

Roa Island to Ulverston Canal Foot.

Morecambe Bay, General History.

Morecambe Bay is situated in the north eastern Irish Sea and is over 120 nautical square miles of drying tidal sands and mudflats. It is a breathtaking area of natural beauty and diverse environment.

In February 2004 19 cockle pickers lost their lives having being caught by the tide on a sand bank off Heysham.

It can be a dangerous place with rip tides, sinking sand and rough swells, spring tides can exceed 10 mtrs.

It is definitely not a place for the in experience or novice sailor. Having said all of this it is a wonderful place to explore in a shoal draught boat that can take the ground.

Provided you plan well and continually monitor the weather, tides and conditions and have prepared your boat and passage well it can be equally as safe as sailing on the lake.

Canal Foot Cruise.

It was over 40 years ago when I last visited Canal Foot by boat; I was a teenager when I crewed for my brother Graham on his Hilbury Islander, Hiatus.

Roa island Boat Club ran club races to Canal head in the early 1970's, most boats sailed from the club then were relatively small and of shoal draught. The largest boat in the race that day was a Sea Dog "Sarah of Wye" and she had bilge keels. I remember that she may have ended up aground with a few other boats, having delayed their departure on the return leg for an odd extra pint at the Bay Horse (significant school boy error)

Ulverston Canal was once a bristling port used for the export of the valuable metals mined from the Furness area and has no doubt seen its fair share of Schooners and Brigantines pass through the sea loch at Canal Foot.

The Loch was sealed many years ago and the canal is now used by local anglers, keen to catch the giant carp which lurk in the depths.



Canal Foot Pier with the old sea loch on the right.

So this time it was Graham's turn to crew on my Drascombe Drifter 22, we intended to use the favourable weather and spring tides to "creek crawl" along the Ulverston channel which runs Easterly about 1.5 NM off the south Furness Coast. Our aim was to chart the course of the channel as it runs and try and plot as much detail of the route as possible. The channel no doubt moves on a very regular basis with banks and shoals being the obvious hazards. We planned our trip on rising springs so there was little chance of being "Neaped" and invariably we could float off on the next tide.

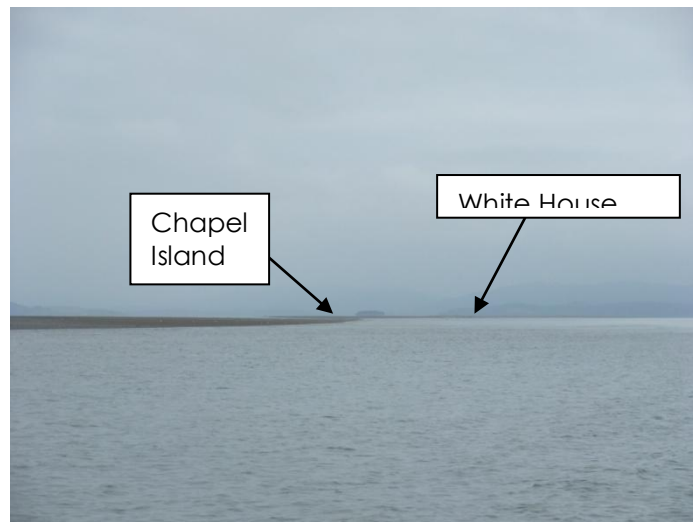
We launched Wee Dram at Roa Island Boat club about low water and by the time we had hoisted sail and made our way up Walney Channel to the start of our un-charted course for Canal Foot it was 0830hrs. I had intended to pass about 2 cables south of Foulney over the mussel beds at Seldom Seen but unfortunately the flooding tide had yet to cover the beds so we had to extend our course further south to Haws Point West before turning east to pick up the start of the Ulverston channel. We left Peil Island to our starboard quarter before we made our way East. Peil Island and the ancient ramparts of the castle are a significant land mark and feature of the channel and approaches to Barrow and is a useful navigation mark to note.



Graham at the helm with Peil Island and Castle in the background.

