

Jack's Sail Caledonia 2016

Sail Caledonia came round amazingly quickly. After our Scottish adventure the year before in Bootstrap we had taken the decision to build a more suitable boat for the job this year although to be fair to Bootstrap we'd had strong winds all week when in "normal" conditions I am sure she would have been fine. The trouble with building a new boat for the following year is that naturally you only have a year to do it and a year isn't really enough.

Jack is really the same sort of thing as Bootstrap, just a little longer, squeezed and stretched here and there so I was able to get her drawn up fairly easily and in fact it was mostly done soon after our return from Scotland last year.

For the rest of summer we were busy doing other things, you know how work will keep getting in the way, and the real fun started in November. By this time the job was starting to look a bit daunting and little doubts started rolling around in the back of my mind, did I really need another boat? Bootstrap was okay in all but the windiest weather. Did I have time to get the boat done? Seven months isn't long, all my other boats had taken about eighteen months to build and I had sailed them for a couple of years first before trying them out on the "Big One". Never the less Jack is very similar to Bootstrap, a sister if not a twin, so with the experience of building the earlier boat I bit the bullet and made a start.

November and December passed easily and almost without a care as I did the lofting and made a few fittings, along with the centreboard trunk and rudder. Around Christmas I collected up most of the timber for the job and got the moulds done. By the start of the new year the jig was built and the backbone of the boat, such as it is, was all ready for planking. This was just as well because panic overtook complacency at this point when the penny dropped and I realized there were only four months to go. My sister Carrie stepped up to the mark here and from then on she spent hours every week up to her elbows in epoxy and sawdust, not to mention paint in the final stages.

We struggled on for months, two steps forward and one back till one day just ten days before we left for Scotland things looked particularly desperate.

It was a dank Monday morning and things had fallen badly behind in spite of all our efforts. We decided to cut our losses and take Bootstrap. I can't remember exactly what happened to change our minds back again, maybe a long awaited part turned up in the post, or maybe the sun just came out, but later in the day we all perked up again and Jack back was on the agenda.

We launched the boat the week before we left by kind permission of Burghfield Sailing Club to do a buoyancy and swamp test, we also rowed it a short distance. All was well and on the Sunday we took her on a short trip along the Thames under oar. Wow, she tracked perfectly, how nice was that! Finally, on the Tuesday just two days before we left I took her out for a sail on the lake at Burghfield. She balanced perfectly with just a touch of weather helm. We still had no idea as to speed or performance as a whole.

On the Thursday we set off up the motorway with the very thinnest of coats of paint, the minimum number of fittings and no idea as to the ability or otherwise of the boat we were towing. We never really did finish her, we just stopped screwing and sticking bits on when we thought we had done enough and when we needed to pack for ourselves.

Arrival on Saturday revealed a variety of boats. There were many from last year and a few new ones as well like the Swiss entry Le Bleu from Lake Geneva and Punt from Falmouth along with Dave from last year bringing his own ship "April Fool" this time. Feadhanach the Islay Skiff from last year returned but with a fresh crew, Bart and Mark from Holland. Wahoo, a Ness Yawl also returned after a gap of many years. Sadly Auk who had always been present in the past was unable to put in an appearance this time. It promised to be an interesting week with so many differing types.

The boats all launched, the briefing complete and filled with nervous anticipation we got ready for

the first race, will the boat work? The wind was a light south westerly so the course was the same as last year with a short beat to a windward mark then a reach to a wing mark about three hundred yards away followed by a longish run then a gybe and a broad reach to the finish.

