Cruising with the Trust

Seven years as the RSPB's one-man Film Unit had given me several opportunities to explore and record off-shore islands in UK, but it had mainly been spent in learning the art of documentary film-making which was to be the basis of my future career. So when I was given the opportunity of a job with the National Trust for Scotland, my addiction to islands was certainly part of my reason for accepting. What other employer owned two island properties like Fair Isle and St Kilda, both crying out for the sort of publicity that only colour movie film can provide?

What I very soon learnt, through the Trust's innovative policy of involving its own membership in managing the islands, was that enthusiasm for islands was widespread and infectious. No period in the Trust's history was more fruitful in public relations than the era of the cruises, where visits to island properties by sea were the best way of enlisting public support for their conservation.

Another imaginative method was work-parties, where volunteers paid for the privilege of working on St Kilda, while on Fair Isle an annual work-camp was organised for many years for IVS (International Voluntary Service) volunteers near the South Lighthouse, to tackle jobs which the hard-pressed islanders couldn't find the time for. The volunteers' first job was to build their own hutted accommodation.

My hunch is that the key factor in such projects is that remote island communities seem to be more meaningful because they are on a human scale we can all understand more easily. Seen from afar, we are all puzzled as to why such an apparently hard way of life can attract so many out of the rat-race, or the prosperous world of business or commerce, into something far less comfortable or secure. Every time the Trust advertises a property for sale or to rent on Fair Isle, it receives literally hundreds of applications. This doesn't happen on Foula. Fair Isle, under the Trust's sensitive ownership, has access to a very wide public through its publications and membership. This more or less assures the future of the island, by contrast with Foula and several other Scottish islands still in private ownership and with absentee landlords. Likewise, it is doubtful whether St Kilda would have achieved World Heritage Status if it had not had the driving force of a national body, dedicated to the conservation cause, as its owner. Life on an island like Fair Isle will never be 'cushy' but with the National Trust for Scotland as landlord it has never looked back.

The Trust's Appeal for St Kilda not only raised adequate funds for the restoration programme, but also spawned the birth of the 'St Kilda Club', which has for many years had up to a thousand members. It is an inspiration to attend one of its annual reunions where the auditorium of the Edinburgh Zoo Education Centre is always packed out and 250 sit down to the annual dinner, just to share a common enthusiasm for a small group of Atlantic islands based on their own visit on a cruise or a work-party. An obsession with islands is like an infectious disease, a sort of beneficial addiction. Once hooked, you probably have it for keeps; but instead of being harmful, it adds a new meaning and purpose to your life.

When I decided to leave a salaried job and venture out on my own, I had several solid compensations from my hectic two years with the Trust. I was already well established as a lecturer for the Trust on the cruises, with many photographic and film opportunities in exciting locations, especially regular circumnavigations of St Kilda.

We went to Mull and Iona on the 'Devonia', and on another cruise to Stornoway in Lewis after a day on the Orkney Islands. Another cruise, after passing St Kilda in a Force 10 gale, went straight on to the Faroes where the first sunny day after six weeks of mist and gloom had brought the whole population out into the warmth, including whole classes of school-children with their teachers. And I fulfilled an ambition to see Mykines from the sea, a rock bastion with a tiny population who still snared puffins for food. We watched a small boat loaded to the gunwales with their feathered harvest – an unthinkable trade to our passengers.

That was one of my first cruises as part of the Trust staff on the smaller 'MV Meteor'. Others enabled me to enjoy the magic of Fingal's Cave on Staffa, and landings on Ulva and Gometra, two seldom-visited islands on the west side of Mull, where we watched the sun set behind the Treshnish Isles and beyond them the Outer Hebrides. On another 'Meteor' cruise we landed on the Shiants, in the Minch off the east shore of Lewis, and climbed the steep, green slopes of Eilean Mhuire where we sat entranced by the antics of so many thousands of puffins that, when they staged a mass take-off, they looked like a swarm of bright insects.

On the cruise in 1966 which landed me for my longest visit to St Kilda, we got within a few feet of far-flung North Rhona but just couldn't manage a landing on the rocks because of the swell. Later we circumnavigated the Flannan Isles with their lonely light-house where three keepers had mysteriously disappeared, leaving their half-eaten breakfast on the table. On another cruise, after sailing up the narrow sound between Islay and Jura for an early morning landing at the ferry pier at Feolin, under the shadow of the famous Paps of Jura, we had a day ashore at Colonsay, a thriving but unspoiled tourist island with a resident community under the careful regime of Colonsay House and its conservative laird. There we walked across the tidal flats to Isle Oronsay and its historic Priory. The Meteor also allowed such difficult landings as Mingulay, almost the southernmost of the Outer Hebrides, where we explored the ruins of the deserted village and watched golden eagles as we climbed to marvel at the west cliffs, before sailing on past Berneray and Barra Head, the southernmost point of the Hebridean chain.

