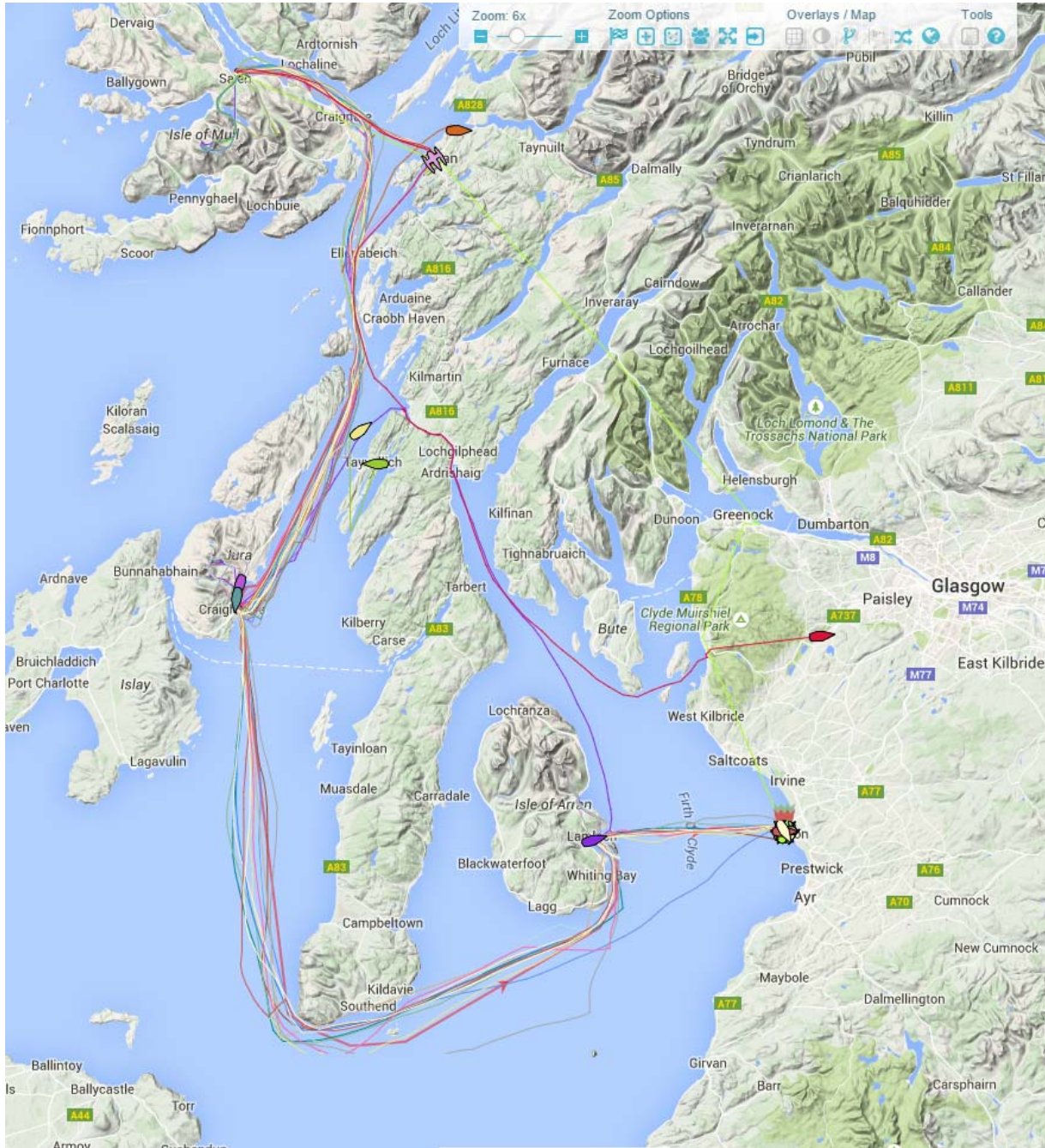


The Scottish Islands Peak Race 2015

Yacht: Green Ginger, Sigma 33C, Strangford Lough Yacht Club, Northern Ireland.

