

North Channel Crossing 2011

Going back a few years, I took part in the Hebridean Challenge. At the end of a tiring but rewarding day I found myself sat on a beach with Bennie. Bennie was a fellow competitor and we were discussing canoeing tales of past and future, as well as his rather strange tent with no poles. Bennie regaled me with details of his trips across the North Channel between Scotland and Northern Ireland; it all sounded impressive and rather intriguing... could I paddle that far? Bennie made it sound like an (almost) everyday occurrence, but it sounded a long way to me!

Winding the clock onwards a few years, things had progressed and I had made a number of crossings of the Irish Sea, but somehow I still had not ticked off the North Channel. It was on the list but I never seemed to get around to it somehow.

The main goal for the 2011 season was to be an attempt on the circumnavigation of Mull, this was going to be a long paddle for me and so I was looking for a couple of 'progress paddles' to fit in first. I was going to fall back on the old favourite of the Anglesey circumnavigation but I was also looking for something else, something a little shorter to do earlier in the year. As I was thinking the North Channel crossing may fit the bill I heard from Tadhg de Barra of the Irish Sea Kayaking Association. In July 2010 he had made the crossing from Donaghadee to Portpatrick and set a cracking time of 4hrs and 9 mins for the 19 nm crossing – impressive. In fact a little too impressive! This would require a good day out to improve upon. I'd been keeping an eye on people making the crossing for a while but this one was special - just outside the 4hrs mark for the distance, it was the new benchmark.

This sounded like the catalyst I needed to get my act in to gear; the plan was set – a good winter's training followed by the North Channel crossing in the spring and an Anglesey attempt a little later – this should build nicely for the Mull circumnavigation in the summer. Time to clock up some more miles!

The winter came and went and then I found myself stood at the edge of the harbour at Portpatrick looking out at the conditions – time flies I thought. A steady breeze was blowing but things looked quite good out there and the forecast sounded reasonable too.

It was my first visit to Portpatrick so I took time to look around and get familiar with the place; I wanted to know my way around for when I arrived in the morning. Looking out towards the horizon I could make out the hills overlooking my destination – it didn't look all that far...

Time for admin; a check of my kit and yet another look through the paddling plan. All looked well so I headed off to find food, before trying to beat my nerves to get some sleep.

I had been through umpteen races over the years, big and small and so you would think I should have got a grip of pre-event nerves. But things seemed to be getting worse rather than better, old age I suppose. Though this crossing was an attempt on Tadhg De Barra's record it was also a training run and one of the things I needed to train was my nerves. I hoped to make the crossing in less than 4 hours, only an hour longer than my Puffin Island Time Trial back on Anglesey. I didn't get too worked up about that one, so why should this be any different? I was deliberately trying to play down this trip to myself and I was interested to see how this would pan out.

Anyway, morning arrived and the boat was on the beach – my old friend the pink Rockpool Taran; it was not too early a start, I aimed to leave just after 0800 and so I had the luxury of packing the boat in daylight for a change. I was usually a little behind schedule by the time I got my backside in the boat but this time I was determined not to be late. And then I found myself looking at a collection of Peregrine Falcon photos a passing gent was keen to show me. Admittedly they were impressive, but the clock was ticking. I can't say

that I expected to find myself on a beach in the early morning looking at peregrine falcon photos , was he out and about so early just to find someone to view his photos? It's a strange world.

But back to the task in hand; Tadhg had warned me about the tide streams and races around the Copeland Islands, just north of Donaghadee. According to the chart there was a large eddy that formed below the islands on the flood and it made sense to time my arrival with this in mind. The obvious approach was to arrive at local slack water but I wasn't convinced that the charts told the full story. A yachties perspective doesn't have the detail desired by a paddler. Looking at the map I reckoned there would be eddies but also channels of moving water. I thought I should be able to use these to my advantage. A bit of bouncy stuff should also concentrate the mind and distract me from the fatigue (Team Boss wasn't too convinced though). I'd find out later if it worked.

I started the watches and left the beach at Portpatrick just after 0815. There was still a slight breeze blowing but nothing dramatic. It was fairly calm with a slight chop but no significant swell.

The pacing plan was to bring things up gently, easing into the swing of things but then to continue increasing the pace steadily throughout, hoping that I would reach the beach before I blew a gasket. I had Tadhg's time in mind and I would have to push things hard and keep on pushing to have a chance of improving on it, there was to be no slack. This was going to be a tough one! As per usual the heart rate monitor and GPS would keep me honest, in their normal unforgiving manner.

