

The First Voyage of Lumina – post 2

Sailing to Svalbard

17-24 May Oban to Lerwick

We were invited for coffee on the neighbouring Boreal, Astrea on the pontoon at Oban. Theirs is a 47.2 delivered last year and ours the original model. It was interesting both to see the changes made on the newer model and also the differences between the options they had installed compared with the ones our previous owner had specified. The whole build process is a bit like building a house where the builder is constantly asking for decisions on everything from the bathroom fittings to more fundamental choices on rigging and associated hardware. Everything has a price and whilst I have not had that experience of the build process there are obvious advantages of buying second hand...

So after a rather longer coffee than we had anticipated we slipped the lines and headed out to catch the tide. It was important that we were not too late as, whilst a following tide makes progress quicker, there is one point on our journey up Loch Linnhe to Fort William that we could not be too late for. The Corran Narrows are about two thirds of the way and the tide runs fiercely through them and might even to be difficult to get through against it. We arrived in time and sped through. Normally there is a vehicle ferry here but not today. It had probably broken down and gone for repairs. If you have been following any of the Scottish ferry fiasco which is big news in Scotland, it looks like the same problem is with the small ferries as the large ones. For years they have been underfunded and are now at the situation where there is nothing in reserve, so when one of the aging fleet breaks down there is no ferry. In this case you can just drive round, probably an hour, but on the Hebrides it is more of a problem as the larger ships have to keep swapping routes to enable some service to be kept going. Meanwhile two ferries are under construction in the Clyde and are massively over budget and years late.



Waiting at a lock

We arrived at Corpach, the entrance to the Caledonian Canal near Fort William just as the tide turned and tied up in the brand new marina they are just finishing. This will make a big difference to the area as the whole of Loch Linnhe is little visited by yachts apart from those transiting the Caledonian Canal as there are few places to anchor and no marinas that many like.

Thursday morning 9am saw us enter the sea lock which leads into the basin at Corpach. Sea locks are always a bit complicated as not only can they only operate during opening hours of the canal, they will not open them when the water level on the seaward side is too low, not because in this case there might not be enough water for the vessel coming through but because the lock gates actually have to float somewhat to be operated. This means that there may only be short windows when you can get in and out. With the booking and insurance checked, key for water and toilets along the canal signed for, we motored straight across the basin to the first two locks. After this there is a couple of miles before a road and railway bridge have to be swung giving access to the famous Neptunes Staircase.

The bridges were opened and a couple of yachts came out of the bottom lock and we swiftly went in. With Ben as an extra line handler the locks were a dream and we made swift progress. The process was that Ben and Carol were on the lock wall with bow and stern ropes and I was on the wheel. All the locks and bridges on this canal are operated for you which makes life easy for us but also probably allows them to justify the cost – an arm and leg and half the other arm as well. I did say that as larger boats displace more water they therefore needed less to fill the locks but apparently that is not how they calculate the prices!

With lunch on the go we gently sailed across Loch Lochy just in time to get the last locking of the day at Laggan Lock. This brings you to the highest point on the canal at 106 feet. It is also home to one of the gems on the canal, the Eagle Barge Inn. Here we had a table booked and a lovely unpretentious meal. Nice to find somewhere serving great food on plates not slates with squiggles of coloured stuff around.

The following morning after a couple of miles of canal you come to Laggan bridge which was duly swung for us and we entered Loch Oich. This was a much smaller loch but a dam at one end raised the height and flooded the watershed so now being top level water that flows into the loch can either go eastwards over the weir to Loch Ness and the North sea or westwards through the canal and into Loch Linnhe and the Atlantic.

After Loch Oich there are a couple of locks before the big flight at Fort Augustus. This is similar to Neptunes Staircase but now we are going down which is much easier as there is no turbulence in the lock caused by the water coming in. This is the major tourist attraction at Fort Augustus and causes much amusement especially with the hire boats with people on them who may not have driven a boat before yesterday.



In the locks at Fort Augustus

We said goodbye to Ben and he got the bus back to Fort William and we continued out into Loch Ness. We had a leisurely sail all the way down the loch and tied up in the canal at the end. No monsters were sighted and only a single boat from one end to the other.