As we passed south of the seaward leading light off Foulney in about 6 feet of water with a hefty current running we could see the start of the Ulverston channel just past the swirling tide about 4 cables ahead of us. Once in the channel we were romping along under sail at about 5 kn boat speed with about 3kn of tide. The wind was barely 5kn so we decided to drop the main and sail under jib and mizzen to slow our progress, eventually just drifting with the tide. We were taking fixes about every 15mins in order to get an accurate plot of the channel. We were barely floating in about 2.5 foot of water when the channel appeared to narrow and abruptly end at a sand bar, we were just about to throw the pick out when the channel course opened up to our starboard side and we could continue our progress in about 4ft of water, alas a further bar suddenly appeared and we were aground. We were about 1 hr too early but as I said previously we wanted to see the channel at low tide to get an accurate plot of its course. Within 5 minutes and a little weight transfer to our leeward weather rail and we were underway again.

The tide was now running at about 5kn and our boat speed had picked-up to about 7kn. We now had about 6-7ft of water under our keel and could see the channel opening up to our starboard side and a sand banking of over 3 ft running west-east about 1nm off Bardsea.



Sand Bar on North West side of Channel off bardsea with Chapel Island in the background.

We could now see Chapel Island about 1NM to our North East with the channel still veering off to starboard. We had spotted a significant white building at about sea level on the Flookburgh headland and this was clear from our position East of Newbiggin bearing 040deg M. This land mark is a useful marker, as it is a good navigation mark for following the general course of the channel.

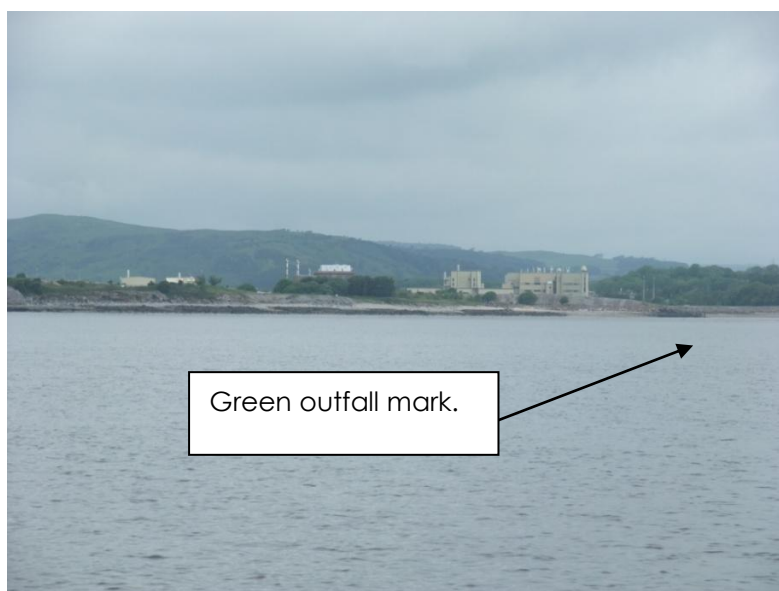
As we approached Chapel Island the channel veered east towards Flookburgh. We took a transit between the boat, Bardsea Church Spire and Humphrey Head to mark this change. We had in fact arrived at the junction of Ulverston channel and Flookburgh channel. The water was now swirling all around us and we could see a reef to the S W of Chapel Island, which the strong current was trying to push us onto, this reef is easily crossed had we been about 1hr later, but now presented a significant hazard. We now had the engine running and turned to head directly to Humphrey Head until we could turn North West to leave the reef to our port side and Chapel Island about 1 cable to our starboard side. It took maximum speed from our 8hp outboard to make our way from this reef so be very cautious in this area and delay your passage through until -1 HWS Ulverston, you will then be able to pass in safety on tides in excess of 8.5mtrs.



Confused currents where Ulverston Channel and Flookburgh Channel meet.