We got stuck under the rest of the fleet at the start with not much breeze so as soon as we could we tacked off on port to find some clean wind. The others all went inshore while we went back out into the loch and when we converged again at the windward mark we were delighted to find ourselves in second place just in front of Ella. We were slow to round so Ella got by and off we all went to the wing mark with Moireach and Le Bleu pressing hard behind. Did the gybe ok and set off on the run to Corpach. Time ticked by and we seemed to be catching Ella. We went slightly right and found a bit more wind. Clearing Ella we then lifted the helm a bit to go back onto a run and carried on down the loch. After a minute or two I realized we were catching Turacco as well who was in the lead. Well what do you know, a balanced lug that sails by the lee! We made the second gybe with a lead of about fifty yards over Turacco and started the final leg. Now which island did he say we had to go too? No signal at the first one so we carried on to the second with Turacco breathing down our necks getting ever closer. We got the gun with twenty yards to spare. Ella and Moireach came in third and fourth close behind. Well that was a bit nerve racking, but in light winds at least she seems to go on a run. Wonder what she is like on a beat!

Mark piped us through the sea lock and into the canal where we rafted for the night. He does this every night and its one of the big features of the week. Its a very welcome sound at the end of a rowing race, you know you have made it when you hear the bagpipes!

At the party that night we were pleased as punch to hear Jack's name announced as the winner. It was to be the ten kilometre rowing race tomorrow.

The next day was glorious and Carrie set off to Dochgarroch with the car and trailer (did I say the trailer was a last minute job too, mostly done by my son Tom). Jack and I ascended Neptune's Staircase in the company of the rest of the fleet and spent the time getting to know some of the others. A quick lunch in the sun at the top and it was time to row.

Rather nervously we got set to go, was she fast, was she too big for the two of us? We had no idea but we did have twinges of regret that we had done no practice during the winter months and perhaps we should have brought Bootstrap after all who was at least a known quantity. Carrie wished she didn't have a cold, I wished I didn't have a bad back. We were paired with Le Bleu to go first. The hooter hooted, Carrie coughed and off we went.

Now Le Bleu, very fine boat though she is, might be considered a little heavy for a rowing race and we got away from her reasonably quickly. They put up a manful fight but little by little we pulled away. Our problem was that with the pairs of boats starting three minutes apart we had no idea what was happening behind us after the first bend. It would be perfectly possible to start in our position, not see anyone else for the entire race yet still finish nearly last. So on we went, puffing and wheezing, our imaginations running riot. We still saw Le Bleu in the distance and also what we worked out to be Swallow under motor. Swallow's crew had made it plain at the start that Swallow was too heavy to row and anyway the trip was for fun! We crossed the line without seeing another boat, then the heavens opened and we had a nice shower to cool off. It turned out that Punt had actually caught Le Bleu but out of our sight. We all headed off toward the sound of bagpipes, our moorings and a long cool drink.

When the results were read out later we had won the race and Punt, the Falmouth oyster boat had come an excellent second, Turacco third and Le Bleu hanging on for fourth. Carrie and I of course could scarcely believe it, two wins!

Next day was the real test. The wind was to be on the nose for the sailing race on Loch Lochy and also for the rest of the week. Jack had done very well so far but her windward performance was an unknown quantity. As with the first two races we really had no idea how she would go but we knew it would be a long week if she didn't perform in this key area. There is a longish winding piece of water which links Banavie to Loch Lochy. The wind was funnelling down it towards us, a steady

force four kicking up a bit of a chop. There was not enough space to rig the boat and beat out and it was going to be a struggle to row against wind and waves especially if we went any distance into the loch to give ourselves sea room to rig the boat. Fortunately Rob in his motorised Drascombe took pity on us and towed us well out into the loch so we could get the sail up.

As with everything else we had not practised this at all and there was cursing and bad language from crew and helm alike before the job was done. The rudder in particular was the devil to mount.

Carrie likes to err on the cautious side when sailing and thought we needed a reef, we put it in and off we went, a dodgy start but at least we were away. The sun shone, the wind dropped, the chop subsided, the others all sailed away and there we were. Bobbing around.

Now Carrie doesn't like the seemingly unpredictable motion of a dinghy under sail but she doesn't like to do poorly either. I gave her a minute of silent contemplation to resolve the conflict in her head then said,

"Ahem. The others seem to be doing rather well, shall we shake out the reef?" A millisecond passed then she said "Oh all right then."