Team: Brian Corry, Alistair Fletcher, Patrick Butler, Michael Ennis & Mark Lennon



Oban – Salen Bay, Mull – Craighouse, Jura – Lamlash, Arran - Troon

In the beginning

Alistair and Mark Fletcher had been considering purchasing a cruising yacht throughout 2014 but Brian Corry's consistent and considered advice had been that a cruiser was not a sensible purchase – it would not be used and the maintenance costs would end up being burdensome. Ignoring this advice the Fletchers purchased a Sigma 41 in December 2014 and informed Brian of the fact. Perhaps Brian had been employing reverse psychology all along as one day later he suggested that the Sigma could be put to use in a low key sailing and running race held in May by the name of the Scottish Islands Peaks Race. With reckless disregard to good sense Alistair enthusiastically agreed to lend his services and his yacht, and thus the campaign was born.

The rest of the team of five were assembled through Brian's contacts at circuit training in Stranmillis who were somehow persuaded that this would be an enjoyable weekend break. At the last minute one of the team had to withdraw and luckily for us Michael Ennis, with limited prior training, agreed to step in.



The task ahead

The race itself has been in existence since 1983 and demands 160 miles of sailing together with 60 miles of fell running (comprising a mere 11,500 ft in climbing). The start is in Oban and following a 6.5km run in the surrounding hills to spread out the competitors, the race proceeds to Salen on the Isle of Mull where Ben More (a Munro no less) is climbed during the course of a 24 mile run, then on to Craighouse on Jura for 14 miles up and down the three Paps of Jura, before the final 19 mile run up Goatfell on Arran. Those who get this far then have a final dash to Troon and the finish line. The intention was for us to enter an all-rounder team, which would require all of us to run on at least one of the islands. Alistair started training with vigour to get from couch potato to mountain goat but had to stop on doctor's orders following a knee injury – rarely has anyone been so happy to be limping around the place.

False start

Boat wise, Alistair meekly reported that the Sigma 41 was having technical issues, or to be more precise it was lying ashore in Ardrossan without an engine two weeks before the start of the race. Thankfully Rick and Maria Harwood stepped into the breach and volunteered their Sigma 33C "Green Ginger". Gordon Hamilton provided his six man life raft and Ian Bogie parted with his flare pack and spare Delta anchor. Our pressure cooker was donated by the intrepid James Nixon OBE, complete with some suggested recipes.

The Sunday before the race Brian and Alistair planned to sail Green Ginger from Whiterock, in Strangford Lough to Bangor in order to shorten the delivery trip to Oban. Prior to departure Rick showed us round the boat but was stumped by an apparent problem with the auto helm. After much fiddling no cure was found so Rick left with the offending item. Later that week, following intensive diagnostic checks Rick informed us that the problem could be traced to the fact that we had forgotten to switch it on!

Brian and Alistair headed out in a head wind of 30 knots in a race against time to get through the narrows before the tide turned, but unfortunately the chop on the Lough meant that Green Ginger struggled to get over 3 knots and had to turn back at Long Sheila when it became clear we had no chance of making the tidal gate. It was left to Brian and Michael Ennis to sail her round the next day in even stronger wind, and in the process discovered just how seaworthy the Sigma 33 is – one reef in the main and full genoa was all that was required to keep her trucking happily along at 7-8 knots.



Bangor to Oban

And so it came to the chosen hour of departure, 7pm on Wednesday 13th May. Alistair turned up in garish yellow and orange PVC oilies of the kind preferred by commercial fishermen, turning heads for all the wrong reasons. We soon discovered that we should have coordinated our provisions a bit better as we ended up with a silo full of Uncle Ben's rice and

Alistair provided a mountain of white baps, hardly the basis of a nutritious diet.

