks round Mull. Check out the 'Terror of Tobermory'.

You can get more-or-less everything you might need in Tobermory. My own favourite shop is 'Tackle and Books'. What an eccentric and yet happy conjunction of small boys eyeing up the spinners on one side and the serious traveller browsing around the fine collection of Scottish and other books on the other. Then there is Tobermory Chocolates for a pricey indulgence (handmade apparently) and excellent ice cream. Brown's established in 1830 is a monument to another age — ironmongery and booze, both tastefully displayed in their shop window. The Co-op supermarket is good (apart from the crowded aisles and long queues), and the Tobermory Bakery and tea Room<sup>57</sup> for rolls and patisseries (get your breakfast croissants here before setting sail but phone to make sure it is open — 01688 302225). The Tobermory Fish Company<sup>58</sup> wins awards and has a retail outlet up the hill out of town next to the Mull Pottery. Once there was a butcher (which also sold fish) but they closed in 2009, very sad. There is a small chandlery which I think is changing hands in 2024 (Seafarer) (ph 01688 302277)<sup>59</sup> Indeed, there is not much you can't get hereabouts which would otherwise require a visit to Oban.

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<sup>53</sup> <http://www.thecafefish.com/>

<sup>54</sup> <https://www.antobarandmulltheatre.co.uk/an-tobar-cafe>

<sup>55</sup> <https://www.antobarandmulltheatre.co.uk/>

<sup>56</sup> <http://www.mullmuseum.org.uk/>

<sup>57</sup> <https://www.tobermorybakery.com/>

<sup>58</sup> <https://www.tobermoryfish.co.uk/>

<sup>59</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/pages/category/Shopping---Retail/Seafare-Tobermory-149276365092756/>

You should certainly not miss a stroll around the upper village, particularly along Argyll Terrace with its neat terraced houses separated by the road from their gardens. The view down onto the bay with the bobbing boats on moorings is exquisite. If you only like to walk with a golf club in your hand, there is a 9-hole course<sup>60</sup> up on the cliffs above the town, overlooking the entrance to the Sound of Mull — stunning views to take your eye off the ball. Even without a golf club you can walk around the course to above the lighthouse, then down a steep path to the shore and back along a path that can be extremely muddy, through the woods to Tobermory. Or just do the Rubha nan Gall lighthouse walk to and from Tobermory along the shore, past where there used to be bathing huts and even a sea-bathing pool (in the first bay past the pier). You can rent the Lighthouse keeper's cottages, sleeps six. And the walk to Aros park and around the lochan and back is an excellent one-and-a-half hour saunter through lovely woods, with scenery<sup>61</sup>.

Finally, just why does the ensemble look so attractive (with the notable exception of the horizontal sign of the Co-op supermarket)? Probably because it was originally laid out from scratch in 1788 by the 'British Society for Extending the Fisheries and Improving the Sea Coast of the Kingdom'. Years before, a retreating Spanish galleon from the Armada had ended up here, before mysteriously sinking into the deep mud of the bay, where it lies still, awaiting the salvage of real or imagined treasures, despite many efforts over the years. In fact the bay had been well known as a safe anchorage for centuries, even though there was more or less no town or even a village, just a few houses: *"..a very fine place for large ships; for it is sheltered from all winds, the ground good, and the depth moderate"*<sup>62</sup> according to Murdoch MacKenzie in 1776, and *"One of the most celebrated, and most frequented bays in the Highlands"* according to John Knox ten years later<sup>63</sup>.

The original town was built over a few years and still retains a wonderful sense of character and history. Ironically, fishing never really took off, instead Tobermory became more a centre for trade between the mainland and the outer islands, helped along by tourism right from early in the 19th century. William Daniell may have helped the tourism industry by not just his sketching but by writing in 1817: *"The inhabitants of Tobermory, whether from the frequent intercourse with strangers which their situation occasions, or from other causes, are distinguished from other Hebrideans by a greater attention to personal neatness and cleanliness. ....Another agreeable prepossession which a traveller acquires in journeying thither arises from the frequent praise bestowed on the beauty of its females, and this characteristic is also well warranted. There are certainly many pretty women at Tobermory, and their appearance, as well*

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<sup>60</sup> <https://tobermorygolfclub.com/>

<sup>61</sup> <https://www.walkhighlands.co.uk/mull/aros-park.shtml>

<sup>62</sup> Murdoch Mackenzie was an Orcadian cartographer and hydrographer, and the first to produce recognisable charts of the seas around the British Isles, as well as sailing directions, while working for the Admiralty. You can find many of the charts in the National Library of Scotland, and the book on line — 'Nautical Descriptions of the West Coast of Great Britain from Bristol Channel to Cape Wrath' 1776.