Now rigging the boat is a rotten job as mentioned and takes for ever but shaking out a reef takes but seconds and soon we were sailing properly. We still didn't know how our boat went to windward but with a little experiment she rewarded us by picking up a place or two. Loch Lochy is about ten miles from end to end and as the fleet spread inexorably outwards we seemed to our immense delight to be in third place even threatening the leaders. This didn't last and as we approached the finish the wind dropped and we fell back a bit though we held our position against the following boats. Moireach sailed a very good race to win closely from Turacco and we kept our third with April Fool shortly behind.

At the far end of the loch there is a small lagoon and here there was to be a short race round the cans. It was however a race with a difference. The first lap is sailed, then there is a rowing lap and finally another sailing lap. All oars to be kept inside the gunwale for the sailing and not even a sliver of sail showing for the rowing. No cheating!

As I said Jack is not an easy boat to rig and the same goes for striking the rig again to set up for oars. I could sense a feeling of dread in my long suffering crew as we pulled away from the jetty and lunch. So when one or two bits fell off the rig as we went out (they don't make sticky tape like they used to do they?) the decision was taken to sit this one out and do some repairs.

We had a grandstand view with the lagoon and the fleet in the foreground surrounded by undulating green pasture and sheep with the steep forested hill beside Loch Lochy as a backdrop. All this in glorious sunshine. The race itself looked like immense fun and Jack will certainly return another time with some improvements to make this kind of thing more practical. Turacco ended up the final winner with Dave in April Fool second, Moireach third and Wahoo fourth.

We stayed the night at Laggan that night, many folks going over to the floating pub on the other bank and enjoying a drink or two and live music before returning in the early hours.

Next morning after our daily briefing by Martin and John, safety officer and race officer respectively we rallied down the beautiful Laggan Avenue to gather round the swing bridge just at the entrance to Loch Oich.

Loch Oich is different to the others. The other lochs are natural features of the landscape very deep with pine covered slopes rising steeply up on each side. This one is man-made, shrouded by trees and quite shallow in places. The wind when I have been there at any rate has been light but not so light and fickle as the lakes and reservoirs near home. It is a truly beautiful place to sail. The navigation winds through the middle, along the course of the old river I believe and with the normal navigation marks showing its course. In places the channel is very narrow.

Once we were through the swinging bridge and into the loch it was time to put up the sail for the

race. The sun was shining and the wind was light so Carrie helmed while I got rigged. We all drifted over to the right hand side of the loch where the start went reasonably well for once. After the general mêle to begin with we found ourselves beating to windward in close proximity to Ella and April Fool. Kathleen the Drascombe Coaster was slightly in front and Bay Raiders Turaco and Moireach out in front of them. I think we overcame Ella first but not before we had given her a nasty moment when I lost track of her and ended up under her bow on port tack. Phew that was close, sorry Ella! We swapped places with Dave in April Fool a few times, we would get in front on one tack then Dave would get back on the other. When we finally cleared Dave the navigable part of the loch was becoming pretty narrow and Carrie excitedly called the tacks as we hit lay lines to the channel markers. We got lucky with the wind shifts and were able to tack through the narrows without too much fuss. This was just as well as Dave was catching up again, the wind was dropping.

The next obstacle was a pair of motor cruisers. They were stuck behind the two Bay Raiders in the lead, all of us heading the same way. The cruisers were waiting patiently for the Bay Raiders to go through a particularly narrow bit. I think the Raiders might have been waiting for the cruisers as well and we certainly waited for everyone else as we tacked back and forth looking for a way round. Eventually we all got through the constriction and headed away which was good because I could almost smell the new paint on April Fool she was so close.

One more pair of navigation marks and out we went into the wider area of the loch. Moireach at this stage had some sort of a rig problem and we wriggled past leaving just Turaco in front as we beat up to the windward mark at the head of the loch. The wind picked up a little here and we were able to close a little on Turaco before rounding and running back down the loch again to a wing mark, closing all the time. Round the mark and across to the other side before heading up for the finish near the windward mark. Moireach never really recovered from her rig problem and we were very happy to finish a fairly close second behind Graham, Andrew and Roly in Turaco III.