Once you leave Chapel Island to starboard you can clearly see the large factory buildings and structures of Glaxo-Smith-Kline with the slag bank to the west. There is also a distinctive red brick chimney to the west of the slag bank.

The channel now runs directly North West to the head of the slag bank, with a small inlet to the west side of the slag bank. Once you reach this point the channel veers north east along the shoreline. You must be careful here as this is a very rocky shoreline with significant hazards. There is a green outfall marker as you turn up this channel and you must leave it to port, be aware of the fast currents here (up to 7kn)



Green outfall mark.

Glaxo Factory outfall mark off picture to right hand side.

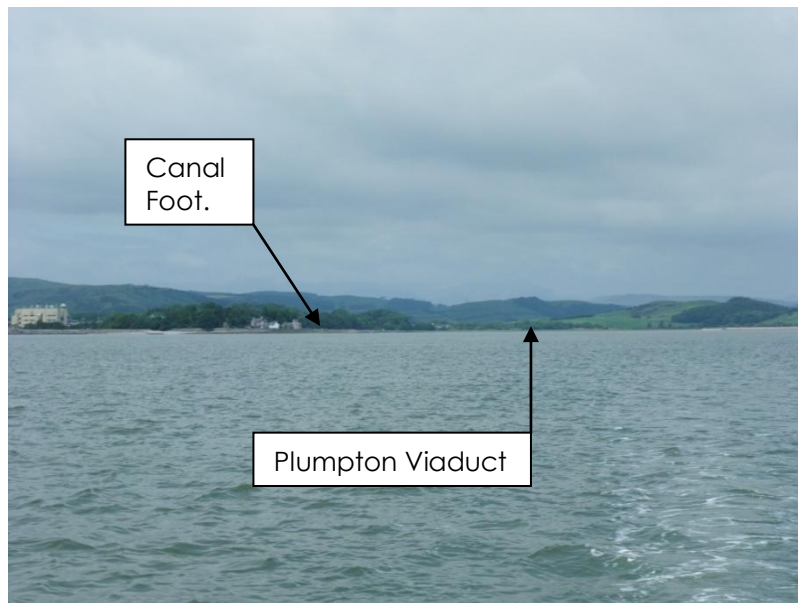
As we rounded the outfall mark out boat speed increased to 7kn, as we were now approx 1/2hr too early and we had to fight the current to get into the Canal Foot Pier. It is essential that you keep to the West side of the channel after passing the outfall as the current will take you onto the Plumpton Viaduct less than 1/2NM north east of the Pier. Due to our early arrival we had to wait for the tide to flood so we could get into the north side of the Pier. We had some anxious moments with anchor deployed and engine running to keep us stationary in the 7kn current, we had managed to position the boat so that if our anchor or engine had failed we would have drifted on to the sand bank to our north west.

After about 1/2hr and a well earned coffee we were able to weigh anchor and head into the Pier, tie-up and have a welcoming pint at the Bay Horse which is next to the Pier. Sadly only one pint is possible, as we needed to leave no later than +20min HWS Ulverston.

