

'Wet Knees at 5:30'

Solo Irish Sea Crossing - Holyhead to Dublin

September 2011

My arms had been making circles for 11 hours now, the tide had long since turned and the speed was dropping. Should I work against the flow, straight line to the headland, or take a chance and head to the cliffs, aiming to scratch my way up the eddies? Looking across I could see all the clapotis and chaos below the cliffs. The clock was ticking; time was tight. Some days I just wish someone else would make the decisions for me...

It had been a long year and I was just about running on fumes. The season had started early with a return crossing of the North Channel, followed soon after with yet another lap of Anglesey. Throw in a couple of races to keep me on my toes until the big one; a 19+ hour circumnavigation of the Isle of Mull in June. Add another race or two for good measure and it was starting to feel like a 'long year'. Trouble was there was still more to go, an old itch to scratch - the Irish Sea Crossing.

The Irish Sea crossing has been completed a number of times but it is still a serious challenge, the Holyhead – Dublin route is probably the Blue Riband of the UK sea kayak crossings; fifty plus nautical miles of open water, fast tidal flows and busy shipping lanes.

My first real open crossing had been on this route. At the time I had been inspired when I read of Jim Savege's solo crossing. It had been a challenge for me just to complete such a distance solo; I can still remember the nerves on the day before I set out. It was a bit of a rough and ready attempt; along the lines of –'keep the letter 'E' lined up on the compass and paddle until you hit something solid'.

Since then I had got a few more miles under my belt and the thought occurred now and then that I should give it another. When Justine Curgenvin and Nick Cunliffe set a stonking 11hr 45 min time in 2009 it caught my attention. That was an impressive time, the benchmark to aim for. I like a challenge and this looked like a good one - from the start this would be an attempt on the record, no messing. If all went well I reckoned I could sneak under the time by a few minutes, if it didn't I wouldn't! It would also be two seasons before I got the chance to find out...

Race Day

September 2011 was earmarked for an attempt but I'd been kicking my heels for weeks now. I was looking for a couple of days of stable, calm weather; gentle easterly winds would be a nice bonus! A few times it looked tantalisingly close but each time the weather window was too tight. I had planned my training in order to be fit for early September and it had been a bit of a struggle to keep the peak for nearly a month now. If I didn't go soon then that would be it until next year.

But eventually the day came around, the desired easterly wind had not made an appearance and the preferred neap tides would have to be 9.8m springs instead! Oh well, beggars can't be choosers.

So after the usual sleepless night I found myself slipping and sliding across the boulders at Soldier's Point. It was dark and there was the usual faff as I packed my boat. Whilst packing I watched a ferry appear and head into Holyhead Harbour; quite a relief - I really didn't want to play chicken with that beast in the dark. I wouldn't win that one.

I had checked and double checked all my kit, as had the 'Team Manager' but somehow we had both overlooked my omission of a paddle leash. Oh well, someone was going to go home without shoe laces! Later it crossed my mind that the rather overpriced leash I usually use was no great improvement on my last minute shoe lace special. After all a bit of string is, well, just that I suppose.

'Team Manager' was along to help out and I had somehow forgotten to mention that she had drawn the short straw. Someone was needed to stand in the knee deep water to help me get into the boat with dry feet! At 5:30 in the morning there wasn't a crowd of volunteers.

Finally I got everything into the Taran; food, water, my lardy ass and nicely dry feet! A quick goodbye, a sequence of button pushing and then I headed out of the small bay. It was dark, there was no moon and I could see no stars either.

The plan initially was to try not to collide with North Stack and then once I could see the South Stack lighthouse I should be able to turn onto a bearing of 274 degrees and set a pace to last 11 hours or so. I aimed to use the ebb to give me a sling shot off the Stacks; this would also carry me nicely south of the ferry route. Later the flood should carry me back northwards. At some stage this would mean I would drift back across the ferry route, not too keen on that one; but then we would cross that bridge when we came to it.

The Stacks

There was only a gentle breeze as I headed out, but I could feel the distinct swell. There was no light at all; over to my left I could only just make out the silhouette of the North Stack cliffs. I had no horizon and could not make out the sea at all. Ahead the North Stack race sounded a little intimidating, I was still trying to see how far away it was when the boat started riding up and over the waves. That'll be it then! The Taran rode through nice and smoothly with no great drama. Hopefully the South Stack waves would be straightforward too; if the plan was right I should only skirt those.