A splendid lunch followed once again in the sunshine, then it was through the swing bridge for a rally section down the canal to the lock at Kytra. It has to be said that the locks on this whole canal are a marvellous feat of engineering. To those of us who live near the narrow canals down south it comes as a revelation to see the sheer size of them, able to accommodate a sea going vessel or indeed a whole fleet of twenty or so Sail Caledonia boats. They are operated by friendly good humoured lock keepers and all the hard work is done by hydraulics. None of this business with a large iron key and blisters!

After exiting the lock there was a rowing section to be run as a pursuit race, and John our race officer read out the starting order as we all clustered round anxiously listening for our start times. The idea was to arrange the starting order and times so that we all finished together at Fort Augustus some four kilometres away. The results themselves were to be calculated using elapsed time.

One of the penalties of doing well in the first rowing race was that for the pursuit race later in the series you had to wait for a far longer time before you can start. John was trying to get us all to finish at once remember, twelve abreast across the canal!

The boats went in ones and twos at intervals varying from a minute to ten minutes. Finally there we were in splendid isolation; Carrie sat coughing as though she smoked thirty a day, imagining the first boats to be finishing while we waited.

We were off, we gave it everything for what seemed like an age and nothing happened. Never so much as a sniff of another boat. Carrie was certain the others were all propping up a bar somewhere at the finish because we saw no one. I have done many pursuit races in my time where the boat is on the other foot and it was I who had the head start. I remembered full well that the earlier starters feel they are in the lead and certain to win till the very last seconds of the race then the whole fleet comes storming through. I just prayed that it worked the other way round for us and that John had done his sums right. We passed a single boat. This raised spirits and we redoubled our efforts. Then another appeared. Then another and another. They passed in a rush

now till we knew there were only a couple left. We knew there wasn't much time left either, then as we rounded a corner we heard a hooter. We didn't catch anyone else after that, Kathleen crossed first with what must have been a huge effort followed by Kingfisher, handicapped by a massive array of flags and a head wind. Clearly they were after the prize for the best dressed boat to be judged later by the lock keepers in Fort Augustus.

John had judged it perfectly, the whole fleet finished almost at once and there we were at the top of the flight of locks leading down to Fort Augustus and the huge area of water that is Loch Ness.

Later we found that we had won the race on elapsed time and we were truly delighted. Starting to look like we have a raid boat.

Carrie had been nursing a cold for a few days now and it was starting to take its toll. Her voice was almost gone now and anything at all seemed to set off a coughing fit. I was more than a little worried about her and when Martin announced at results time that the wind was to be gusting up to force five on Loch Ness the next day we resolved that Carrie would sit that one out and we should consult Norna, chief administrator, as to the availability of the "Press Gang."

Press gangs come along on the trip as crew members but are unattached to any particular boat. They are able to step onto any boat in the fleet as a kind of "reserve" and very grateful we were too that John was available for the following day.

With that settled we left Jack moored alongside the pontoon in the entrance to Loch Ness. There was a fresh little breeze blowing in from the other end and the boats all jostled each other in anticipation. Its always a bit of a moment this stage in the raid, it kind of divides the week in two. The earlier days have comparatively short races coming quickly, mostly two a day, one after another. Loch Ness is the big one, the other end is far out of sight from here and it takes most of a day to go just halfway along its length. It can look quite foreboding from Fort Augustus with its steep rocky sides and dark colours and I remembered last years escapade on the loch.



2015's escapade on Loch Ness. (By kind permission of Kathy Mansfield.)

Ah well, off for fish and chips, the long suffering galley crew have the night off!

Next day, fully briefed by John and Martin, we cast off and headed up the channel into Loch Ness proper. We were anticipating a force three to five wind today, on the nose once again. Sun to come later!

I rowed and John (Press Gang) steered the boat till we were far enough out to hoist the sail. I passed the customary fifteen minutes getting this done then we sailed back and forth while John got to know the boat.

