

Two Weeks in Stornoway

Monday, July 4, 1983

“Dave gave me a lift to Ullapool via Achnasheen, and we camped overnight at Ullapool.”

A night of rain and wind. Trust my luck! Still raining at 0745 so a bit slow getting up. Dump wet tent in boot of car and escape from site before anyone comes round for money. Buy ticket for boat and hang about waiting for it. It's late again (see June 4). When it does appear 20 mins late, Dave sets off to beat the traffic and I hang around the pier. Rain almost off. Same gangway system as the St Ola (Scrabster – Stromness). Ferry leaves 25 mins late. A brief moment of watery sun as we round the point then more rain. A cup of tea and a daud of cheese for breakfast – 28p. About half way across, the captain starts using fog horn. Fog immediately disperses. By the time we approach Stornoway, patches of blue sky. By the time we land, Sun! Arrive 30 mins late. Enquire at tourist info office for location of hostel, and hoof it there in 20 mins or less. A small knot of people outside waiting for someone who knows something about the arrangements. At last a lass arrives and we get sorted out. Three beds in my room but only one made up. Looks like I get it to myself so spread well out. Wander round town and have language problems trying to buy pipe cleaners. Back for tea at 1700. Macaroni cheese, very stodgy. Chips not very good but lots of them. Pan bread better than usual. Tea weak by the time it had been well watered. Experimented with tape recorder. The external microphone borrowed from my music centre works well. Check classroom for mains supply – Nothing convenient. Will have to use batteries. Sit in and drink tea. Chat with Lindsay who is also in beginners class. He has been learning for two years. If that's the standard of the beginners class, I'm in trouble.

Tuesday, July 5, 1983

It is raining this morning.

Wednesday, July 6, 1983

Today the sun shines.

Thursday, July 7, 1983

Still no clouds.

Friday, July 8, 1983

The weather is getting boring, but a very slight breeze renders the sunlight more bearable. Slightly late for breakfast but never mind. One group is outside but not enough shade for Lise. Donald has decided that the class will sing of the beauties of Mull at the Ceilidh – no excuses accepted. Flounder for lunch – excellent – with peas and potatoes followed by baked apple. I give lessons on how to eat fish without choking on bones. Lise arranges us all outside in the shade.

Saturday, July 9, 1983

Jeannie took me up on my offer of an emergency entrance and came through the window at half past three in the morning. Day dawns clear and sunny. Bus is due at 1100 hrs but apparently there is some problem with the arrangements like – no one told the driver. That gets sorted and off we go. Pleasant drive down to Tarbert. The mountains in Harris are very bare – lots of rock and little

vegetation. An hour at Tarbert. The ferry is in – quite a queue waiting to get on and a lot just got off. Climb hillock to take photographs then into Harris Hotel for a quick pint. Drive on and stop at a beach. I go swimming for the first time in years. Water temp is very reasonable. Consume packed lunch and can of beer. After a couple of hours, continue south.

Sunday, July 10, 1983

Awake at 0830. No sound of breakfast bell. Lie a-doze. Bell goes at 0920. Decide I want a cup of tea so get up. About half a dozen missing. Main topic of conversation is which churches have Gaelic services. It seems almost everything starts at 1100 hrs which is a sensible arrangement. Domhnall and Dominique go off to mass but I am too lazy. Frank, Iain and David are planning a walk for this afternoon. Loonies. I'm just going for a stroll across to the Eye peninsula. Dinner is rice and soup followed by.... Afterwards I resist further suggestions of going to Dalibeg, though the idea now is to stay on the beach. Set out for a walk with Barbara, about an hour and a half across to St Columba's Church at Aignish, the burial place of the McLeods of Lewis. Some interesting gravestones. Walk back along the Broad Bay beach, in the shallows. Lots of jelly fish dying on the beach. Arrive back just before seven for salad for tea. Out for a stroll up to the war memorial. An appalling pall of smoke across the harbour mouth from the power station and a Russian factory ship in the bay. Wander back to hostel about half past ten and get the cans out. Sit and swill till two in the morning. Will need to buy more cans. Only three left.

Monday, July 11, 1983

Feel not too bad at eight o'clock. Get up slowly. Still sunny! How long can this go on? Everyone at breakfast, looking quite well in spite of last night. Another Gaelic irregular verb to chew on. After tea we played twenty questions. The object is not an elephant. Cold pork, potatoes and cabbage for lunch.

Monday, July 18, 1983

Breakfast at 0830. Kippers again. Barbara packs leisurely but we get out about 1015. Drop Barbara at Comhairle and drive on out to Islair Memorial whence I photograph Russian factory ship, but not the memorial. Back into town, a little shopping, and into the Royal (for lunch) just before 1200. Barbara arrives ten minutes later. We spend lunch packing her books/papers into jiffy-bags. Head off out to Carlway via Garynahine and Callanish but don't stop at the stones. Broch impressive. Smaller than Gurness but somehow more effective without any clutter around it. Any clutter here was probably cannibalised to build block houses which have very thick walls. On to museum at Shawbost. A lot of interesting stuff but poorly presented in too small a space. Mistake some sort of headgear for black bra (very large) and slip. If one allows for set-up by school kids, probably very good but lacked expert advice. On to Ness, missing out Black House of Arnol on the grounds that I sent someone a postcard of it. Later discovered it costs 30p admission so a good decision. Visit Butt of Lewis – lighthouse clothes in scaffolding then Port of Ness – very nice. See boat built on traditional lines, six oared (but only four in boat), called Jubilee. Barbara saw it last year. Dinner in Cross Inn then drop Barbara off at her digs (where I get a strupag). Forty minutes drive back to Stornoway. This will be a boring night.

Tuesday, July 19, 1983

What a weary night. Drank two cans of Pale Ale, went for two walks around the harbour and the docks, and, at about 0430 found people going on board. So, tidied the luggage and followed them. Very odd, lots of people already aboard, many more than had passed me in the night. Still, hang around, watch the loading, and at just after 0530 the boat moves two feet from the quay, and pulls

back in again. Gangplank put back in place. About five to six, they announce that the boat won't sail till 0700 due to a technical fault. Eavesdrop here and there to discover that the ferry didn't sail yesterday afternoon at all, and about 400 people were stranded at Ullapool. At about quarter to eight, they announce that they are conducting trials and might give a sailing time later. Later they say they have conducted a trial, will make adjustments and try again. At 1015 approx they announce another trial at 1045. At 1145 they say boat won't sail before 1300 because engineers en route from Glasgow won't arrive Stornoway until 1230. If the captain thinks anyone can get from Stornoway airport at 1230 to the boat, diagnose a fault, repair it and get away by 1300 – he is a mug. I nip off to post films and drink beer. Back at 1255. Shortly an announcement that a successful trial has been accomplished, and we are just waiting for the engineer to arrive before setting sail. Engineers arrive, ferry picks up more cars, passengers scurry aboard and nothing happens. Just after 1400, “we regret to inform you...” engineers have found more faults and will make definitive statement at 1500. I go for lunch – cold meat salad, 2 dauds of cheese and a cup of tea £2 – 8x. While eating, request for bus travellers to Inverness and Glasgow to contact Purser's office. This is an attempt to identify numbers to justify bus “whenever we might arrive”. Three o'clock passes as I write this! 1520 engines start, 1530 hoots, 1535 announces “we shall be leaving within the next few minutes” and behold, it actually does. On the way across, passengers are offered a free meal, they again gather numbers for Glasgow and Inverness, and then announce that passengers to Inverness and Edinburgh may travel free by Highland, but travellers to Inverness and Glasgow by Newtons should pay on the bus.