

Irish Sea Crossing

It was now more than two hours since I had rounded the harbour wall at Dun Laoghaire, the GPS showed I was now over nine miles off-shore. As I ventured further from the sanctuary of Dun Laoghaire the conditions had grown steadily worse. Ahead of me lay over 40 miles of open water to Holyhead which still lurked beyond the horizon. It was coming close to decision time; do I continue and hope for the forecast improving conditions or turn back and face the disappointment of the slog back to the harbour?

Crossing the Irish Sea had been on my “to do” list for quite some time, but it had just not made it onto the “been done” list. Then I heard that Geoff, Ely and a team of Royal Air Force Adventure Training Instructors were planning to cross from Rosslaire to St. Davids. This looked like the catalyst I needed; so of course I phoned Geoff and invited myself onto the trip - as you do.

Nautical charts winged their way around the country, as we compared timings, tidal drift, compass bearings etc. We seemed to have come up with similar plans, so if all else failed at least I wouldn't be alone when I got lost! We hoped for good weather as we pencilled the dates in for a week in August.

August soon arrived and Geoff headed home to West Wales to act as on-site weather girl. The remainder of the team was scattered around the country and waited for the “nod” from ‘Ulrika’ before travelling down. If we got the go from the grey-haired weather girl we would all hot foot it to Fishguard, jump on the boat and then paddle back the next day. We had agreed we would need ideal conditions to take the large group across, but Ulrika had bad news - strong winds and rough seas. Things didn't look good.

As the week progressed with an uncooperative weather forecast, time grew short. Our last chance revolved around the Thursday afternoon ferry to Rosslaire. Early Thursday morning the buoy at Aberporth showed a 1.8m swell passing every 4 secs. Didn't sound like the calm we were waiting for. Conditions were improving but not quickly enough, so the decision was reluctantly taken to cancel.

As I looked around, the floor scattered with paddling kit, I felt disappointed – after all the anticipation and preparation it just wasn't going to happen. The Irish Sea would have to wait for yet another day.

But as I looked around at my kit, an idea formed. Everything was ready to go; the boat was on the car, my kit packed and food prepared. I didn't have enough time for the southern crossing but what about Dun Laoghaire – Holyhead? All I needed was a new compass bearing (out of Dun Laoghaire and turn right), a new chart, a quick jaunt across on the HSS ferry and bob's your uncle! Oh, and of course the weather. The forecast showed improving conditions for the next day. I had nothing to lose, it was either paddle or go back to work. “Sod it! If no-one else wants to go I'll do it on my own”. The downside was an extra 10 nm or so added to length of the Rosslaire crossing, but then what's a couple of more hours after 12 or so anyway?

The rest of the morning was hectic; a quick planning session, a very long winded and rather surreal phone call to an overseas call centre in order to book the ferry (“Sir, can you explain just what a kayak is?”) Meanwhile, the Team Manager (Pascale) booked accommodation in Dun Laoghaire (“Make sure they have somewhere to store a kayak overnight!”) Pascale was not overly impressed by the whole escapade. Geoff had made the decision not to go (he was

usually correct) and now she thought that the new plan was too rushed. Personally, I think it was more to do with the fact that it was my turn to do the washing-up. This had to be one of the better excuses I had come up with!

I had elected to paddle from Dun Laoghaire to Holyhead rather than the reverse for a number of reasons. I had not sampled the delights of Dun Laoghaire before and didn't fancy wandering around town with my boat on my shoulder after a 14 hr paddle. Likewise I was unfamiliar with the harbour and other landing areas. At least if I paddled towards Holyhead I should be able to find the beach without too much of a problem!

After Pascale and I had manhandled my boat through the entrance into Holyhead ferry terminal, I found myself standing in the check-in queue with an 18 ft Inuk under my arm. It drew a few curious looks. The Stena staff were very accommodating as they helped me manoeuvre the boat tentatively through customs.



As the HSS Stena Explorer rounded the Holyhead Breakwater the waves slammed into the hull with rather alarming booming noises. As we passed a buoy I watched the swell, counting under my breath, it was rising and falling 6 ft or so every 1-2-3-4 seconds, just as Geoff had reported. Oops. Not the calm and dreamy seas I was hoping for.

As the ferry got up to speed I was expecting a fast, smooth ride; it wasn't. As we travelled further out the conditions grew worse. People staggered about like Friday night laddettes as the ferry rolled uncomfortably. The view from the window was depressing. These weren't the conditions I was hoping for. I couldn't really see myself paddling back across that lot! As the ferry progressed westwards the seas worsened and I grew more depressed. After all the

anticipation and frantic activity it looked as if I would be returning by ferry after a spending a night in Dun Laoghaire with an 18 ft Inuk. I just hoped it wouldn't snore.

The ferry arrived in Dun Laoghaire to be met by foot and mouth disinfectant procedures, a blast from the past. After more help from the Stena staff and a rather bemused policeman, I found myself dodging the rush hour traffic in Dun Laoghaire town centre complete with boat, paddles and a large bag of kit. Arriving during rush hour was not the best planning...