At the Inverness end there is a single lock which regulates the height of the canal beyond Loch Ness and then a flight down into the main basin in the town. We did not stop but went straight through to the sea lock which then lets you out into Moray Firth and the North Sea.

With a favourable wind and the tide we were soon racing up the coast and had Wick in our sights. We ploughed on past Fort George with a mental note to visit it one day and past the entrance to the Cromarty Firth with several oil rigs being decommissioned and vessels with wind turbine blades stacked ready for installation. Now, however, the expected wind shift was upon us and the engine was called upon for some help. Between 6 and 8 pm it turned from being directly behind at 180 degrees to being directly on the nose and then settled in a rather unfavourable direction giving us a bit of help but not enough to sail in the direction we needed to go. So Volvo Penta continued until we past Wick and eventually anchored in Sinclairs bay just north of the town at about 3am. This was an easier option than coming into the harbour in the dark and was good enough for our needs which were just to wait for the tide to be right to cross over the Pentland Firth to the Orkney Isles.

At 0600 we were off again as by now the tide had turned enabling us to cross one of the most treacherous pieces of water in Britain. The tide rushes from the Atlantic side towards the North Sea and back. Simple, or maybe not, because it also funnels through the many

islands of the Orkneys so, once across the firth you then also need it to be right to get to your chosen island. Last time it surprised us so instead of going up the East of the islands and into Kirkwall we had to make a swift change of plan to go through Scarpa Flow instead. This time however I got it right and we were able to continue North to Kirk Sound where there is one of the famous Churchill barriers and the Italian Chapel built by prisoners of war.

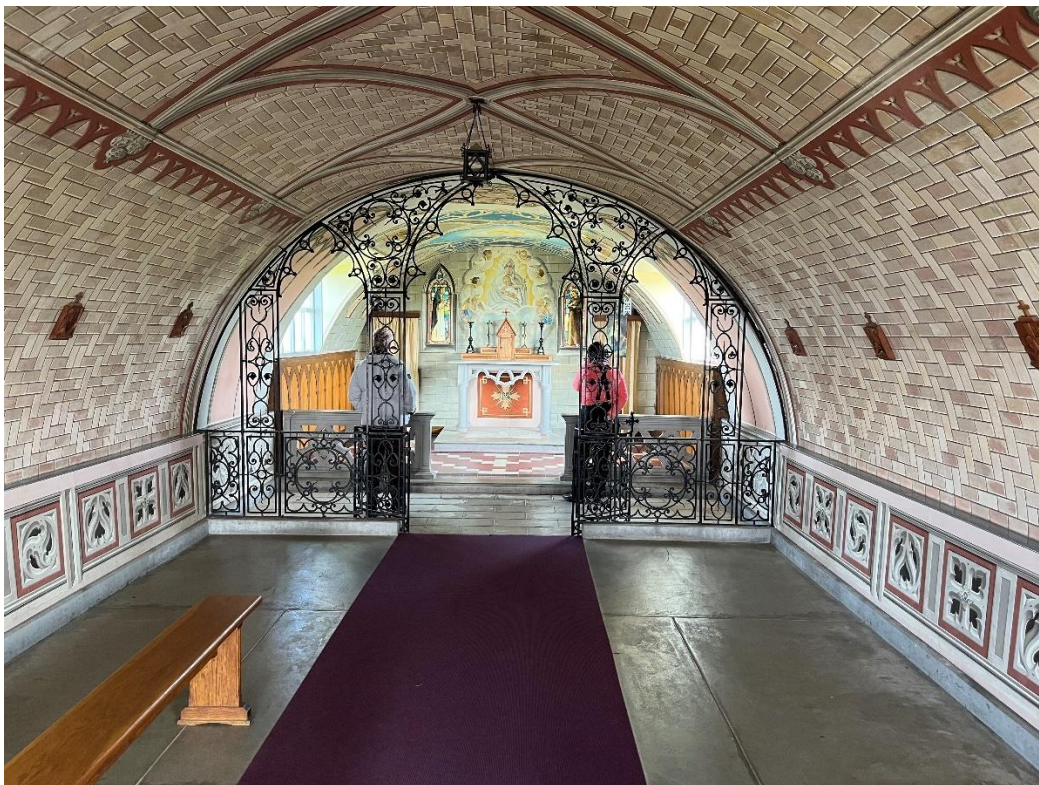
In the WW 1 Scarpa Flow, the area of water between a number of the Orkney islands was used as the main base for the British Navy and later as the point where the surrendered German battleships were interned. At the start of WW2 there was also a heavy presence of British warships in the sheltered anchorage. On 14 October 1939, the Royal Navy battleship HMS Royal Oak was sunk at her moorings. The U Boat U47 had crept into what the British Navy had thought to be safe waters and escaped through the sound we were anchored in. Whilst a devastating blow to moral, the ship was of WW1 vintage and its loss was apparently not that serious as it could have been. The U boat escaped through the sound we were anchored in and at only 15m deep must have been a challenge to navigate in a submarine. Block ships had already been sunk in some of the entrances to Scapa Flow but had obviously been insufficient. Churchill proposed to build concrete barriers. These were constructed by contractors assisted by about 2000 Italian prisoners of war captured in North Africa. Thousands of tons of concrete were used to make rectangular blocks which were dropped from aerial ropeways strung across the sounds. The causeways, as they were known as to get round any problems of using prisoners or war for military purposes, were finished with roads on top which are still in use today.