As we left Bangor marina there was little more than a zephyr so the engine was put to use to get us moving at a steady 5kts. With flat seas and a cloudless blue sky it was a perfect way to start the trip. At around 12am as we were approaching the Mull of Kintyre Paddy Butler, Alistair and Mark Lennon left Brian and Michael to the first watch, and not long after this the wind picked up to 25knts from the east and stayed like that all the way to our destination. As we passed the majestic and somewhat imposing Paps of Jura at about 5am Mark and Alistair found themselves reassuring Paddy, who was due to run that leg, that they were experiencing an optical illusion, making them look bigger than they were and that he would have no trouble.

We reached Oban after about 15.5 hours and berthed in the marina on Kerrera Island. Alistair was tasked with trekking over to the office to book us in. Despite following his precise directions we still managed to end up taking a reserved berth to the unsaid but obvious displeasure of the marina manager.

In the afternoon we pottered around a gloriously sunny Oban picking up supplies to augment the baps and rice before heading over to Oban sailing club to register and have our running gear scrutinised.

Unsurprisingly for such an extreme race the organisers required a pretty hefty list of safety equipment to be carried by the runners, such as headlights, blizzard packs, first aid kits and full waterproofs. The evening was spent enjoying our last

fulsome dinner and a few pints of Guinness to build up the energy reserves.



Le Mans start

Paddy and Brian were volunteered for the first run, due to start at noon. We spied a perfect mooring close to the slip at the club that amazingly no-one else had utilised. Inadvertently and in keeping with our new tradition we had, it transpired, taken a member's mooring, and forced the poor fellow to pick up a visitor's mooring further down the bay. Alistair was at this time bedecked in his PVC oillies so Brian took the opportunity to explain to fellow competitors that he was in fact a local trawler man with intimate knowledge of the waters and who was on board as our ringer. Sadly the lack of weather beaten skin and soft uncalled hands clearly revealed to any casual observer that there was no truth in it.



Two runners from each team lined up on the start line just outside the sailing club and with a loud hoot from an air horn the race was on. The course was a loop through the steep hills of Oban and back to the sailing club, where inflatable dinghies were lined up on the shore ready to take their runners out past the moorings to where the yachts were milling about ready to pick them up in a flying Le Mans style start.

Paddy and Brian came in with a respectable time of just under 45 minutes and Alistair rowed them out to Green Ginger. Our changeover was slick and we were soon

heading north on a run towards the exit of Oban bay, though we were lying in about 30th at this stage. We gybed out of the bay and headed towards Mull on a broad reach on port gybe.



It was an impressive sight ahead of us, with the whole fleet spread out in single file. Michael rigged up a barber hauler to ensure the genoa was not twisted off too much and we soon picked a few competitors off. Just as we reached the Sound of Mull the wind unexpectedly died away to nearly nothing where we were, but frustratingly we could see the lead boats had not been affected to the same degree. As it was so light we thought we'd let Mark, a novice sailor, take the helm. After about 20 minutes the wind returned with a vengeance,

