Sailing to the Faeroes

by Boece Cardus and John Payne

I realised a long time ago that, with the odd exception, trying to mix sailing and climbing or walking does not work very well. However, this year I thought that a trip in our boat to the President's Meet might be a good idea.

As usual, logistics were a big factor and it became obvious that with the limited time available to us, we would only be able to spend a relatively short period at the meet. Our boat, named 'Vember' (a girl's name), is a solid, dependable sloop of fairly old design which will sail at a steady 5 knots in fair conditions. This speed might increase if the wind and seas are favourable, but is often considerably less.

I estimated the trip from the mooring in Loch Leven up to Klaksvik, on Bordoy, would take about a week, with one or two stops on the way. After that we had a further week to get somewhere convenient for two of the crew to return home and get back to work. My wife suggested it was going to be a lot of hard work to achieve a Rucksack Meet tick! More importantly, the weather was going to be crucial. My view was that we should get as far up the West Coast of Scotland as we could and then decide if the trip to the Faeroes was feasible.

The journey to Stornoway went reasonably well, with the exception of rough seas off Ardnamurchan Point and to the west of the Small Isles. This caused us to stop at Canna after Kate had been thrown across the cabin and landed heavily on the corner of the chart table and then on the VHF radio. The radio was of robust construction and did not suffer any damage. Unfortunately the same could not be said of Kate, who suffered a severe knock to her ribs and head. We got into Canna 'Harbour' on Sunday evening and anchored in very rough conditions until early next morning. Poor Kate suffered an extremely uncomfortable night and I began to have further doubts about out objective.

There were about a dozen other yachts anchored in the bay and more arrived after us, often struggling in the foul conditions to find sufficient space to anchor clear of the other boats. This, to me, was a sad indication of the increasing number of pleasure boats on the West Coast. The first time I stopped at Canna, fifteen years ago, there was nobody there. Now there are enough visitors throughout the summer to support a small restaurant in a farm building near the shore.

We departed at 0430hrs next morning and after a long day, docked in Stornoway at 1830hrs. Occasionally climbers who have turned to sailing

make comparisons between the two. One of the more disagreeable, in my view, is there is often a need for very early starts! The sailing that day was excellent with a following wind, sun, and sightings of Minke whales. The next day, Tuesday 20 July, Kate went off to hospital and returned a while later following an X-Ray of her ribs and inspection of her head. The doctor said she should be all right, provided she was careful, and prescribed some pain killers. The skipper, recalling the encouragement he used to get from a climbing doctor friend whenever he hurt himself, took the view that if Kate was fit enough to walk unaided to and from the hospital, she was probably fit enough to stay on the boat.

We got hold of a three day shipping forecast and held a council of war. The forecast was for a depression to track across Scotland and gales were predicted for sea areas Rockall, Malin and the Hebrides. I reasoned that by the time this bad weather arrived we would be far enough north for it not to be a problem, also the low could give us a good southerly wind. So we departed that evening, with a two hundred mile journey ahead of us to Suderoy, the most southerly of the Faeroe Islands. The journey was going to include two nights of sailing and I set up crew watches for these periods. Night watches on a boat are often the source of much discussion, particularly if crew numbers are scant. There were four of us on board and I chose to split the time from 2000hrs until noon the next day into four hour periods, with two people per watch. In theory, this gave us all two reasonable periods of sleep and it enabled the two people on watch to share that period however they saw fit, provided they were both ready to go up on deck if necessary. There were two of the crew who had not sailed this far offshore before and this watch system spread the available experience on board as well as it could be.

With regard to safety, we used harnesses and the rule was that during the hours of darkness, and at all times if the seas were rough, nobody left the cabin unless they were clipped on. In addition, whatever the conditions, nobody left the cockpit and went on deck unless clipped on. The seriousness of this can not be over-stressed. If somebody falls off a small boat in anything other than flat calm, irrespective of whether they might be wearing a life jacket or not, the chances of finding them again after the boat has been turned round is somewhat hit and miss at best, and at night a virtual impossibility. I used to be rather dismissive about the need for harnesses, taking the view that being a climber, I would always be able to hold on and stay with the boat. That was until, in a gale in the North Sea, I was pitched off the fore deck whilst changing sails. Fortunately the boat was not moving very quickly and I surfaced close enough to grab hold and climb back on board, but it was a sobering experience nonetheless.