I staggered up the road to the B & B and rang the door bell. I was faced with a cheerful lady whose opening line "You'll be bringing the boat in as well then?" took me a little by surprise. "Err, it's a little large" I replied. "Oh, don't worry, we'll manage." When I had asked Pascale to mention storage for the boat I had hoped for a garden or driveway, not for it to spend the night in a room of its own!

Early the next morning I tried to slide the Inuk out of the hallway with the minimum of fuss, hoping not to wake the household or remove too much wallpaper with the rudder! I headed down to the slipway I had recced the previous night. After a slight problem trying to squeeze too many cakes into too small a boat, I left the harbour ten minutes behind time. A quick call to Dublin Coastguard and I was on my way at last.

As I left the harbour I was accompanied by a small yacht; they told me that they were heading for Holyhead too. However as I left the harbour and settled on my heading they promptly turned left. Hmm, this didn't seem right. I stopped to check and recheck my plan, I couldn't see any obvious mistake, but they were definitely on a different heading. With one more look at my chart I resumed my course, a little uncertainly but hoping for the best.



Conditions outside the harbour soon became choppy with a following sea. As the waves repeatedly broke over my spraydeck, I realised it wasn't going to be practical to paddle so far without being able to change my water bottles or reach my food. I would paddle for an hour and review.



The first hour went by. Conditions had started to get a little lively now as I dodged between squalls. I decided to continue for another hour, but it looked as if I would be taking the ferry home after all.

As I reached 10 nm out from Dun Laoghaire I was still unsure if I should continue or turn back. I had to make the decision now. It didn't look good so I kicked the rudder over and rather deflated I started to turn back towards Ireland. But as the boat started to turn I noticed a gap in the clouds and blue sky ahead. I realised the squalls had eased, perhaps the forecast was correct? Time for a food stop as I watched things develop, conditions were definitely improving. I couldn't be bothered paddling all the way back to catch the ferry, so onwards towards Holyhead, hoping for the promised blue skies and calm seas.

The conditions did ease and I started to get into a rhythm, paddling steadily with a break every hour or so for food and every half hour for water. On the hour I also updated the Coastguard with my present position. I was finally starting to relax.

As I looked behind I could see the ferries leaving Dun Laoghaire right on schedule. The plan was for the tide to carry me south, clear of the ferries track. It was a relief as I saw that they would pass a comfortable distance to the north.

I was steadily ticking off the miles now and there was more blue sky up ahead. For six hours I paddled towards a featureless horizon. It was a welcome sight when I could finally make out Holyhead Mountain; I was heading in roughly the correct direction. I mused on just where the yacht was heading to.

The next few hours passed with a steady routine of radio calls, stops for food and water and a few thousand paddle strokes.

As I cleared the half way point I could hear the sound of a helicopter. Peering to the north I could make out a Royal Air Force Sea King close to the Ulysses ferry. In the real world I work as an engineer on the RAF Search & Rescue Sea Kings, so I decided to call up the crew on the VHF to say hello. The crew replied, saying they were holding station whilst the winchman worked on the ferry so they could spare a few minutes for a visit. As I passed my position I could see the Sea King turn towards me and a few minutes later it appeared, noisily overhead. After a few photos and a little radio banter the winchman was ready and they headed back to the Ulysses to collect him. I was tiring a little now and it was quite a boost to have some friendly company. Reinvigorated, I continued my progress to Holyhead.

The weather was much improved now and the conditions had settled down nicely, calm seas with just a gentle swell. The rough conditions earlier had dictated that I wear a cag, so now I was getting too warm. It would have been nice to remove it but I really didn't fancy the idea of a capsized 30 miles out with a half removed cag wrapped around my head – I would just have to suffer a little longer.

A few miles short of South Stack I realised I was on collision course with a small tanker. Time for a bit of burn. But after a few minutes we still seemed to be steadily closing. A bit more of a burn. Still no change – was he doing this deliberately? It dawned on me that the ship was slowly changing heading in order to head south as he rounded Anglesey. As I paddled and the skipper changed heading it was enough to keep us on a collision course. So I stopped paddling thinking he would pass in front, too simple, I now watched the ship settle onto a constant heading, straight towards me. This guy was taking the p*** now I thought. So time for

