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Irish Sea Kayak Route

During the summer of 2011, Owen Gabb and Mike Mayberry **crossed the Irish Sea by sea kayak**. Owen had taken part in some of the [Big 5 Kayak Challenges](#) and was keen to sea kayak across the Irish Sea. It was a trip I had considered for a while but struggled to find a paddling partner to do it with. We had met during the summer of 2010 and paddled together a few times before Owen went away again to work.



Sea Kayaks on the Ferry

It was June 11th 2011 before I saw him again. We decided we would



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definitely get this sea kayaking trip done this summer and the sooner the better, while we had the longer days. By the 16th we had confirmed with the Stena Line that we could get free passage on the ferry and planned the route as an exercise. The following day the forecasts looked like we may get in a window of opportunity on the 24th June. By Monday 20th, my forecast models showed that the winds would be force 5 from 7pm on the Friday; it didn't look like it would happen that day after all. The forecast continued to get worse for Friday each time I looked.

On Friday 24th June, the forecast was correct, I was glad we had changed our minds. Looking ahead again it seemed high pressure would build again for the end of the following week. On Tuesday it still looked good for either Friday or Saturday. I packed my sea kayak on Wednesday. Thursday 30th June the forecast looked great all the way into Sunday now. We were going to catch the ferry that afternoon. I had worked booked in for Saturday, so we would have to paddle on Friday. I was getting excited!

We intended to leave Rosslare at 0300 so that we would arrive at Whitesands for 1800, 1 hour and 45 minutes after the tide turned in Ramsey sound and St David's Head. This meant that we would be following a bearing of 124 degrees. The wind forecast was NW up to F3 and due to drop until early afternoon to almost nothing. The swell forecast told us to expect 0.5m seas, improving to 20cm throughout the day. Mid to late afternoon the wind would increase again to a whopping F2!

From the chart, we would travel south of the lighthouse at Tuskar Rock passing between it and the South Rock South Cardinal Buoy at 0500. We would then be pushed North on the flooding tide until it turned at around 1200 and then south until we landed at Whitesands. I was very happy with this arrangement as it meant that we would be coming in from above the Bishops and the Clerks.

I plotted on the chart where we expected to be each hour so I could check on our progress as we paddled. I don't have a GPS but with the iphone the compass provides a Lat and Long reference. This had been checked for accuracy over the past few months and seemed to be great. I wanted to track the entire route with the Navionics app, but testing suggested we would only get 10 hours of tracking even with the extra battery pack I have so we decided we would only turn it on each hour, check our position and record it as a waypoint. We would track our final approach, the last two hours of our sea kayak journey.



Our Camping Spot

We arrived in Rosslare and found a nice spot under the cliffs on the sea dunes. We grabbed fish and chips and checked over our kit, making sure we packed everything exactly where we needed it to be. At 8pm a beach comber came walking past with his dog. What a really nice chap, I got the impression that he'd pretty much bumped into everyone that has ever done the crossing from there. Two hours later we were in our bags for the night trying to get what sleep we could. He returned and gave us some drawings he'd done since he'd last seen us and wished us luck again. He said that we would get a good run on the tide from Greenore Point, much like the Navionics app had suggested. I was feeling very confident about the trip. Owen had set his alarm for 2am.



It was 2.30 when I felt his hand on my shoulder waking me. He was already dressed, he said he hadn't slept at all and had assumed I had heard him moving about for the past half hour but was being lazy about rising. I woke refreshed and feeling good, but I now only half an hour to get ready to go. I put the water on for the flask, ate my cereal, packed my sleeping kit, checked the forecast again, called the coastguard and generally rushed to get ready. We carried our sea kayaks to the waters edge. It was 3.30; we were half an hour late. Our new Irish friend arrived to see us off, I really liked this guy!



Tuskar Rock Lighthouse Image

Off we went, the Tuskar Rock lighthouse was at 124 degrees, perfect, the sun wasn't up and we had a light to paddle towards. We knew that it would be up shortly after we passed the lighthouse. As we approached the lighthouse I was able to make out the light sequence of the cardinal mark. At 5am we were between the two of them, we had made up the half an hour without trying.

Irish Sea Sunrise Image



Sunrise on our Irish Sea crossing by Sea Kayak

It seemed as though we were going to have a good run of the tide. Conditions were exactly as forecast, we were happy. By 6.30am we seemed to have gained half an hour. We were even able to listen into Milford Haven coastguard, which I'd not expected on a handheld from that distance.

We were due for our hourly stop at 7.30am, we knew we had to keep this routine to make it across. At 7.20ish a pod of about two dozen dolphin arrived. I knew from experience that if we stopped they would get bored and leave us so we decided to continue through the scheduled break. They were riding the waves next to us, I could see them swimming underneath me, and they were jumping about 2 feet in front of my sea kayak. It was the best dolphin experience I've ever had. At 8am they were still with us but we decided it best to take the break. Sure enough, by the time we started again they had gone. I would be looking and hoping they would return throughout the rest of the trip.

9am passed. 10am passed. 11am passed. Our routine, kayak for an hour, switch on the phone, check the position, eat something, wee if needed. My planning was working, we were exactly where I expected to be each hour, compensating for the fact we'd gained a half hour earlier on. The feeling from this was immense, I was confident.



Stena Europe

I think it was around 1130 when I was first able to pick out St David's Head on the horizon. Somewhere along the way we had got back to having our breaks on the half hour again. The gps told us that we were still half an hour ahead. I thought we'd try to let the coastguard know our position, I never expected a reply. Back came the call from them, we assured them we were fine, on schedule and doing well. They asked if my partner was still with me. I found this odd, why would he not be with me? They requested we call them again at 12.30pm.