I had been on four big-ship cruises after the first 'Dunera' one, which launched the brilliant idea of adult passengers in cheap dormitory accomodation designed for schoolchildren. Offering five days crusing from the Forth round to Greenock, including the circumnavigation of St Kilda, for a fare of £12, 10/-, it was rightly dubbed 'The Bargain Sail'. I had organized three of these 7–10 day cruises, taking in destinations in Norway, Denmark, Orkney and Shetland – including the famous one aborted on the day before sailing when the 'Devonia' collided with a Swedish ore-carrier at Greenock as 1,200 passengers were on their way to board ship. The calibre of staff we recruited to run such cruises was made evident when many of them stepped in to organize, at a day's notice, alternative trips for parties of disappointed cruisers to other islands like Arran and Rhum, for what they declared had been 'the holiday of a lifetime'. Alex Warwick, Jock Nimlin, the mountaineer, Donald Erskine, the Trust Factor, and Jim Nicolson, the Trust's highly talented artist, were all such men and it had been a privilege to work with them.

My task running the Cruise Office had only been possible because I recruited Isabel McClearie direct from the British India office in Glasgow. She was an experienced expert in cruise booking and management, who became known to and beloved by a whole generation of Scots who took up the Trust's cruises as a hobby. Some came on almost all of them, as much for the social life as the experience of new sights and sounds. We couldn't have done it without her, especially when the chartering of 'MV Meteor', with only 150 cabin passengers,

became a regular feature for NTS spring cruises. Places on Meteor cruises were expensive, but worth saving up for if one had caught the island bug. Her special ability to visit and usually land on exciting Scottish island venues appealed to those with the call of islands in their blood – and adequate money in their purses.

I was lucky to be on Meteor for one spring visit to Foula, just for an afternoon. How nostalgic it was to find myself entering Ham Voe once again, on one of Meteor's dories. I had offered to lead a large party of passengers on a walk down to the Hametoun. Following the path across the wooden bridge over the Ham burn, I stopped to point out the site of my old Heligoland trap. There was no trace of it visible. I had a lot to take in after ten years absence.

So much was exactly as I remembered it, like the big party of Bonxies bathing in the Mill Loch as we walked along the road across Hamnabreck towards Mornington and the Manse. But suddenly I stopped in my tracks, to the astonishment of my fellow passengers. There was a car – a rather old green outdated model to their eyes, but to me a complete anomaly – parked outside the Manse, as though it was the most natural thing to expect. I think my astonishment at this revelation said more to the passengers I was with than any lecture I could have given about Foula as part of the on-board programme of entertainment.

It was a frustrating visit, with just time for a quick cup of tea in the Schoolhouse kitchen and a vain attempt to catch up with news about changes and old friends, and, of course, problems over the mailboat. I think that was the first occasion when I heard of their plans to build an airstrip using their own resources with a 'new' (i.e. second-hand) digger-tractor and island unpaid manpower. I wished them good luck. I knew it was possible and I was certain they would succeed, despite the difficulties they had persuading the Shetland Island Council to give them a helping hand. I didn't like to suggest that perhaps the SIC would rather pay to evacuate the island like St Kilda. If I had, I suspect they would have agreed. The islanders were certainly still fighting a losing battle at that time over getting a satisfactory new mailboat, which they needed in order to preserve the jobs involved and the emergency capability, which would often be several hours too late if supplied from the mainland as the authorities seemed set on imposing. That battle, coupled with serious incompetence in providing a boat suitable and safe enough for Foula's weather conditions, went on for years and years. And even when they got a mailboat that was viable, there were endless problems over authorizing a qualified skipper for it and providing a house for him on the island.

I was only just in time for the last boat out from the pier to Meteor. It was so difficult to leave Foula yet again. I felt that old sense of guilt as I looked back and watched a dozen or so old friends wending their way back up the road to Mogil, while I returned to that little luxury world of comfort and service and gourmet meals that constituted a Meteor Cruise. It was a good job I had a full programme to keep me busy, preparing my illustrated talk on "Life on Foula" in the Lounge that evening.

I also landed once on Fair Isle from a Meteor cruise, where our evening meal was a barbecue on the beach of North Haven, and we were entertained by the Fair Islanders to live music with fiddles and guitars and an accordion and some very competent renderings of traditional Scottish airs. We tripled the island's population for that day and made a sizeable contribution to their annual turnover of knitted goods from an exhibition and sale in the village hall. I was able to inspect the new Bird Observatory building near the landing, with accommodation for twenty visitors and a structure designed to withstand Fair Isle weather conditions, a huge

improvement on the old naval huts I had stayed in during my autumn visit in 1956. There was also a new pier, which obviated flit-boat landings at low tide.

Such visits boosted both the island economy and the islanders' morale, as well as promoting many of the improvements in access. What a contrast with the negative effect which the early tourist visits to St Kilda had, where the islanders were often treated badly and regarded as curiosities rather than people in need of help and encouragement. In my own case, revisiting these islands only served to whet my appetite for covering their story on film as soon as the opportunity offered.