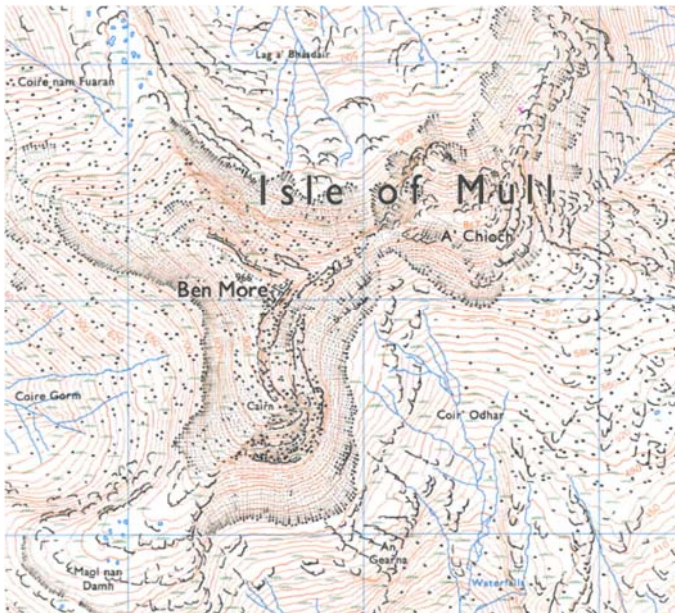
blowing 25 from the west and gusting 30. All credit to Mark who stayed on the helm and handled the conditions superbly – a natural or just brilliant teachers? The larger more modern boats were broaching and looking very unstable, with most of them having to reef. We on the other hand had no such trouble and flew along without any bother, another example of how well designed the Sigma was.

By the time we reached Salen at about 4pm the fleet had bunched up again and there was almost a queue of boats trying to drop off their runners. Paddy placed the boat as close as he could to the disused wooden pier which was the assigned landing site, and at the appropriate point the dinghy was released and Alistair rowed Mark and Michael ashore. The head wind didn't help and upon reaching the shore Alistair was sorely tempted to grab an oxygen tank from the first aid point. Meanwhile Paddy and Brian found a spot in Salen bay and dropped anchor, to be joined by Alistair a few minutes later, although he nearly didn't make it to the boat at all as he misjudged the wind and was almost blown past into the sound.

The Green Ginger crew anticipated that the runners would take at least 6 hours to finish and so settled down for what they hoped would be a restful evening. Things didn't start out well as the boat began to drag her anchor - this was not ideal in an exposed bay with over 30 boats anchored in very close proximity. We pulled up the anchor and were greeted by a huge amount of kelp, which explained why our holding was so poor. Having decided that the Bruce anchor was not up to the job we motored to a different spot and tried the Bogie lent Delta, but again we dragged. On the second time of asking the Bogie Delta held fast and for the rest of our stay we didn't move an inch. Neighbours did however and it was interesting to see other boats spend hours trying to get some decent holding. Safely moored Paddy got to work cooking a Thai green curry from scratch with fresh ingredients. No-one else in the bay could possibly have eaten as well as we did that night.

Mountain madness

When Mark and Michael arrived ashore they went to the marshals for a kit check and 5 minutes later they were off. The first 8 miles or so was a flattish road section and the guys averaged between 9 and 10 minute miles. Unfortunately the weather deteriorated quickly, with howling wind and heavy rain making it difficult to judge how much protective kit to wear in order to get the right line between being cold and overheating. Running with a laden backpack was cumbersome, and by the end of the road section everything was so wet that it became unappealing to add more layers so they kept moving toward the first checkpoint as fast as they could. Not long after this came the first river crossing, which Michael later described as “a health and safety nightmare” as the fast flowing river looked to be nothing less than certain death. Mark and Michael managed to get across safely only to be met by another river in spate about 5 minutes later, which resulted in the onset of numb feet for the duration of the run.



The ascent of MhicFhionnlaidh began in earnest, with terrain different to anything Michael had ever experienced. He admitted that he struggled to move at the pace Mark could manage. Mark led the way with fantastic navigation skills in difficult conditions, and kept Michael moving on. Reaching MhicFhionnlaidh Michael watched as Mark merrily skipped vertically up the slope and out of view. Michael’s legs were gone by this stage and he staggered on in pain looking at the slope sure in the knowledge that it wasn’t going to be scaled. Another team enquired as to the whereabouts of Michael’s partner, so he

decided to follow them as they carried on along the contour before zig zagging up the slope. In agony with every leg movement Michael managed to slowly zig zag up the slope to find Mark waiting for him. Mark wanted to take a route involving a descent followed by another ascent but on Michael’s request Mark followed the contour round the depression as Michael was not attracted by the amount of climbing to be done on the more direct route.