The Churchill barrier at Holm Sound with remains of one of the block ships.

During their time off the Italians asked if they could build a small chapel and they were given two Nissen huts which were built end to end. The end result is really impressive and has become Orkneys most visited attraction. There must have been thousands of Nissen Huts constructed and after the war many were sold off and can still be seen around the countryside. There is the frame of one behind the shed at home! Never been reconstructed and is part of my fathers stock of things that you keep for 7 years. Then after 7 years you keep it for another 7.... A couple of years ago I was doing a trade show for GreenRoofTops

and having a walk round came across a chap selling garden buildings with curved roofs and sides – called Nissen. I asked him if he had any trouble getting the name, knowing its interesting history? No trouble he replied he was my grandfather!



The Italian Chapel, Orkney

Another Early start to catch the tide saw us heading up the east coast of Orkney to Fair Isle. Arriving in the early evening we found the small harbour with 6 yachts, the Fair Isle ferry, and a landing craft vessel on the beach. It had delivered a massive crane to continue with the rebuilding of the Fair Isle bird observatory which had burnt down just a month or so before our previous visit.



Fair Isle Bird Observatory 2023

and the same view in 2019

We didn't linger on Fair Isle as there is some weather coming in and the short hop up to Lerwick on Shetland was easily done by early afternoon following. There were 4 boats in fair Isle heading for Shetland. All seemed to get a bit spooked by the strong tide off the North of Fair Isle pushing them westwards. Not wanting to end up on the west of Shetland they all headed out the other way after a while so that they had plenty of room as they neared the south point of Shetland, Sumburgh head. What they all seemed not to realise was that by the time we reached Sumburgh head, the tide would be going the other way. We continued on a straight course for the head and although we left third, we arrived first. It didn't help us though, as the harbour was full and we had to raft up outside a Swedish boat. It wasn't until after we had tied up with our lines going ashore from the bow and stern that I noticed the freshly painted anchor that had obviously never hit the ground. Highly polished boats with painted anchors are best avoided if you can as they are more interested in the sheen you can get from a particular polish than of interesting anchorages and experiences.... Fortunately later on the boat in front of us left and we were able to get a space on the pontoon.

So after a day in Lerwick, doing the obligatory Tesco run we are off to Norway, landfall around Alesund maybe.

If you want to track us in real time we now have the satellite tracker working and this should get a signal more reliably than Marine Traffic.

Here is the link:

<https://forecast.predictwind.com/tracking/display/SV-Lumina/>

Best Wishes

Tim and Carol



Busy harbour in Lerwick