Stena Lynx

12.30pm we called in our position. Doing this every hour was going to put my timings out so I got in first and told them I would call in again at 2.30pm. They seemed ok with this. I'd been hearing a drone for about the past fifteen minutes, it sounded like the Stena Fastcat from Fishguard, but I thought it didn't start for another two weeks. The noise was bugging me, we couldn't see anything. 15 minutes after we called in our position, then we heard the coastguard side of the conversation with the Lynx. They were told our last known position was 10miles due west of them. 5 minutes later I could see it, it was heading straight for us. I didn't want to alter our course as it would put my plan out. At the same time I didn't want to get caught in the wash from it, I've seen it when it's on a plane and don't much fancy being that close, particularly after 10 hours of sea kayaking. We stuck to our bearing, hoping they would spot us and sure enough after about another ten minutes it turned to port and gave us a wide berth. We heard them give the coastguard our new position and tell them that we looked fine, were going well, and also an eyeball of the conditions. These were now pretty smooth, the forecast had held true.

2.30 passed, we checked in. 3.30 passed, 4.30 arrived. We called in, I really didn't want to as I knew the Ramsey tide had just turned. They insisted we called in again in an hour. This concerned me as St David's head still looked a long way off and we were north of it. Everything I could see with my eyes was telling me that we weren't going to make it past the head. I remembered a tip from someone who had done it before, "don't be tempted to turn early". I also knew that the tide along the North Pembrokeshire coast turned before the tide further out. Owen wanted to turn south, I stood firm and insisted we stay on the bearing, knowing that we had Abereiddy if it came down to it. It would be slightly further, but in all honesty, my body felt fine, my legs knew that I had been sitting in a sea kayak for 13 1/2 hours but that was all. If I had to do an extra hour or so to Aberieddy with the tide I could do it.

5.30 arrived, it seemed like St David's head hadn't gotten any larger. We

were easily picking out houses we knew, cars parked at Whitesands, but the head looked no closer. Our minds were playing tricks. We could hear the coastguard busy conversing with a French yacht skipper, it sounded like hard work, as they were calling the owner of the boat he was delivering to on his behalf, relaying messages, neither spoke English really well. It kept me entertained and my mind off of what was ahead of me. By now, I knew we were looking at a hard paddle across a tide running NE through the Bishops and Clerks which would join a North tide running through Ramsey sound. We would hit St David's head as the third hour of the streams began. I expected it to be running at 5kn. This was going to be our punishment for starting half an hour late. I knew we had lost the half an hour we had gained in the morning gradually during the afternoon. I really didn't want to have to stop and call in our position again, using time in a tide that was going to be against us. I made the call intending to say that we were fine but the tide had turned and I had to get moving again quickly. They were busy with the yacht and didn't reply, which suited me fine.

Using transits from the point of St David's Head, now clearly distinguishable from the background, we ferried across the flow which had increased as expected 500m or so from the point. We weren't going to make it around, at least not from where we were. I directed my companion into an eddy just north of the point. There were three fishermen on the head, one with a line out. I figured we could use the eddy to accelerate up to the point and hopefully carry enough speed to get us around the Head and into Whitesands Bay. The fishermen were looking at us oddly, not many people paddle against this kind of flow. I relayed my plan to them, explaining we had just come from Rosslare and needed to get to Whitesands. I don't think they believed us but they bought the line in anyway.

We sprinted forwards, the eddy providing some much needed speed. Owen was ahead of me, he flew straight into the tide, and he was going to make it. I was relieved as he's not really done that before. Me? I hit a boil, possibly too aware of how he was going to do. I drifted down to the first eddy and tried again. This time I got the angle wrong and was ferrying back out to sea, fatigue was affecting my concentration. I could see him safely past the point this time and made the executive decision that I would carry my sea kayak over the rocks on the point. They were low as the tide was high. There was little swell, so climbing out and re-entering would be easy. The sea kayak was heavy with kit but two of us would do it. I climbed out and lifted it above the swell. I walked to the other side expecting to see Owen coming over them the other way to see me. I reached the other side and he was nowhere to be seen. I couldn't believe it, he'd left me. I started to lift the sea kayak over by myself; it was heavy, very heavy. I decided that as I was on dry land I would make contact with the coastguard, after all they hadn't heard from us for two hours and had been expecting a call at 5.30. I also figured that he had headed for the beach and knowing that my wife was there to meet us, a call would probably go out that I had last been seen in the tide off St David's Head.

Whilst I was talking to them they received a call from Jeff of the lifeguards at Whitesands to tell them he was sending a boat out to me. They were going to patch me through to talk to them directly but I could see it coming and said it wasn't worth it, they'd be with me in two or three minutes. Two teenagers arrived! They wanted to tow me but there was no way I'd kayaked all that way to accept a tow. I made one of them assist me carrying the sea kayak and re-entered, still annoyed that I'd been left.

I kayaked into the beach at Whitesands, surfing on a foot high wave. Dragged the boat up the beach, I had made it. My wife later told me that when Owen arrived he was all over the place and not too great on his

feet. They were concerned about how I would look when I arrived, pleasantly surprised that I was fine, had minimal aches and was able to carry one end of my sea kayak myself.



Arriving at Whitesands

We would like to thank Milford Haven coastguard for the fantastic job they did for us that day, it was nice to hear a cheerful voice when we called in. Thanks also to Stena for the passage over to Rosslare, Nige Robinson for lending me a sea kayak at short notice as mine had sustained damage that week, Pip for running us home at the end and the youngster that helped me carry over the rocks.

2 Responses to Irish Sea Crossing 2011

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