The next couple of hours for Michael was a blur of moving in constant calf pain with every step. Every time Michael caught up with Mark he hoped for a rest but Mark couldn’t stay still for long as he needed keep moving to build up body heat. The weather was still poor with very little visibility, and Michael described the scene as being like a dodgy Star Trek set shrouded in mist. Eventually they reached the scree slopes and traverses which required them to use all fours, but they made it to the summit and the checkpoint, where the wind chill meant the apparent temperature was close to zero.

Michael was in bad shape and not thinking straight but Mark’s leadership skills came to the fore and he got him eating and guided him off the slope by insisting they ran the descent to keep generate some body heat. Michael reports that the descent was not problematic and was even enjoyable at times - however he might have been delusional by this stage. Darkness began to

fall as they came to the main road, running at times walking at others, and about 30 minutes out Mark rang to let the others know they were approaching

On Green Ginger the crew had seen the lead runners come back after an incredible 4 hours, which was hugely impressive. Several more hours passed and more runners streamed in, all looking absolutely dreadful. At this point we realised just how tough the run must have been, and waited anxiously for Mark's call. Fearing the worst, we considered that a séance would be the only way to contact our runners, but just as we had everything set up Mark rang.

Alistair rowed ashore and Paddy and Brian weighed anchor and loitered just off the pier. With other boats and dinghies milling around, the agreed sign was that Alistair would flash his headlamp 3 times to indicate that our dinghy was coming back and Green Ginger could manoeuvre herself accordingly. Unfortunately Alistair had purchased the cheapest headlamp he could find at Decathlon with the resulting pitiful beam meaning Green Ginger had no chance of spotting the dinghy. Somehow they managed to get aboard OK, but Michael was clearly experiencing the early stages of hypothermia and was absolutely wrecked. The fact that Michael is an experienced runner with plenty of marathons and mountain marathons under his belt demonstrated just how difficult the run had been. Fortunately Mark was in better shape but still very cold.

Whilst ashore Alistair had got speaking to another team who informed him that several teams, including an armed forces one, had retired as the conditions were too brutal, and one person had been hospitalised. Although our time was not quick, it was still respectable considering the testing conditions and the withdrawals of other teams.

Jura or bust

Paddy and Alistair sailed Green Ginger out of Salen Bay and back into the Sound of Mull, joined shortly after by Mark after he'd had time to eat, warm up and have a quick rest. Bizarrely the forecast force 7 from the south west was nowhere to be seen and we had barely 5 knots of breeze for the duration of this watch, only reaching Auchnacraig before the changeover. During the watch Mark commented on how he always wondered what it meant when someone described the Mull run as "technical" - he now knew it meant "absolutely horrendous".

It was soon time for Brian and a resurrected Michael to begin their watch, and shortly after the forecast wind filled in and we made speedy progress down the Sound of Luing. Yet again Green Ginger held her own when all around her other boats were having a tough time of it. Just as things started to get even more bouncy in the Sound of Jura the off-watch crew witnessed a heroic and selfless act from the only non-sailor on the team. Mark felt that this was the time to closely inspect the heads on his hands and knees and ensure that there were no leaks in the bilges. He did find a quantity of Thai Vegetable Green curry but manfully cleaned it up without making a fuss.

Meanwhile Brian and Michael managed to stay close to the wind and hug the Jura coast whereas larger boats were forced to bear off to the Mull side of the Sound of Jura and then beat into Craighouse. Green Ginger managed to overtake three faster boats which had started out a lot further in front. It was now gusting 36 knots as we neared our destination so two reefs were

put in the main but we kept up our good progress and arrived in Craighouse at 10am on Saturday morning.

Imitating other teams we changed tactics and Brian and Paddy jumped into the dinghy and paddled to shore Canadian canoe style against a strong headwind. All seventeen visitor moorings being occupied by other competitors, Green Ginger had to lie off the stern of Wildwood, which was another Northern Irish boat (and crewed by Kirk Robinson of Down Marine fame).