The tiderace started to smooth out now and I could see the South Stack light. On with the head torch to check the heading - 274(ish) – 'that'll do!' The South Stack race presented no problem and as things settled down I glanced over my shoulder to watch the strobes from the lighthouse scan along the sheer cliffs - mesmerising. I felt a little lonely as I realised I could see no sign of light from Holyhead, surprising.

50 miles to go

Hopefully the fun and games were over and I could settle into a rhythm now. Away from the coast the swell was surprisingly chunky, but without any wind it was still oily calm on top. Though the sun hadn't risen yet the light was starting to improve. Ahead I could make out a series of lights; they seemed to be staying on a constant bearing. Either I was going to run him down or I had made a serious mistake and was heading for the beach at Treaddur Bay. Eventually the lights moved across my heading and disappeared into the gloom.

A further hour of paddling before the sun rose and as the light improved it became obvious why it had been so dark – visibility was probably only about a mile. As the day grew brighter the view turned a rather milky grey; it crossed my mind that it was like looking out of a rather dirty milk bottle, with the milk still in it. I guessed the sun was coming up, though I never did see it!

The Shopkeeper

Soon I heard the throb of a low revving diesel engine but the engine sound didn't seem to give much help in locating the source, always a little disconcerting,

Where is it? Have I missed it? Is it behind me? It's always surprising how a few thousand tons of floating steel can appear like Mr Ben's shopkeeper in a sneaky mood.

Ah, there he is and he's heading this way (the boat not the shopkeeper) – great. Just when I'm thinking that it's about time to dig the VHF out he alters course and crosses ahead. Just taking a look, I suppose. After all a muppet in a shiny pink canoe is not something you expect to see 5 miles off the Stacks in the early morn.

Routine

I settled into a well practiced routine now - 56 minutes on and 4 minutes off with a drink on the 30 minute mark, 500ml of fluid per hour. The Coastguard had requested a position update every hour too. With the routine the 4 minutes off soon passes by and it's a bit tight to get all the admin done. But the off-time needs to be kept to a minimum; if you take 5 minute breaks and add them all up for a 12 hr crossing it totals nearly an hour of non-paddling. That's not a great drama on a straightforward crossing but when you are aiming to sneak under a tight record time all those lost minutes become significant.

And so that was it for the next few hours, 56 minutes on 4 minutes off, paddling in a grubby milk bottle.

Hmmm...

Lunchtime arrived and I was trying something new this time. Summit to Sea had provided me with some self-heating meals to try out.

'Just how hot do these things get?' I was a little concerned that it might melt down through the spraydeck and out through the hull - 'Alien' style! I could see the headlines: 'Sea kayaker dies in freak offshore self heating food immolation!' But all worked as advertised and the warm food was a very welcome change. While I was working through my Chilli lunch a seal popped up by the boat; I was a little surprised as the GPS showed I was 25 nmi out now - the seal seemed rather bemused too.

As the day progressed the sound of a ferry drifted over from the north, but the murk hid its exact location. My only company was to be found with the Fulmars; sometimes a group of 30 or so but most of the time just a lone visitor.

As the Fulmars circled I was becoming distracted by the drift figures. The plan anticipated for a maximum drift of around 3 nmi south of the desired track. It was disconcerting to watch the figures steadily increase beyond this until they showed nearly twice the figure. This was much greater than I had allowed for, there was not a lot I could do about it at the moment. If the calculations were correct it should all pan out as I drifted the same distance back North - yeah right!

The swell was still quite chunky but the wind was only a variable breeze leaving the smooth surface I had experienced for much of the morning. I watched the furrows left in the water by the wing tips of the Fulmars as they continued to circle gracefully, so smooth.

The odd rain shower came and went as I tried to maintain my rhythm. The tide was running north now, though it didn't seem to be flowing as quickly as I wanted. Hopefully I would gain back my lost 3 miles...

I didn't.

Now where did that come from?

The hours had slipped by as I relentlessly ticked off the miles. Eat, drink, radio - the routine marked each passing hour. My mind drifted and the pace wandered accordingly. Even so it looked as if an 11 hour crossing may be on. That would be good, but then there is always a sting in the tail - always.

Things were still surprisingly comfortable; usually aches and pains start to appear by now but overall everything felt reasonably good. The heart rate had decided not to play ball all day though, staying sulkily low whatever I tried; perhaps things didn't hurt so much because I wasn't pulling hard enough? The figures would rise after each break but then drop after 20 minutes or so, not the best sign. About this time that the mental processes start to slow down too, thinking becomes a little woolly and you lose your edge - time to pay attention.

