

Iona's First Regatta

28-30 July 2017

by David Erdal

When St Ayles stalwarts heard that Iona (pop around 120) would hold their first regatta in July, nine of us signed up more or less immediately. As the day approached, however, word came through that true west coast weather was expected, and we were advised not to take our skiff the 132 mile drive to Oban, 45 minute ferry to Mull, 35 mile single-track road to Fionnphort and one mile row (or in the case of bad weather, ferry) to Iona. Six of the nine still risked it skiffless, however, to carry the name of St Ayles to the island of St Columba, where we knew we'd be welcomed into others' boats.

The first indication that extraordinary persistence and dedication were going to be required came with flashing blue lights and a helicopter overhead near Pennyghael, about 20 miles into the 35 mile journey across Mull. Two local buses had run into each other, the single-track road was blocked for an 'indefinite' time, and the two St Ayles cars were told to go round the long way. This turned out to be a two-hour diversion on unfrequented (and therefore un-maintained) roads skirting the cliffs of Mull's west coast. Beautiful country, but testing for drivers, and would have been dire for any skiff on a trailer. (Re the crash: three casualties, flown to Oban by helicopter, were not seriously injured).



St Ayles skiffies beside an (undamaged) bus, with Iona behind. (Photo taken departing in Sunday sunshine, not on arrival)

Settling in didn't take long



Leaving time for some serious pre-match preparation





When Mull's *Sine Bhan* had come in May 2017 to help celebrate the launch of Iona's *Red Boat* the Sound of Iona was a sunny, warm, blue, hospitable stretch of water, ideal for skiff racing.

When she returned in high summer for Iona's first regatta the cold grey wet southerly wind was blowing a hoolie, stirring up water that no skiff crew, no matter how gallant, would wish for.



Nonetheless three skiffs — two from Mull and one from Ullapool — joined *The Red Boat* on Tramore beach, well down the SE coast of the island.

Although Tramore is open to the full blast of a south wind, the water is protected by rocky islets.

Two races and a number of practice circuits were completed. A St Ayles crew (3 women and 1 man), rowing in the Ullapool skiff, took on one of the Mull boats (3 men, 1 woman). Such is the reputation of our club that our (creditable?) second place was a real surprise to many. Sorry chaps.



The event finished with a proud row in convoy the mile back to the village — thankfully with the wind and tide together now, and in our favour.



Every visiting rower was presented with a medal, some in glass, like this cast of a mussel shell, and others in polished stone, all created and donated by craftspeople working on the island.

And then it was time for the (rain-washed) barbecue and dry ceilidh (with bar), first with a local warm-up band and then Scottish dances including all ages.

To Topher's relief nobody sang China's 1966-76 national anthem lauding Chairman Mao.



Sunday, with rather better weather, gave time for a quick dash to the glorious west side of the island, and to the graveyard of kings, which also holds that of the man who would NOT have taken us into the Iraq War — John Smith.

Our thanks to the intrepid boatbuilders, budding rowers and organisers on Iona.



Photo credits: Elsie Johnstone, David Erdal.