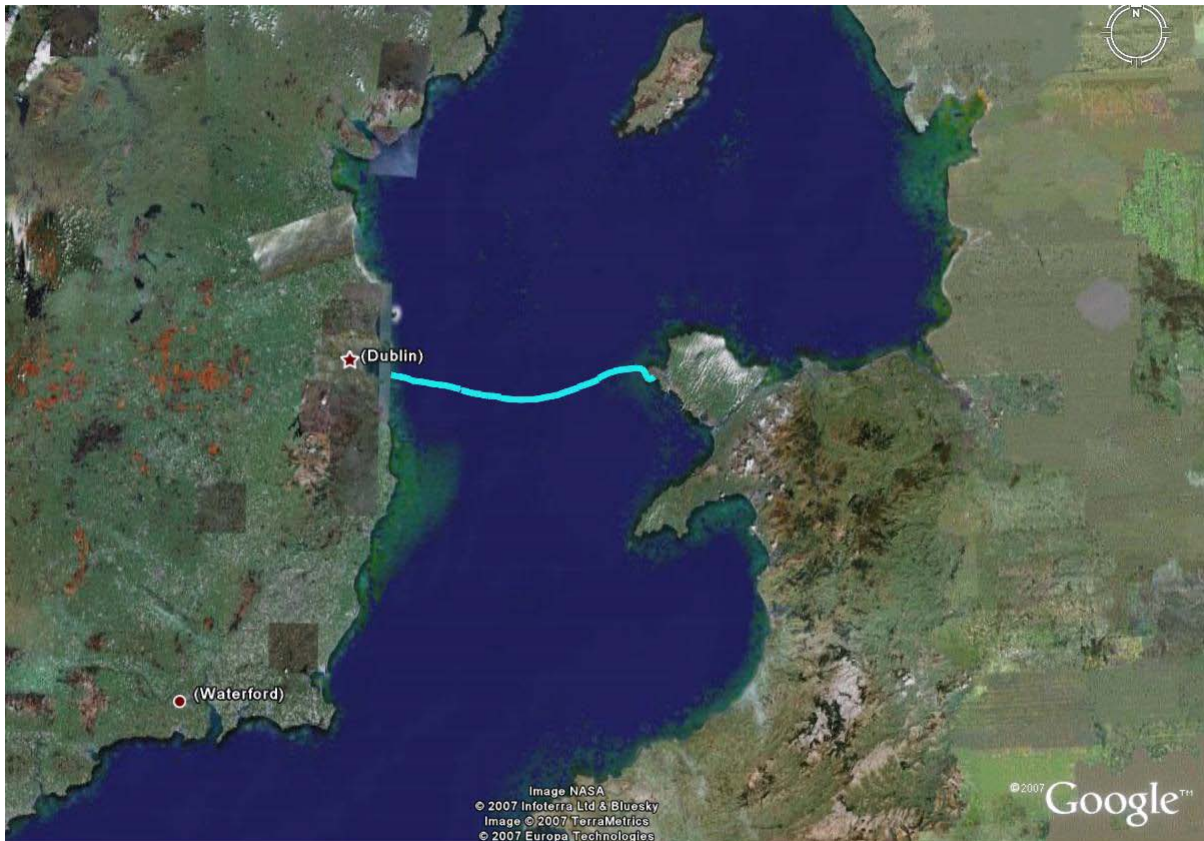
another burn. Things were getting nervously close now, but eventually I realised it would pass behind. Phew!



I was nearing South Stack, the low sun illuminating the Gogarth cliffs with a warm glow. The wind had dropped, the sun was out and things were looking good. I was tiring by now but rather enjoying myself all the same. My hourly stops were taking longer and longer as I tired. It's surprising how much "admin" you can find to do in a boat when you don't want to start paddling again.

But I had taken my eye off the ball a little. As I drew close to South Stack I found myself fighting the tide. Not the way I had things planned. The irony wasn't lost on me either, I had planned the trip from West to East, thinking I would be able to rely on my Anglesey experience to make things easier as I neared the end of a long day. In my dreams! As time steadily ticked away I was getting more frustrated but not much closer to the beach.

I was working hard and not seeming to make much headway towards South Stack. The obvious remedy was to go with the flow and get out at Soldier Point. Unfortunately Pascale had arranged to meet me at Porth Dafarch. If I turned downtide to Soldier Point I knew lack of mobile signal would mean I couldn't contact her. I couldn't face being marooned on the back of the Holyhead Breakwater; I would have to slog my way to Porth Dafarch.



Eventually I passed South Stack and worked my way up the eddies towards Penrhyn Mawr where things eased off a little.

As dusk fell I headed towards a convenient campfire illuminating the Porth Dafarch beach. Sure enough Pascale was there to meet me, a very welcome sight – even if she had forgotten to bring my dry clothes. We stumbled slowly up the beach through the darkness towards the car as I tried to reintroduce my legs to the concept of walking.

And that was how my day trip from Dun Laoghaire ended. I landed at Porth Dafarch 13 hrs and 45 mins after I left the slipway at Dun Laoghaire. The GPS showed a distance covered of 54.7 nautical miles. It had been a long day but strangely rewarding, I could now add an Irish Sea crossing to my ‘been done’ list. But as is the way with these things it all felt a little bit of anti-climax as we drove home to unpack a car full of soggy kit.

So, what next?

Well, it was still my turn for the washing up apparently...

John Willacy

Crossing Date: 24 Aug 07

<http://angleseypaddling.fotopic.net/c1355441.html>