As I stopped on the 8 hour mark I realised that the tide was going to slack. There was still about 15 miles to go and the chart showed that I was only just level with Howth (I should have been 3 miles north); with 3

hours to go I really didn't need an ebb tide now. During the 4 minute downtime the wind picked up to a Force 3-4 and moved to the north. The swell also moved through 180 degrees in the same time, no warning – it just happened. I was surprised how quickly things changed; a south running ebb and a northerly wind were not what I needed now - flipping great!

Time to get angry

Conditions were quite lumpy now with the odd wave breaking over the boat, not the best for maintaining boat speed. On the up-side, things didn't seem to be getting much worse.

It was time to sort things out.

No more of that fancy, by the book, tidal drift stuff now! It was time for Plan B - GPS straight track to Howth. It looked like a 3 hour ferry-glide home; as long as the GPS showed an ETA within the record time then this should do. Of course I would have to allow for the steadily increasing tidal flow too; as this picked up, more of my effort would be diverted to holding my line north-south and less taking me towards my destination. A quick calculation and I realised that my mind was working too slowly to think this one through in any detail! Oh well, just have to paddle harder then to make sure.

As I closed on the north end of Dublin Bay the rain was heavy, the wind was getting quite fresh and the murk had turned into a mist, though the visibility had lifted to a couple of miles. There was some sort of ship leaving the bay, I couldn't really make out the size through the gloom but as it seemed to be sticking to the Inshore Traffic Zone I reckoned it was probably a bit bigger than me. Of course, the closing heading wasn't changing (does it ever?) and I had the feeling that I couldn't get comfortably ahead of it but it was also going to be a pretty close crossing behind – I couldn't afford to lose any more time now by waiting.

It was quite close; as it glided by the rumble of the diesels turned into the hiss of the water along the hull. I could see no other traffic close by and looking across to the south of the bay I was relieved to see the ferries were well clear on their approach into Dublin.

I was nearing the headland south of Howth now, but the increasing flow was slowing me down and it would only grow worse as I got closer. Did I go straight line to the headland against the flow? Or across to the cliffs with an aim to scratch my way up through the eddies? Decisions, decisions! Of course too many years flogging up and down rivers meant I would always head for the eddies. I headed into a good stretch of clapotis as I closed on the cliffs to find the eddies were smaller than hoped for!

I was close into the rocks now, bouncing my way up through the eddies trying to avoid the worst of the waves. A burst to get through the faster water at the headland and then I rounded the corner and into the flat calm of Balscadden Bay. Bliss!

Ahead lay the beach; it looked like a nice place on first impressions. Head down and pull hard now. Then 3 minutes to the beach and an invisible angler casts a line across my deck, it wraps around me.

'Oh come on!' 11 hours of hard work for it to end like this; I'm stopping for nobody now.

'Up yours ugly!' I think as I hear shouts of abuse.

But finally, the welcome hiss as the Taran slides up the beach – stop the clock!

The GPS showed 55.8 nautical miles covered with an overall average of 4.9 knots, 11 hours and 19 minutes and 59 seconds had elapsed since Soldier's Point. It was a record, not by a huge margin but enough for now.

Getting Home

I'd never been to Howth before and had only recce'd the beach on Google Earth! The limitations of this method of planning became obvious as I unloaded the boat and tried to carry it up the steep steps. Narrow walls and a fenced gate made life difficult at the top of the steps but eventually I got through and stood soggly on the side of the road to change.

Just as I was setting out to the B&B with the boat on my shoulder, Keith drove by. Keith McGuirk is an Irish Team wild water racer and had kindly offered to drive me to the ferry the next day (but only after the Rugby had finished!) In the meantime he'd had driven down to watch me paddle in to the beach, unfortunately he was standing on the end of the pier and missed the dynamic finish!

The next day the kind people at Irish Ferries helped me dodge the jobsworths to carry my boat onto the ferry and take the easy way home. I returned to find my rest day was earmarked to replace the shower which passed away as I was mid-crossing. The glamour of it all...

John Willacy

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Support from: Summit to Sea, Rockpool Kayaks and Pascale.

Photos: <http://angleseypaddling.jalbum.net/Irish%20Sea%20Crossing%20Photos%20Full/>