In relatively high spirits and sunshine, Paddy and Brian went through the kit inspection and started the run at a leisurely trot through the picturesque village. The Jura distillery was just a momentary distraction and Paddy and Brian debated briefly whether Mark had booked himself in for the afternoon tour as they made their way up through Kiels and onto the hills. Little more than 20 minutes in and disaster nearly struck - when crossing a fast flowing river Paddy slipped and banged his knee but fortunately no serious damage was caused, though it was a good reminder to take care, or have a doctor sign you off sick before the race even started.



As they made their way across the hills by the official route they were disappointed to see a whole bunch of competitors tramping along a track at quite a lick – a route Paddy and Brian had considered but subsequently dismissed as too risky to try. They knuckled down and as they approached the first Pap they were greeted by their first of many highly unpleasant hail showers. With hands over faces to protect their eyes and faces from the stinging icy balls, they pushed on.

The first Pap was a sight to behold – it was positively vertical. The teams ahead seemed to be clinging to the unstable rocky scree and were having to use their hands to make their way up. It was clear to Paddy and Brian that this was going to be no walk in the park. They started up and kept up a good steady pace but it was relentless. After what seemed like an eternity Paddy and Brian made it to the top and were treated to a cracking view of the Sound of Islay, Colonsay and the Mull of Kintyre. Two other teams made it to the top at the same time and there was a hair raising race down the scree to reach the bottom. The fastest route seemed to be riding a rocky avalanche of scree if your nerves could stick it.

Safely down the first, the second Pap beckoned with her equally rocky and steep sides. With one team ahead of and one behind they cracked on up with the added element of a full gale

trying to blow them off the mountain – it was so strong that it caused them to be blown off course on several occasions - an unsettling experience when navigating past sheer drops . To get a break from the wind, Paddy and Brian lay down on the ground to try and get out of the worst of it. The rocky ridge that needed to be climbed seemed to take forever to scale but the summit was reached three hours into the run.

Another fast descent and Paddy found himself low on water. Sadly the fill up options were not particularly appealing at this location but beggars can't be choosers and Paddy was left to pick the least stagnant pool of water he could find. Most runners put electrolyte tablets in their water to help replace the salts and minerals they use up during the climbs but Paddy declined Brian's offer of one and instead proclaimed, Ray Mears like, that the natural mud and slime contained within the pool he had filled up from would be just as effective.

The final Pap turned into a slog, with weary legs now starting to feel the pace. On reaching the summit they were treated to a large snow shower and rapidly deteriorating visibility. A quick compass bearing was hastily taken to keep them on the straight and narrow before they descended the now familiar avalanche like scree down some very steep slopes. It was with considerable relief that they reached the bottom and some half decent terrain. They found themselves deliriously happy that the climb was over and all that was left was the home straight. The track back to the road emerged like a mirage and they walked briskly towards it, looking forward to a fast walk back. The so called track turned out to be 3 miles of sodden bog where feet regularly disappeared into a squelching pool of mud with the resulting over extension of the calf muscles triggering several prolonged bouts of cramp in Paddy. He soldiered on but hopes of a fast leg back turned into a slow muddy trudge.

The last bit of the route back was on metalled road around the coast and offered the opportunity to stretch the legs however there was very little left in the tank by then and Paddy and Brian resolved to keep their powder dry for a morale boosting and glorious final mile sprint back into Craighouse to the waiting crew. Sadly when the time came to accelerate for the finish they discovered that the Paps of Jura had completely punctured them, so instead it was plodding speed only as they came back in to finish in six and half hours – still a respectable time bearing in mind yet more teams retired on the Paps. Meanwhile the crew on board Green Ginger were monitoring the radio for the runners when they overheard another team informing his boat that they had been forced to retire due to “intimate chafing issues”. The crew on board Green Ginger were not immune to dark thoughts themselves as retirement options were discussed but at this point the sail home to Bangor would have been as just as difficult as the sail to Arran so it was fairly short lived.