Most of the boats started on port this time and although we were on the line when the gun went we were slow to get going and Turaco sailed over us. We tacked into clean air then tacked back onto port fairly quickly. With Jack's newly discovered pointing abilities we made good solid ground and soon seemed to be leading, it was looking good in the fresh breeze. Twenty minutes later however the wind started to fade and Turaco, Moireach and April Fool started to come back at us.

There is always a temptation to fiddle with the boat in these circumstances and I succumbed. I wondered if we had the board in the right place so I asked John to lift it a little. It wouldn't budge so we shoved it harder. Disaster! The handle came off the top and it popped almost right up. We thought our race was done, you can't beat to windward without a centreboard and ours was almost fully lifted. Without the handle you just can't do a thing with it, it is way out of reach of even the longest fingers. Turaco, Moireach and April Fool needed no encouragement and went streaming past. We started looking for the safety boat and a tow.

The far shore was starting to loom large now and we had to put about. Back in fourth place and with Ella, Kingfisher and the others closing fast, round we went. As we tacked, John, resourceful chap that he is just managed to jamb the broken end of the handle back into its socket and push the board down a bit. This was much better and at least we held our own now though the wind was still dropping and Jack doesn't really like this much.

Next time we tacked John got the board down the rest of the way and there it stayed, showing no inclination to come back up. We heaved a sigh of relief and left it well alone. Lesson learned and no more fiddling.

The breeze hadn't listened to the forecast and it was still a bit fitful. We got back in front of April Fool after a bit of a tussle and even rounded the first mark a little in front of Moireach. We tried dastardly tactics to keep in front of Moireach till the breeze filled in again but in the end quality showed and they split tacks to pop up later, far in front. In fact we never got near them again.

This did leave Turaco though and with all our gear working we chipped away at their lead. The breeze was filling in again now and it seemed to be to Jacks liking as we finally edged up to the windward mark. Turacco was a hundred and fifty metres ahead now as we rounded and headed off on the run back half a mile or so to the next mark. Running is normally our strong point and we could have hope to whittle away at their lead further but our board was jammed right down and strangely no-one wanted to mess with it!

It all hung on the last beat. Moireach was well away and untouchable. Turaco I felt was probably too far ahead as well, but no harm in trying. We tacked off left where we thought the wind was better, Turacco fell into a hole and tacked as well. We tacked onto port again, so did they roughly in front of us. Lead is smaller now. Both boats sailed on into a hole in the wind, both boats tacked onto starboard. This time Turaco tacked back onto port first, going for the line now, and we followed momentarily, we were neck and neck. We were to windward and pointing high, they were below us and going faster, not much to choose. The finish line was slanted in our favour so in theory we had the shortest distance to go. Turaco is slightly faster through the water though but wont point so well, it was all very exciting. The minutes passed like an age. I anxiously asked John if I had missed anything, could we wring any more speed out of her? "No" he said. "Hold tight".

We hit the line right by the pin and got the bullet by a whisker Turaco crossed eight seconds later.

Cor what a race, that was a proper cliffhanger!

In somewhat of a daze we made our way over to Ros Crana to do some more repairs. Anticipating a bit of trouble of this sort Carrie and I had brought along a large box of screws and bit and bobs. We managed to get the board out without losing anything over the side and Carrie took it up on deck for repair. An inquiry to the crew of Ros Crana revealed that safety man Chris did indeed have small quantity of quick setting epoxy and yes we could use it. Swampy Dave, skipper of the mighty Ros Crana had a drill/screw driver and that meant we could glue and screw the handle back on, which is what I should have done in the first place. Twenty minutes later we were all fixed up and lounging around in the sun at Foyers.

Loch Ness is so big that the majority of the competitors can't really sail it in a day so for the most part it is done over two days. I say for the most part because there is a hardy bunch that does what is called the "Loch Ness Challenge" most years.

These boats start very early in the morning from Fort Augustus, at dawn I'm told but I've never witnessed it, and sail right down to Loch End some twenty miles away, then they turn round and sail back to Foyers which is where the rest of us mortals finish, half way down, a distance of some thirty miles for them and a mere ten for us. This year, with the wind in the North East it meant a twenty mile beat down to the other end and a ten mile run back to Foyers in the middle. The race is far easier when the wind is the other way round in the South West as the majority of the race is a run with a much shorter beat home. This year, the only taker was Turaco, none of the others (self included) fancied it so it wasn't run. Maybe next year.