We left the Butt of Lewis behind at midnight and sailed almost due north on a course that would take us between the rocky islands of Rona and Sula Sgeir. Rona, the larger island, was occupied in the 19th Century by a single crofter and his family. The island has an area of about one and a half square miles and their only contact with the outside world was a boat which called twice a year for their wool and feathers from sea birds, which they caught for food. It was during this first night's sail that the crew were able to fully appreciate the advantage of the self-steering gear. This piece of equipment was installed last year and operates from the power of the wind on a vane, which, via some intricate gearing, operates a separate rudder. This holds the boat on course relative to the prevailing wind direction. It's a lovely piece of kit, cost a fortune, but well worth it on long cold nights when sitting on your backside, holding the tiller for hours at a time can be a real chore.

Early morning on Thursday, 22 July saw us approaching the southern end of Suderoy. At 0730hrs, when we were still 25 miles away, I began to appreciate the strong tidal currents, which affect these islands. My log entry at this time – Very strong stream to westward. Altered the heading to 45 degrees, compass, but the GPS is showing a course of only 15 degrees over the ground! Then, later that morning, we hit thick fog, another disturbing feature of the Faeroes. Visibility was thought to be between 100 yards and half a mile, depending on which person was doing the estimating. Even at half a mile, at a possible closing speed of up to 20 knots between us and any other vessel, it was all rather worrying. We did not have radar, there is a limit as to just how much gear one can carry on a small boat, but we did have a Radar Alarm. This is a radio receiver, which hopefully picks up radar signals from any other vessel in the vicinity. Although it did not inspire total peace of mind, it did prove its worth later in the trip. The fog cleared at about 1700hrs that evening, when we were inside Trongisvags Fjord on Suduroy, and we tied up in Tvororyri Harbour at 1730hrs.

Almost as soon as we arrived people came and expressed interest in the boat. There were two blokes in particular who spent a long time talking to us and, I thought how friendly they were. Then, afterwards, Owen suggested they were probably after booze.

The following day, Friday the 23rd, we had to get moving again if we were to meet the Rucksackers. From Suderoy the intention was to sail NE and then north up to Bordoy and Klaksvik. This less than direct route was to avoid the worst effects of the tidal flow between the islands. These severe currents had been my greatest concern prior to the trip and it was a case of trying to be in the right place at the right time. In conditions of wind against tide, the sea state could be horrendous. On board I had a local publication showing the location of the worst currents for each hour of the tide. In the

introduction there is described an event in the 1920's when a visiting ship got caught off the Sound of Suderoy at the wrong time and, later, limped into Torshavn minus its funnel and lifeboats. The ship weighed about 4000 tons!

That morning the weather was good and we had a wonderful sail past Litla Dimun and Stora Dimun, two very striking small islands, each about 1500 feet high. Later the weather turned for the worse and we motor sailed through the afternoon in frequent heavy rain to arrive in Klaksvik in the evening. Just as we came into the port we were overtaken by a small ferry/fishing boat, full of day trippers some of whom were waving and shouting at us. So we waved and shouted back and I realised it was the President and party returning from a trip to another island. Later that evening after we had dried out, we were treated to a fine meal by Geoff and Mary. A wonderful way to end our trip up North. We had the next day off - from sailing that is. Alex and I mended the toilet.

Vember and crew arriving on the The Faroes Meet. ***Photo Geoff Bell***

The following day, Sunday, was nearly the end of the Club Meet and we departed also, going south to the capital, Torshavn. The small boat harbour in Torshavn was very crowded and we ended up tying alongside a very purposeful yacht from the UK. This boat was owned by a lady called Denise Evans, a member of the Pinnacle club. She enquired after the name of our boat and informed me she had done the climb of that name with Tony Smythe. Later on I asked her what she thought of the Faeroes. She replied

they were very nice, but preferred to sail up to the fjords and glaciers of Norway, Iceland and Greenland! I went quiet and thought - 'Very impressive. Makes my efforts somewhat insignificant'.

That evening we obtained a three-day shipping forecast, kindly given to us by a lecturer in meteorology in Torshavn. We could not believe our luck. I had been half expecting to be delayed by the weather and that Kate and Owen would have to return home by ferry or plane, but the forecast for the next few days was for a westerly wind, force 4 to 5. The next part of the plan was to go across to Shetland, round the northern tip and down the East Coast to Lerwick. So, next morning after another early start, we set a course south of east for Muckle Flugga, 180 miles away.

Initially the weather was calm but the wind got up and gradually increased to force 5 to 6 from the west. It then stayed like this for nearly two days. We had a wonderful sail; the weather, wind and sea were just right and we logged over 140 miles in one 24 hour period. On the way we were entertained by whales, dolphins, skuas, puffins and fulmars. The wind vane worked perfectly and the limit of the crew's exertions was to discuss the relative merits of Owen's immaculate, breathable, garments from Henry Lloyd as against the plastic 'boil in the bag' clothing worn by poor Alex. We rounded Muckle Flugga on Tuesday afternoon and turned south into Balta Sound on Unst. Late the following evening, after a long day's sail, beset with engine problems, we arrived at Lerwick to be met by John Payne who had come up by ferry from Aberdeen to join the boat.