South by south east

Brian had a quick swim in the freezing water to try and soothe his aching muscles, the local ladies had never seen the like. At about 5pm on Saturday afternoon another perfect pick up was orchestrated either by chance or design, and Michael, Mark and Alistair took the first watch whilst the now hobblers recovered. The wind was gusting well over 30 knots so two reefs were put in the main and the conditions got worse as we sailed away from the lee shore of Jura and towards the tip of the Mull of Kintyre. Unsurprisingly some crews retired at Craighouse and

chose to wait out the gale or head for home via the Crinan canal. We were faced with a 5 metre swell but by this stage we had such confidence in Green Ginger that we knew we would be fine. Michael and Alistair swapped helming duties every 30 minutes as the active steering required was quite tiring, especially given the fact that everyone was pretty sleep deprived by this stage.

This was probably the most rewarding part of the race sailing wise as the sun came out and we warmed up nicely and kept pace with a large 40 something foot yacht about 4 miles ahead of us sailing on her genoa alone. As we rounded the Mull night was starting to fall and the wind had eased to a more pleasant 20 knots when a recovered Paddy took over the helm for a couple of hours, though Michael insisted on staying on deck to help so that Brian and Mark could rest up for the Arran run. It was difficult work as the wind was behind us, and instead of undertaking lots of gybes we opted for a slightly longer route that would only require one gybe.



Alistair and Michael sailed the final leg in the small hours of Sunday morning as the wind picked up again to 25 knots and more. Holy Island, which is now inhabited by Buddhist monks, guards the entrance to Lamlash and we left it to starboard as we beat our way slowly up the channel with two reefs in the main. It was 3am on Sunday and still quite dark, making it hard to see the various unoccupied moorings that littered the bay like mines. The rules state that the engine cannot be used until the runners leave the boat, but as we sent Mark and Brian on their way the engine chose this point to fail us. With only the reefed main up Michael showed his

skills and easily (or at least he made it look easy) brought us to a free mooring close to the shore. The three left on board went to sleep pretty quickly, glad to be almost done.

Legless in Lamlash

Mark and Brian made it ashore and headed for the race organisers' tent pitched on the beach. This final run of the race was 19 miles and a climb roughly the same height as Slieve Donard, to be done with tired legs. After a quick kit check and blinding one another with powerful head torches they struck out for Brodick, keeping up a good pace until the foothills of Goatfell, on the way passing a few returning teams.

By this stage Mark, who had had to suffer Brian's interminable chat in general and in particular about the wonderful scenery and views from the summit made the most optimistic suggestion of the trip stating that he thought the weather was starting to clear and that they would enjoy great visibility. This prediction turned out to be as accurate as Michael Fish's fateful advice in 1987 that no hurricane was imminent.

No sooner had they left the road than the rain began in earnest. This lasted until approximately 400m elevation at which point it turned to sleet and intermittent but intense hail showers. The only positive note was the fact that the path was proving to be a fast route and they were making good progress. Two teams subsequently passed them going back down looking grim faced and the usual friendly and extensive pleasantries that are normally exchanged were noticeably absent. Mark put this down to Brian's effect on people but as they were soon to realise, the misery that awaited at the top would make anyone want to get off the mountain as fast as possible too.

The last 400m became a slog through sleet and hail and up steep steps. Everything was now absolutely soaking – disproving the claims by manufacturers that their outdoor clothing was totally waterproof. Mark started to lose the feeling in his arms and Brian began to wish they were anywhere else. Finally they got to the top as the visibility closed in. Mark's hands were now not working at all and Brian, with much difficulty, managed to get his rucksack open to retrieve the tag to be left behind at the checkpoint. At this point most people take a few minutes to enjoy the summit and perhaps get something to eat before heading back down, but Mark and Brian were in complete agreement: "Let's get the hell off this mountain" or words to that effect were used.