Next morning the day of Loch Ness Two I sloped off early to collect Jack from where we had all beached overnight up a river and rowed her across to Ros Crana in order to re-fit the board. Sun shining and not a breath of wind.

Carrie was still not feeling up to scratch so John was to be on the boat again today and they would both attend the skippers briefing to take copious notes in my stead while I fixed Jack.

Everything fixed and everyone confident of what they were doing we cast off in Jack and headed up the loch to the start a couple of miles away. Chris and Jordan on one of the ribs took pity on us as we broke out the oars and they towed us the rest of the way.

The wind was to be on the nose again today and the further we moved from the start toward the first mark, the lighter it got.

Another year on our first boat "Black Pearl" my son Tom and I had good results by sailing and using a single oar, strange but true. Jack didn't like this idea much so I tried sculling while John helmed. It was quicker but not very comfortable because I was hunched under the boom while the sail flapped over my head. The water by now was glassy smooth and we were close to Urquhart Castle. Lovely Lady was in the lead with Turaco behind. We were next but it was hard to tell which boats were close as they were spread across the width of the loch.

The obvious thing for us was to row properly but as this race is quite a long one we needed to be sure that if we took down the rig the wind was going to stay switched off right to the end. If we made a small gain with the oars it could quickly be wiped out if the wind got up before we were done and then it would be tea time before we got the rig working again.

I stood up and looked round, as far as the eye could see there was flat water with barely a ripple. Not that we could see the end.

We gave in to temptation and struck the rig, Martin and Kathy on a rib looked on bog eyed with astonishment that anyone could make such a meal of the job. Twenty minutes or so later, looking no doubt thoroughly dishevelled we finally took our first strokes.

John by his own confession had bits of metal in his back and hadn't rowed for nearly half a century. I had only ever rowed double with Carrie. We were a bit of a shambles to start with but surprisingly

quickly we sorted ourselves out and got an effective stroke going. Turaco and Lovely Lady fell quite quickly as we rounded into Urquhart bay and as we approached the first mark the shortened course flag went up.

Now I have fallen foul of that flag before. I remember well fighting my way along the length of Loch Lochy in the lead with the fore mentioned Tom and Black Pearl only to lose the race because I hadn't read the instructions properly regarding the blue flag. This time I headed for the finish. John has sharper hearing than me and he heard the shouted instruction as well. And because he went to the briefing he knew where "Dawes" was too. Anyway on we went and after half an hour or so we decided it would be civilised to stop for lunch, so we did.

Lunch over, we headed ever onwards, the fleet far behind. I felt uneasy, after so many times racing at home when I had thought I had the job done someone would appear from somewhere and get you. And what if the wind got up? About this time I became conscious that the boat wasn't pulling all that sweetly, she wasn't tracking. There were the beginnings of a bit of wind now, I wanted to hug the north shore in the flat water. And go right to the finish. John kept muttering about Dawes. Uncertainty was rife. She wasn't tracking because we each were subconsciously pulling in our favoured direction

"I reckon I can see a mark over there." John said nodding to the other side.

"Why would it be over there? The finish is right in front of us" I asked

"But he said there was another mark. It was at the briefing" He replied.

"A blue flag means we go straight to the finish. Learnt it the hard way"

"But Martin said to go to Dawes, he was putting a mark in"

Well I do confess I did hear Dawes mentioned so I asked "Where is Dawes anyway?"

We dug out the chart and had a look. There it was. Over there on the other side.

Still not fully convinced I said "Oh all right lets go and have a look. We are far enough in front that we should have time to do it and still get to the finish even if it's wrong."

So that's what we did and sure enough he was right. Half way across the loch one of our rescue boats appeared which indicated we were on the right track. And there was the mark sitting up ahead, plain as a pikestaff! He was right all along!

