

## Sail Caledonia - the Scottish Raid Jack O'Keeffe

**"Sail Caledonia aims to provide an opportunity for competitive and relaxed sailing and rowing in small boats and to encourage the use and development of such boats for cruising and 'expedition making'. In addition, the event provides a unique sample of highland culture"**

**So says the event's website.**

**Jack O'Keeffe was intrigued and asked David Camlin to join him "on a nice cruise". From then on, things began to get serious...**

**"I** fancy a nice cruise alongside the Caledonian Raid" I said.

"Oh no - we have to compete. Show the Bay Raiders what a Coaster can do!" was David Camlin's reaction.

OK... This meant figuring out where to get oars and then how to row the

Coaster. We were helped in this regard by Desmond Brown and my colleague who procured old racing eight sweeps for us to tinker with and to learn how difficult it is to get a good rowing system for a Coaster. After trials with Danny Donnelly in the Newry Basin we decided to fit an aft rowing point and a temporary thwart

and set off with the carbon fibre sweeps to show the world how to do it. As we passed Loch Lomond on the road to Fort William we met the first of a carpet of bluebells that stretched from there to our final destination in Inverness. Even the lower mountainsides were coated in blue.

**Photo: Chris Smith**



At Lochaber YC the bustle of registration and launching a motley mix of trailersailers from UK, Holland and France was an indication of the scale and level of organisation of the event. Whilst registering I was asked "Are you entering the Highland Challenge; no motor, no assistance?" As we were limited to the electric outboard and as the raid travels in the prevailing wind direction – why not? I was surprised by the exclamations of "Wow! the Irish are doing the Highland challenge!" – sudden foreboding...

After a welcome and a briefing the first

**Above: Jack O'Keeffe keeps an eye on the opposition in his "front view mirror". Below: Under the trees. Photos Kathy Mansfield**

sail an oar race was held from Lochaber YC to the canal sea locks. We were shy about sailing AND rowing – but after a light wind start a breeze came up so we could comfortably sail the second half of the course. We were welcomed into the canal by a piper – as we were at each stopover for the duration of the event – very nice touch. David took

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the car and trailer to the collection point close to Inverness – and I had the job of hauling the boat to the flight of locks at Corpach single handed. There was a strong headwind – and the significance of "no assistance" became clear as the rest of the fleet passed by under power or tow. David rejoined halfway up the stairs of locks and we faced into the first rowing race. Lack of practice together took its toll, and we were outside the time limit at the finish point. Only a few of the fleet were inside the limit – the rest went on under power to Gairloch. We hoisted sail after completing the rowing course and tacked the few miles up to Gairloch lock but overnighted away from the fleet among beautiful wooded scenery just below the lock. We joined the others for dinner aboard the pleasure barge Ros Crana just above the lock and discovered the nightly ceilidhs that are an essential part of the event.

The following morning there was discussion with Scottish Waterways personnel about which hour the Gairloch lockkeeper should come – and to this day we know not whether summer or winter hours were in force. In any event we rejoined the fleet in plenty of time



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for the start of the race on Loch Lochy. We were happy with our performance in this race as there was enough breeze to avoid rowing – although some crews just took out the oars and rowed any upwind leg. At this point we began to appreciate the scenic wonders of the Great Glen, and became aware of the fact that not far above us the snow was still on the ground. The rowing races were a challenge for us due to lack of practice, but we were glad of the preparations that we had made. The sweeps were longer than Coaster oars which was a great help, and we had fitted a front view mirror on the mizzen mast to see the view ahead – this needed practice for successful use – Eventually we concluded that the best system for long periods of rowing was one person sculling over the stern and the other rowing with one oar. This returned a consistent 2 and a half knots in calm conditions. Lough Oich, like Loch Lochy was beautiful scenery and sailing, the wind was constantly from the NE so any Loch was more to our liking than a canal stretch. In Fort Augustus there was no ceilidh on Ros Crana and we dined out – three Drascombe crews together having a good time in a local hostelry. The first day on Loch Ness was our best day – we gave the Bay Raiders a good run for their money on the beat up the loch to Foyers and were among the first to arrive at the rendezvous. We were half way along the south shore in a very pretty small river – more trees, more bluebells and very nice walks into the forest park with waterfalls and some industrial archeology. The second day on Loch Ness was our biggest challenge – no wind so a 27km row. We took our steady time and to our delight the organiser gave us a finish even though we were behind the rest of the fleet. As we approached the NW exit from the Loch the headwind breeze came up and we got in some good sailing before we were in the canal where sailing is prohibited. We did not know this as we tacked 50 times up the canal to Gairloch a few days earlier! On the final night on the canal there was the salute to the haggis with full ceremony – and very delicious it was too!

We emerged from the canal into the



Locking through. Photo: Chris Smith

Beaully Firth at South Kessock for the final sailing /rowing race. At last but too late the wind went round to the SW, and we had a lovely sail in the Firth. We were back in our element and we had a result to put us into the prizes at the final ceilidh. We had been told we had to have party piece for each boat and from the beginning of the evening it was clear that the standard wit was higher than we expected and each party piece was specifically written for the occasion. Faced with our disgrace, David took a napkin and pen and wrote: *"The crew's lament"*

*There was a boat from Ireland  
TYBOAT was her name  
Jack said "I'm going to Scotland"  
So to the glens we came  
"We'll sail and drink and have some fun  
So David would you like to come?"  
To sail and drink sounds so good  
He really put me in the mood!*

*So to Fort William for a gentle cruise  
But then I saw it was a ruse  
Row, row and row again  
No breakfast, lunch just so much pain  
The hands are sore, the knees have gone  
We've just been passed by the "New Dawn"  
But what a week! Such a team!  
Things are not as they seem  
So sitting here, now warm and fed  
I really think enough's been said!*

The week was a fantastic experience of fun in great company and wonderful environment. It should be on every "bucket list" After the Raid we continued on to Roskilde to join the Viking Cruise... Life is good when one is retired! There are galleries linked to the DA events page and the event website <http://www.sailcaledonia.org/>



David reads his instant poem. Photo Jack O'Keeffe



Power on. Photo Kathy Mansfield