<sup>63</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.

*as that of the children and the men, is much improved, by that glow of health which habitual cleanliness never fails to promote.*"<sup>64</sup> So there you have it, wash regularly!

Apparently it was not until the 1960s that the owner of the Mishnish decided to splash colour on to his grey building, so setting the multicolour trend of what you see today. However, this story may not be quite true as Archibald Young described some of the houses as being painted 'bright yellow' in 1898<sup>65</sup>. And why the name Tobermory? Because Tobar Mhoire is Gaelic for Mary's Well which is somewhere hidden in the upper town near the remains of a medieval chapel.

*"I've sailed the seven seas and travelled every way but there's nowhere near so beautiful as Tobermory Bay".* I have no idea who wrote that, but it just about sums it up.

To get an idea of what Tobermory looked like in 1939 have a look at this old movie.<sup>66</sup>

## **Torosay**

You can sail up and down the Sound of Mull for a lifetime and never spot this place, I think because one is always trying to get somewhere else, and anyway the anchorage is very much for fair weather. There is an old slipway, a boathouse, and a path through rhododendrons to the 19th century Torosay Castle<sup>67</sup> with an amazing terraced garden complete with real 18th century Italian statues (bought or stolen I wonder). The attraction is not so much the plants — although the herbaceous border is pretty spectacular — but the setting, the design, the old stone walls, the gargoyles, the trees surrounding the water garden and those decaying statues — a hand off here, half a fish there, an evocation of the fruits of the land being enjoyed in simple rural pleasure. There is even a statue of a man watering his garden. But all of that is now behind closed gates for the enjoyment of the few and the detriment of the many — sounds familiar in the days of excessive bankers' bonuses. The castle and gardens were sold in 2011, I think to an American who was said to have a rather dodgy past history. But then, mysteriously, it was back on the market in 2012, offers over £1.6 million. Again it was sold, this time to a Swiss family, and the gardens were definitively closed. I somehow think we are not "all in this together" as the once Prime Minister David Cameron claimed.

And nor did the new owners want the intrusion of the lovely narrow-gauge railway that used to run from Craignure, so beloved of countless children — and their fathers. So it was all pulled up and is gone. Shame on them (particularly if they are not going to live there). Much to their credit the previous owners, whose family had lived there since 1865, shared this lovely place with us, the grubby but appreciative public. They had left notes all over the house: *"Your presence does much to keep the place alive...we don't do conducted tours which in my view are hell for both guides and guests...take your time, but not our spoons"*. Bravo David Guthrie-Jones.

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<sup>64</sup> William Daniell, *A Voyage round Great Britain Undertaken in the Summer of the Year 1813*, vol. 4. London: Longman et al., 1820.

<sup>65</sup> *Summer Sailings*, by an old yachtsman by A Young. David Douglas, Edinburgh, 1898. More like a late 19th century tour guide than a book about sailing, but includes excellent illustrations by the author, an Edinburgh Advocate, as well as descriptions of well-known places like the Falls of Lora.

<sup>66</sup> <https://movingimage.nls.uk/film/1397>

<sup>67</sup> <http://www.mull-historical-society.co.uk/daily-life/castles-fortifications/castles/torosay-castle/>

The house is very Scottish Baronial, 1856-8, designed by David Bryce who also designed the old Edinburgh Royal Infirmary and Fettes College (Tony-Iraq-War-Blair's alma mater and Scotland's answer to Eton). There are rather wonderful Rupert Bear turrets and crowstep gables, and inside it had the feeling of a family home, which it was, with interesting items and charming descriptions of many of the pictures and their family relevance. It was particularly welcome to be invited to sit on the chairs. The whole place used to have a lovely feel to it, posh for sure, but nice, and not too cocky. Libby Purves described the same feelings in "One Summer's Grace"<sup>68</sup>. But now, all closed and the public can bog off, except for the gardens which are maybe open on the first Sunday in the month. I can understand the house being closed, but not the gardens — even the Queen opens her gardens at Holyrood Palace in Edinburgh to the public, when she is not residence. Who owns Scotland? Not the Scots.

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<sup>68</sup> One Summer's Grace, a family voyage round Britain, Hodder and Stoughton 1990, by Libby Purves, particularly for her observations about small children on boats.