The paddling plan was to paddle out of the bay and keep paddling hard until I ran into something that didn't float. In a little more detail I aimed to take the initial stages on a bearing, aiming off to allow for the tide but also heading a little low to allow for the anticipated eddy below the Copeland Islands. But when I neared the Copelands I expected the flow wouldn't quite do as advertised. So I figured as I closed on the rough stuff I would suck it and see a little, falling back onto a GPS track rather than the bearing. I anticipated by this point it would be a bit s**t or bust, without enough time for the luxury of text book nav! Sometimes you just have to stop farting around and paddle hard.

So finally, I called the Coastguard and leaving David Bailey's bird spotting brother behind, I paddled out of the bay at Portpatrick. The boat was running nicely, the heart rate was steadily rising as I woke up and conditions were ok. It looked like the start of a good day.

As I stopped to feed I thought the first hour had gone well. Because it was a relatively short crossing and time was so precious, I had cut my feeding and drinking down compared to my usual routine – again it would be interesting to see how this panned out. Back on the bearing and off again.

The second hour went by and things were looking good. I had maintained an average of over 5 kts for the previous 2 hours, if I could maintain this I would get inside the 4 hour mark. I wasn't going to count any chickens just yet though; I expected to tire towards the end but at the same time I would aim to lift the pace. But there was always a sting in the tail, in this case the unpredictable waters around the Copeland Islands.

As I closed on the Copelands I could make out tide races and confused flow in the distance. I figured it would be good to bring forward my next food stop – I didn't fancy faffing around in that lot. So a quick stop and then it was time go again, this time to the finish. The GPS hinted tantalisingly at a chance of a sub 3:30 crossing – game on!

As I moved south of the islands I was glad that I had aimed low to allow for the draw of the eddy, it was strong but was tempered by fast flowing channels which split the confused water. The faster water made for some quite bouncy conditions for such a calm day, I was glad I had fed early – this wouldn't have been a good spot. As I crossed the confused area I realised that the fast south flowing channels were having a greater overall effect than the north bound eddy, I needed to aim off at a good ferry angle. The GPS still showed that the 3:30 crossing was possible but it was going to be tight. I was working hard now through

the bouncy tide races, it was fun but at the same time a little frustrating trying to keep the boat running smoothly as the clock ticked onwards...

I had planned to land on the beach in the bay but the harbour looked an oasis of calm (and a bit closer!) so that would do. As I cleared the last race things calmed down; I still needed a good ferry angle but with the 3:30 time still on it was now time to really put some power down. I was working hard now but the harbour mouth didn't seem to get any closer. Pull! Pull! (Hmmm, pretty harbour by the way!) Pull!

The boat was gliding through the calm water of Donaghadee Harbour now, and then the welcome hiss as the Taran finally slid to a halt on the sand. Stop the clock and the GPS. Phew! That was hard going – the heart rate maxed out at 178 just before the finish.

The crossing had covered 18.8 nm and taken 3 hours and 25 minutes – only 30 minutes longer than the Puffin Time Trial! I was pleased. Before I started I thought it would be a close call to better Tadhg's time, but to finish sub 3:30 was special, it felt good.

It was now that I noticed that the sun was out and wind had dropped. As I hauled the boat up the beach I took my first real look of Donaghadee. Children were playing, folks were eating ice cream and there was a buzz about the place – I sat in the sun drying my kit and doing nothing for a while.

One thing I had been trying not to think about was the return journey, I had no ferry ticket. I guessed it was probably around a two hour paddle to the docks, followed by all the hassle of man handling the boat and then I would still have to get back from Stranraer at the other end – I figured I could paddle back in that time.

So that is what I did.

After sitting in the sun for a couple of hours I loaded up the Taran once again. I headed out of Donaghadee harbour with an aim to see what Portpatrick looked like from a distance. All the way home I worked into a headwind and somehow I didn't get the tides right either. It was a slog and it took me an hour longer than the first crossing, but I didn't care. I had achieved what I set out to do.

As I loaded the boat up back in Portpatrick, I wondered what Bennie would have made of it all...

Boat: Rockpool Taran

Paddles: Rockpool/Zastera Wings

Kit: from Pete Baars at Summit to Sea

And lots of help from Pascale

John Willacy

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2027 Words