The wind was starting to make its presence felt now and we were glad to be in the little bay at Dawes and out of its influence. The wind had made its way back to Turaco too and she was starting to pile on the yards. I looked back and there she was, less than a mile behind. When we rowed into the bay I noticed the wind had swung onto our bow and rather uncharitably hoped that the same would happen to Turaco as well and give us more time. We were going to need it!

Round the mark and back out of the bay we came. Then we swung to the North East for the final leg. As we rounded the corner the wind hit us like a sledge hammer. I was heartily glad that I had struck the mast over lunch, had it had been up now it would have nearly stopped us. With the wind a stiff force four at times and Jack starting to pitch we dug deep, our boat felt very vulnerable now as we imagined Turaco catching us hand over fist, out of sight as she was in the bay behind. John performed magnificently even in this last bit when he should have been flagging, and finally as we approached the end of the loch the wind dropped away again, the waves went. We hurried to the finish expecting Turaco to appear any minute now, bearing down on us with a big bone between her teeth. It didn't happen, she never did appear, not at least till we were comfortably ensconced on Lochnagar with pretty much the best cup of tea I have ever had in my life clutched in my hand.

Punt came in next looking very pleased with herself sporting her jib and the standing lug today. I believe she did a lot of rowing too. Wahoo and Le Bleu came next almost together, Wahoo getting

it by a whisker.

This was a bruiser of a race. John did a tremendous job and Carrie was pig sick about missing all the fun. It also demonstrated how gigs of old could easily evade the faster sailing boats of officialdom by rowing directly upwind. Oh and John said Carrie was welcome to her place back for the rowing next day.

We steadily rowed round and out of the loch and up the River Ness with aching muscles stopping in the little pool about half a mile down. We went ashore for soup and to stretch our limbs while the fleet assembled to rally up to the lock at Dochgarroch. We started to row the last bit but then Jon and Helen in their Bay Raider Ella kindly offered a tow to the lock. What splendid people, couldn't have come at a better moment!

So there we were, just the one race to go. Mark piped us home as he had done every evening while we rafted up the other side of the lock at Dochgarroch. We stopped there for the night and would be there for the following night too, the night of the Ceilidh.

Because of problems with the tide we hurried down the canal next day, out of the sea lock onto the Beaulie Firth. One of the ideas of the raid is to make your way from salt water on the West Coast of Scotland and end in salt water on the East Coast. All in all this was our third attempt at the raid but the first time we had gone the whole way so we were happy to be there. The wind was very light and didn't look at all promising, however we opted for sail.

This time the race was more of a round the cans one with a reaching start and we got away well making it to the leeward mark with a healthy margin. We rounded and went for the windward mark with Turacco hard on our heels. We covered them most of the way but finally they slipped ahead just as we all got there and headed off downwind again. Oh good we thought, this is our best bit. But they read us easily and as I tried to steal their wind from behind they whipped out a pair of oars to supplement their sails and sped away. They had found our Achilles heel, we can't do transitions. We sail ok, we row better but we really can't do both at the same time and it takes for ever to switch between the two. The whole week was hanging on this race and here they were getting away using by their oars!

We were left really without any choice, if we wanted to beat them we had to row. We could easily beat them under oar alone but it was a short race and would we even get going before the race finished? Only one way to find out.

During the course of the week and with a little practise we had reduced the time needed for this operation from fifteen minutes to maybe fourteen and a half and the sharp eyed race officer John was able to recount the whole farce later with some accuracy.

We both stood up and the boat rocked. Carrie heads for the halyard to let the sail down.

"No No" I cry, "the oars have to come out first or they will be trapped under the rig." We sit down, we stand back up and turn a circle, each revolving in a different direction. Carrie kneels down and removes the front thwart to untie the oars and get them to the other side of the boat away from the rig, I wait impatiently offering advice and encouragement. This is poorly received and I was told to get the other thwart off and undo your end too you useless lump.