On Thursday, Kate and Owen departed on the ferry, John took up residence on the boat and Alex and I spent most of the day attending to the engine. John wisely decided that too many cooks would spoil the broth and took charge of the gin and tonic. There was thick fog on Friday and we were confined to port. On Saturday morning it cleared somewhat and we decided to go.

Here, John takes up the story.

Saturday 31 July to Sunday 1 August. - An early visit to the local breakfast café and the Harbour Master's Office. The Captain and his mate avidly discuss forecasts. They look over both the printouts and also the attractive young lady who kindly prints them out. I am sure they don't need an hourly update. It's on, well not sure, it's off. On the other hand it could be all right. Looks like it's clearing, no the cloud has come in again as the island opposite comes in and out of view. Cabin boy Payne refuses to enter the debate even when consulted. There is no point asking for opinions from people who know nothing. Eventually there is a rush to buy post cards, fags, phone and we cast off around 1100hrs. Cape Wrath, some 200 miles away, here we come. Lots of waving and 'bon voyage's from our neighbours and

we head south. Visibility is variable, around three miles reducing to two as we near the end of the Shetland Isles in the mid afternoon. Light or no winds mean we are using our repaired engine on a quiet, short waved sea. As the only sail we saw on this section disappears in the mist, towards the coast there is some debate whether to use this last haven before the long overnight passage towards Cape Wrath. We decide to go for it.

No sooner decided, than doubts arise. Is it closing in or not? As the cloud gets denser the sight of a pair of gannets doing a quick disappearing act into the mist confirms the visibility is down to yards and it's declared 'FOG'. Alex decides to keep lookout on the bows and Captain Cardus mutters his regrets at not taking refuge and busies himself tuning the radar alarm. By late afternoon we are south of Sumburgh Head in an area of sea known as The Hole and the visibility gets worse. We do a 'right a bit' on a new course WSW to take us well north of the Orkneys. We are now open to the Atlantic and the sea increases its wave length but with little increase in height, very pleasant and comfortable for brewing. In the middle of one such brew the radar detector suddenly bleeps once. The skipper has no sooner convinced himself that it's a false alarm when out of the gloom a high speed launch, blasts around us. It must be doing 20 - 30 knots in a wide arc suggesting he has spotted us on his radar. Throttles close and his bow drops as he checks us out, engines roar and he's off south with no attempt at radio contact with us. This experience highlights just how little time there is to avoid a collision if courses converge and the cabin boy is sent as bow lookout with strict instructions to keep his eyes peeled. As the light fades the crew discuss the finer points of fog look out. The cabin boy deserts his post at the bow on the grounds of being frozen and the extra 20 odd feet of visible warning being of next to no value anyway.

Plans are made to keep watch through the night. The value of even a cabin boy on board to share the hours of watch and stave off tiredness is obvious and, after several alternative watch rotas are discussed, a plan to 'keep watch' throughout the next 24 hours is agreed. As we get further into the northern Atlantic the wave length and height increase in inverse proportion to the visibility until for much of the time we can't make out the top of the huge grey rollers. With visibility down to 50 yards it's only on top of the rolling hills of sea that you can sometimes make out the next top. Fortunately there is no wind and therefore no spray or breaking waves on the tops. It's quite peaceful in a way, with just the odd group of puffins or auks putting the fear of collision out of mind but it gets harder as each hour passes. The fog is like a very wet blanket which muffles any sound except the steady chug of the engine. We are more than grateful that it has decided to behave itself. Then at about midnight, the radar alarm bursts into life. All

hands on deck, all eyes and ears focussed into 360 degrees of pure black fog. The captain orders less revs to keep the chugging noise to a minimum in case we can hear anything. Then he dives down to the radio and broadcasts our position. 'Any ships in the area, please identify your position and do you see us on your radar?' The radio goes silent for a few seconds then there is a response. 'I am 2.5 miles SW of you, moving westwards at 11 knots – over'. Thank god we're safe, a little too close for comfort though. The entire crew then jump into surmise mode. Wonder where it's going? How big is it? We really appreciate the value of the radar alarm, but the knowledge that there were ships out there in the dark concentrates our efforts as we peer into the darkness. The tension increases as we strain to hear or see any sign of the ship we had spoken to, but to no avail. Beds and watch positions were taken again and we comforted ourselves in the fact that after 14 hours or so we were now west of the Orkneys and clear of any dangerous currents.