If a split time had been available for this section, Mark and Brian would have won it easily, as they fairly sprinted off the mountain and back down to Brodick in just 45 mins. Both of them were now very cold and utterly soaked through so they tramped into the ferry terminal to change clothes. Mark and Brian will always be grateful to Calmac Ferries as their gentlemen's WC proved to be warm and dry. If the Ferry café had been open they might well have suffered a further unavoidable delay. But feeling a little better they headed back the last 4 miles to Lamlash posting a time of just under 5 hours – the seventh fastest time overall, quite remarkable given the conditions.

Having forgotten to bring the VHF radio to rouse the rest of the team on Green Ginger into a moving pickup, Mark and Brian rowed out to the mooring to commence the last leg of the race.

Trouble in Troon

At about 9am on Sunday Green Ginger headed out into the Firth of Clyde full of anticipation for what should have been a quick jaunt across to Troon. Our luck was out again as the wind dropped away to nothing and we made little progress for two and a half hours. Thankfully 15-20 knots filled in from the west and we were able to enter the outer harbour just before 1pm. Mark and Brian hopped into the Dinghy for the last time and rowed into the marina before running the short distance to the race office. Our official finishing time was 13:05:50, with a total time of 48 hours 50 minutes and 50 seconds, which we didn't think was too bad for a first attempt in such difficult conditions.

Meanwhile things weren't going so well on board Green Ginger in the outer harbour. Just as we dropped off the runners the main the engine cut out and once restarted then couldn't get her into gear. Paddy skilfully drifted the by now heavily fendered boat onto the harbour wall so we

could inspect the prop to make sure nothing was caught in it. We couldn't see anything so we tried again, this time reverse direction worked so the plan was to take the odd step of reversing into the marina, but before we could get there the engine stopped again. The main was hoisted quickly, though still with one reef in, and Michael had to steer Green Ginger in with little way. This he did perfectly and we managed to get into our berth with no issues. Upon a closer inspection it transpired that a rope was stuck around the prop, so Brian hopped into the water for another restorative ice bath and cut us free.

Homeward bound

We fuelled up with a hearty lunch at Scott's in Troon marina and headed for home. Mark and Paddy had work commitments so they took the ferry whilst the rest set off for Ballycastle, where the Harwoods had requested we leave Green Ginger. The wind was on our nose and was only blowing about 10 knots initially, so we hoisted the main and motor sailed at around 5 knots. Alistair took the helm as we approached Arran and when Brian came up to relieve him he, the Training Captain no less, was sitting head to wind.



When Brian pointed this out Alistair decided to tack and head straight for the middle of Arran. Clearly not functioning any more due to sleep deprivation, Alistair was retired to his bunk, where he slept properly for the first time on the trip. Michael and Brian sailed her on to the tip of the Mull of Kintyre before a rested Alistair took over for a few hours, then went back to bed and left the other two to finish the sail into Ballycastle at about 5am on Monday morning.

Never again?

In the immediate aftermath of the race the general sentiment was that the 2015 edition would be the first and last time we ever took part. It is hard to describe how brutal a race it is: little sleep, tricky navigation, hard sailing conditions and all of that before having to run through bogs and up mountains. Fourteen yachts didn't make the finish line this year out of 38 entries, experienced sailors and fell runners among them. Now that the achievement is settling in and the suffering fades into the distant past there are mutterings that an attempt could be made on next year's race. Michael is addicted to the task of defeating Ben More once he gets more used to fell running, and Brian could be talked out of retirement. Alistair has his doctor's note at the ready but could be convinced to ditch it and get some training in. Mark and Paddy have important things to do on whatever dates the race is on next May. Who knows, maybe the Fletcher Sigma will be ready by then.....