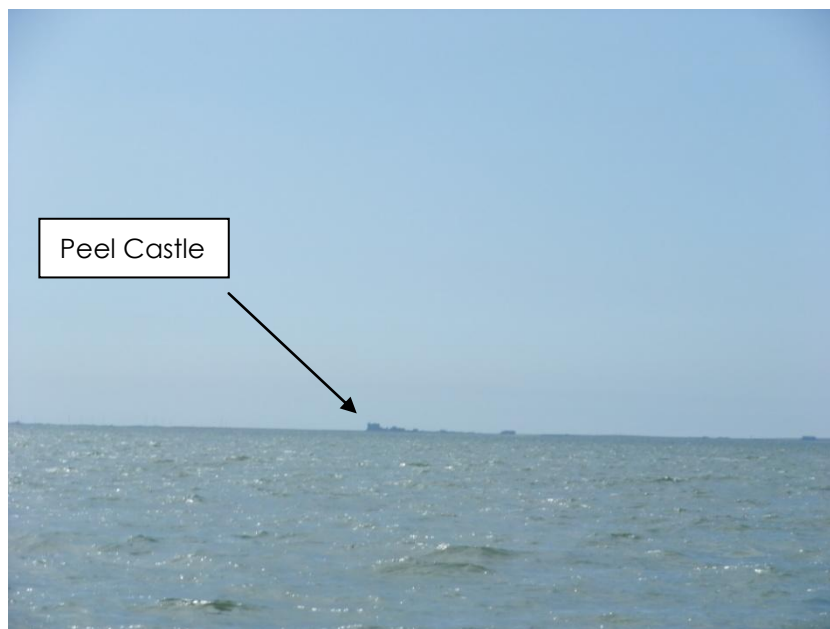


Wee Dram alongside Canal Foot Pier.

As the tide was now ebbing we had to head back to Roa Island with the full benefit of a clearly charted channel route and an ebbing tide to give us fair conditions for our journey. We were back at our home mooring within 3hrs of departure.



View from Chapel Island back to Canal Foot and Viaduct at high water.



Homeward heading for Foulney with Peel Castle view beyond and over Foulney.

Summary.

It is essential that you plan your journey well and keep a good look out for changing conditions and weather, always have a back-up plan and escape route if things go wrong.

Our aim was to set off and plot the passage as we went and provide a detailed set of pilot notes of our route and the significant areas of risk.

Log Data.

Date. 2nd June 2011.

Tides.

- Roa Island LWS 0651 BST 1.5M
HWS 1229 BST 8.5M
- Ulverston LWS 0710 BST
HWS 1242 BST 8.7M

Standard port. Liverpool

Weather.

- Sea State. Smooth-Moderate.
- Wind. Variable W to SW 4-5kn.
- Fine and Hazy. Sunny and clear in afternoon.

Details,

Coarse Steered	Time	Position	Notes. (Extract from Log)	Depth In ft
134 deg M	0745	Roa Island	Heading Foulney via Walney Channel.	
100 deg M	0830	Haws Pnt (West Channel Mk.)	Changed course due to bank still exposed at Seldom Seen.	
030 deg M	0845	Ulverston Channel entrance.	Aft transit Outer Foulney Ldg. Lt with S/Walney lighthouse.	6.3
030 deg M	0850	054- 03.65' N 003-07.48' W	Sailing Ulverston Channel SOG 5.4kn	10.5
030 deg M	0915	054-04.9' N 003-06.47' W	Channel Narrowing. Reduced sail to Jib and Mizzen.	15.5
034 deg M	0930	054-05.55' N 003-05.889' W	Aground, engine raised and crew Leaning leeward rail.	2.5
050 deg M	0945	Flookburgh Head White House brg 040deg M	Under way again, channel coarse veering to starboard.	
040deg M	1000	054-06.037'N 003-04.779' W	Motor Sailing SOG 7.2kn Seed Hall on port beam brg 310deg M Tide running strong, approx. 5kn	6.5
040deg M	1015	054-07.612'N 003-3.43'W	SOG 7.1kn Baycliff on Port Beam	10
030deg M	1025	054-08.216'N 003-02.82'W	Change heading to follow channel need to head more east.	8

040deg M	1040	054-09.567'N 003-01.7'W	End of sand spit running S/W-N/E. Bardsea Church Spire to Port Beam 1nm. Need to keep close to Chapel Island to avoid reef.	4.2
300deg M	1100	054-10.13'N 003-02.47'W	Reef to Port Beam about 1 cable stay within 1.5 cables West of Chapel Island	
	1110	Glaxo Slag Bank	Follow channel N-E to Green Outfall mark to be left to port. Keep clear of N side of channel as danger of rocks awash.	
	1125	Canal Foot Pier	Anchored with engine ahead waiting HW to head into N side of Pier. Very strong run of 6-7kns. Monitoring anchor and transits to ensure we do not drift N towards Plumpton Viaduct (approx. 0.5 NM)	
	1155	N side Pier	Tied up alongside Pier.	