"Oh yer, I forgot" The sail comes down, an all smothering mass of canvas and there is a temporary white-out while Carrie unhooks it and bundles it away. Our propulsive force gone I decide its safe take the rudder off now and I turn round and wriggle out over the stern to remove it. I turn back triumphant in time to see one of the oars plop in the water and drift away. Carrie is stricken. I lunge after it and just nab it with my fingertips (John didn't see that bit). We are now in the final stages of the transition.

"I can't get this sodding thwart back on" cries Carrie beating it with her fist in frustration. I have a similar problem with the after one and have to rummage under the sail to sort it. Who would think that eight and a half square metres of sail could be such a nuisance? Now we just need to change

places so we doze-do in the middle of the boat, the cause of more rocking, gyration and howls of protest.

Finally, we flumped down on our respective spots and started to row. Carrie, who is always the more alert in these matters immediately screamed

“We're going to hit them! We're going to hit them!” I looked round and there was Kingfisher sailing along, her crew Belinda and Nobby watching with a kind of horrified fascination as we crossed the course at right angles straight at them. Frantically we pull on our oars to get clear and disaster is averted. A few of the other boats had caught us by now and our main protagonists, Turaco and Wahoo had got away in all the kerfuffle. We rounded the bottom mark and made for the next. It was a reach for the sailing boats and keeping up was tough. Wahoo and Turaco were by now headed back up the windward leg for the final time. The wind had come back a little and Wahoo was too far ahead to catch. Turaco was worth a shot though. We gave it all and half way up the beat we realised we had them, there's nothing like being able to go right at the mark in a straight line. There was just a small matter of the short run down to the finish after rounding. Would we hold them with their larger sail area and oars as to boot or would we succumb? We got lucky.

To everyone's immense delight Wahoo won the race through a stealthy combination of sail and the massive frame of Mark on the oars. We came second and Turaco third, no mean feat for such a large boat in a race that needed oars. Kingfisher got fourth and Ella just pipped Moireach for fifth.

The racing was done now and it was time to reflect on the week which had passed. We all had a wonderful time, the rotten weather the folks at home had endured passed us by leaving us with glorious sunshine and temperatures in the lower twenties. The winds for the most part were a force two, three or four giving the best sailing you could wish for.

The Sail Caledonia organizers made the whole week run like clockwork, I am certain there was a massive amount of work there but they made it seem like second nature. To name but a few, Norna's spadework and admin was impeccable. Martin's ability to marshal everyone made sure we were all in the right place at the right time and his organization of the safety boats kept us all safe even when the fleet was spread out over several miles. The safety boats themselves were ever present and their crews always smiling. Jean did the fetching and carrying for the week in her minibus, the galley crew kept us well fed and there were many cameras working to record it all for posterity. The company was a delight.

The final event of the week was the Ceilidh that evening. The galley crew put on a fantastic meal in the Hall at Dochgarroch just by the canal. Everyone was present as prizes and awards were given out. Turaco won their group, Lovely Lady won hers and we won ours. We were also lucky enough to win narrowly overall from Turaco, how costly it could have been if we had lost that oar out in the Firth! Everyone was very kind and Graham and his crew came over to open their bottle of champagne with us.

Mark, who had piped us home to our moorings every evening, put on some live music later with his merry band which we all enjoyed, several of the crews doing their own turn. The finale for me at any rate was the large drum in the middle of the floor. Several volunteers went up, took a stick each and played along with the band. The boom boom of the drum was quite random to start with but they soon got organised and played along just fine.

At this stage I could hardly keep my eyes open and went to bed, though others I am quite certain went on till nearly daylight!

I would recommend this event to anyone who has a suitable boat. It's a moderate physical challenge traversing the sixty six miles under a mixture of sail and oar and it certainly adds another very interesting dimension to your boating with its concept of making choices for your boat between sail and oar. This option to choose means that a very wide range for boats can compete on level terms, the boat itself is its own handicap. Boats which sail well do not always row well and vice versa. The whole thing changes if the wind picks up, drops away or changes direction. Many

sailing dinghies will row reasonably well given a pair of oars, so why not give it a go. Just remember, no spinnakers, trapezes or sliding seats! And be prepared for the scenery, its stunning.

I wonder what Jacks like in a blow.