

The Third Ascent of Rockall

by Brian Cunningham

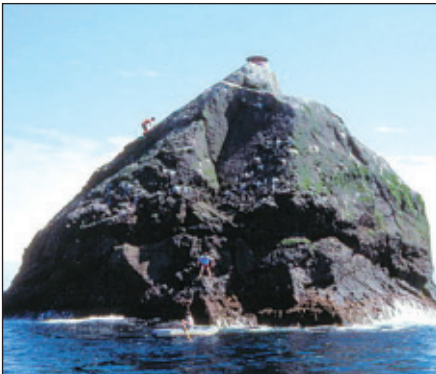


Rockall in ideal conditions.

Photo Andy Strangeway

A seafaring variation of Murphy's Law has it that the more difficult a rock is to find, the easier it is to hit by accident. So it is with Rockall. In 1686 a Spanish merchant ship foundered on the rock. The survey vessel Leonidas also foundered on Rockall in 1812 (250 dead). Helen of Dundee was wrecked in 1824 and the steamer SS Norge sank off Rockall in 1904 with the loss of 634 lives.

In 1955 the Royal Navy first planted the Union Jack on Rockall using a helicopter. A light was erected in 1959 but it was soon destroyed by the sea. A much more substantial light was installed in 1972 but inevitably, it also met its fate in a winter storm.



Brian ascending Rockall.



Photo Ian Reynard

Only sixty feet high and about the same in diameter, Rockall appears on the chart as a tiny speck approximately two hundred and fifty miles from the nearest land at Tory Island, off the north-west coast of Donegal in Ireland. To the amateur sailor, the remoteness of Rockall is its only attraction and in the days before GPS, finding it was considered the ultimate navigational challenge. It was this challenge that attracted Ian Reynard and one day in June 1977 I received a telephone call from him.

'Hello Brian, you don't know me but a mutual friend told me you do crazy things.' He paused to let this sink in before continuing. 'I want to sail out to Rockall and I was wondering if you'd like to be part of the crew?'

And so it was that, near midnight one Sunday, four of us set off from Portrush on Ian Reynard's 34ft yacht Malaprop bound for Rockall. The wind was south and Malaprop romped out past Innistrathull into a lumpy Atlantic Ocean. Soon the harmony of the short summer night was being rudely marred by the sound of the previous night's dinner being chucked overboard. Malaprop crashed on and breakfast relentlessly followed.

Towards evening on the Monday things began to settle somewhat. The wind eased, the sea calmed and the pattern of life on board settled down. We were split into two watches, each comprising a sailor and a full-time navigator. In this way Malaprop's position could be checked and rechecked continuously. Day and night this continued with an endless succession of sun, moon and star sights, consul, direction-finding radio and dead-reckoning positions. I was a sailor and in contrast to my navigating watch companion, Ian, I enjoyed a relaxing sail, happy in the knowledge that if Rockall were to evade such intense navigators, there was little I could do to help matters. Tuesday brought fog which increased the tension, but providentially it cleared on Wednesday morning, perhaps burned off by the will of our demon navigators.

The friendly southerly wind which had blown so steadily for the past three days finally died and on a glassy-smooth sea beneath a clearing sky we motored steadily towards Rockall. Luck was with us and at 11.00am we sighted Rockall as a black speck on the horizon, dead ahead.

The already good conditions continued to improve and by the time we reached the rock the day was perfect. The sea was flat and the sun shone. The air was full of buzzing puffins and soaring fulmars; everywhere there was life and noise. Although Rockall is for the most part sheer, it is pitted with fist-sized holes in the rock which serve as secure roosts for the sea-birds.

Our flat calm turned out to be a lazy six-foot swell which was sufficient to deter the skipper from attempting a landing. It was therefore left to Dave and me to scramble ashore. The climb to the summit was straightforward

but required care as it is steep and very slippery. In 1972 and with an eye to future deep-sea drilling for oil, HM Government staked its territorial claim to Rockall by constructing a new and very substantial navigation light on the summit of Rockall. To do this, in an act of unforgivable vandalism, they blasted away the top ten feet of the rock to make a flat base for the light. In a further act of desecration this unfortunate and unnecessary deed was proudly commemorated on a brass plaque fastened to the rock just above Hall's Ledge.

The light required annual servicing and it wasn't long before it ceased operation. Winter gales batter Rockall with unimaginable ferocity and in the five years since it was installed, everything apart from its bronze casing had been washed away. Incredibly, inside the light were several pieces of driftwood which gave testament to the severity of the storms which pound this lonely rock.

I stood on the top for ten priceless minutes before scrambling down a few feet and jumping off into the sea. Minutes later I was back safely on board Malaprop drinking champagne. By late afternoon Rockall had vanished once again beneath the horizon and it was all just a memory.

Footnotes.

1. That summer I published an article on Rockall in several yachting magazines. In it I described Hall's Ledge as being just about big enough to take a deckchair and a case of beer. Coincidentally (or otherwise...) the following year the Dangerous Sports Club sailed out to Rockall, climbed onto Hall's Ledge with a couple of deckchairs and a case of champagne, got royally smashed and then dived off the summit dressed in top hats and tails.

2. As best we could establish, my ascent was the third time anybody had scaled Rockall. (Many naval personnel were landed on the summit by helicopter during the construction of the light).

3. In the days before GPS there were many stories of yachts which cruised out to Rockall and never found it. Others found it but couldn't land. Only a very few have been fortunate enough to have the perfect conditions we enjoyed.