During the four o'clock watch, hearts raced again as the alarm bleeps once more. Boece springs into action, removes the torch-sized gizmo from its holder and out to the cockpit. Pointing carefully in a circle it fires up again just off our port stern. At the right point it repeats its warning, there are radio signals being picked up from this direction. But how close is the vessel? Alex jumps into the chart / radio area and calls up any ships in our vicinity. A tanker replies. Thankfully he's 12 miles away and he has seen us – we are safe - 'Can't miss you – you are showing very clearly - it's a bad night, be careful and good luck', is the reply. We actually cheered, we could be seen clearly by anyone who was using radar. There is a brief negative vibe as the skipper remarks that we can still be hit by some other vessel which has not got radar, or some tanker captain who's pissed or watching the Euro cup. The cabin boy dismisses these as infinitesimal odds; jumps back into his pit and is asleep in minutes.

Night slowly turns to day, and as the greys get brighter the seas get steeper. The boat climbs them effortlessly and I reflect that I am so pleased we are sailing. To walk up these hills would be a major effort. After 18 hours of 'fog watch' and after a few false promises of something called the sun coming through, the fog bank suddenly lifts and starts to disperse behind us. Within seconds the world is a different place. The huge grey rollers become huge green rollers stretching away for miles under an azure blue sky. My first real Atlantic rollers. Wonderful sailing as all the tension of the fog lifts from our minds. In the distance we can see the bright red tanker, who we had spoken to in the night. It looks bigger than an office block! An early breakfast is called for, to celebrate our good fortune. Groups of birds can be seen in colour again, set against the deep green. Life has got pleasant again.

We adjust and set our course to 'clip' Cape Wrath and although we can't see it, or any other land, we are now confident we will turn the corner by nightfall of Sunday. Alex jumps into film director mode and captures the most marvellous sight of a gang of dolphins playing with the bow wave. They dive around, under and alongside Vember, popping up to as if to say well done we were keeping an eye out for you. One is very much larger than all the other five, he or she rolls effortlessly leading the boat on its way to Cape Wrath. After five minutes they get bored or distracted and disperse. Almost a fly over, more a dive under, departure. A wonderful and joyous moment.

Alex, now renamed Hans and Lotti Hass saves his next video masterpiece to record the Captain's particular new pleasure. Conditions are ideal for employing the 'Self Steering System' he has bought Kate for Christmas. How many guys can spend £3K on adding gear to his favourite toy and get thanked by his spouse. ‘There's a lot in this Payne, you'll never understand how it works. You have to 'trim' the boat to the kit for it to work’. Oh, clear as mud Boece. Basically it's £2700 for a load of shafts and gears that poke out of the back of the boat. One then attaches £10 of an old nylon vest, like a flat windsock or lobster pot flag and, it steers the boat via a small secondary rudder. No chance that will work declares the cabin boy as we cut the engine. But eight hours later, traversing the 'Big Green Ones', without even touching the 'rudder/stick thing' we nearly bump into Cape Wrath. The really excellent thing about this self steering malarky is that there's nowt to do but enjoy the relaxing sway of the boat as it carves its way through the green sea.

We rounded the Cape at about 1800hrs and changed course to south in a changing sea and down to our haven and overnight stay at Kinlochbervie. I've never been before but the place reminded me of a deserted Wild West town. Deathly quiet, the new harbour buildings machinery and equipment, all to do with fishing and Euro cash grants, border the water but hardly a boat or fish to be seen. A few tall floodlights and a distant stone house with no sign of life. Not designed for pleasure craft, there are no jetties to use; we decide to tie up in a corner alongside an old fishing boat. Fenders down. Tie up alongside. ‘Aye aye, skipper’. ‘Well done Boece, what an adventure, thanks for getting us through! Now don't just stand there, get down in the galley and get the dinner on, I'm starving’.

August 2nd to 6th. Over the next five days Vember and the crew worked their way down the West Coast, along the Sound of Mull and then north up to the boat’s summer mooring, in Loch Leven. A wonderful journey, full of new experiences especially for the cabin boy who has never been west of Mull. Highlights were the wonderful weather, bird life, seals and cavorting

Minke whales. The skipper had to endure the odd occasion of an ungrateful crew - after taking two hours to untangle his fishing gear, catch and cook fresh mackerel you would think he'd deserve something better than the cabin boy asking if he could catch some smoked salmon next time! Apart from the engine making a World War II smoke impression under the Kyle of Lochalsh Bridge embarrassing the crew, all went well. We topped 11 knots over the ground through the 'Kyle Rhea Narrows' and put on a good show joining the Tennants Sailing Cup Sound of Mull race as uninvited guests. With superb timing, opening time, we tied up at the mooring in Bishop’s Bay. By eight in the evening we were enjoying our first meal on land for eight days at Paddy's Eatery. Home base again and a round trip for Boece and Alex of some 1000 miles of sailing.