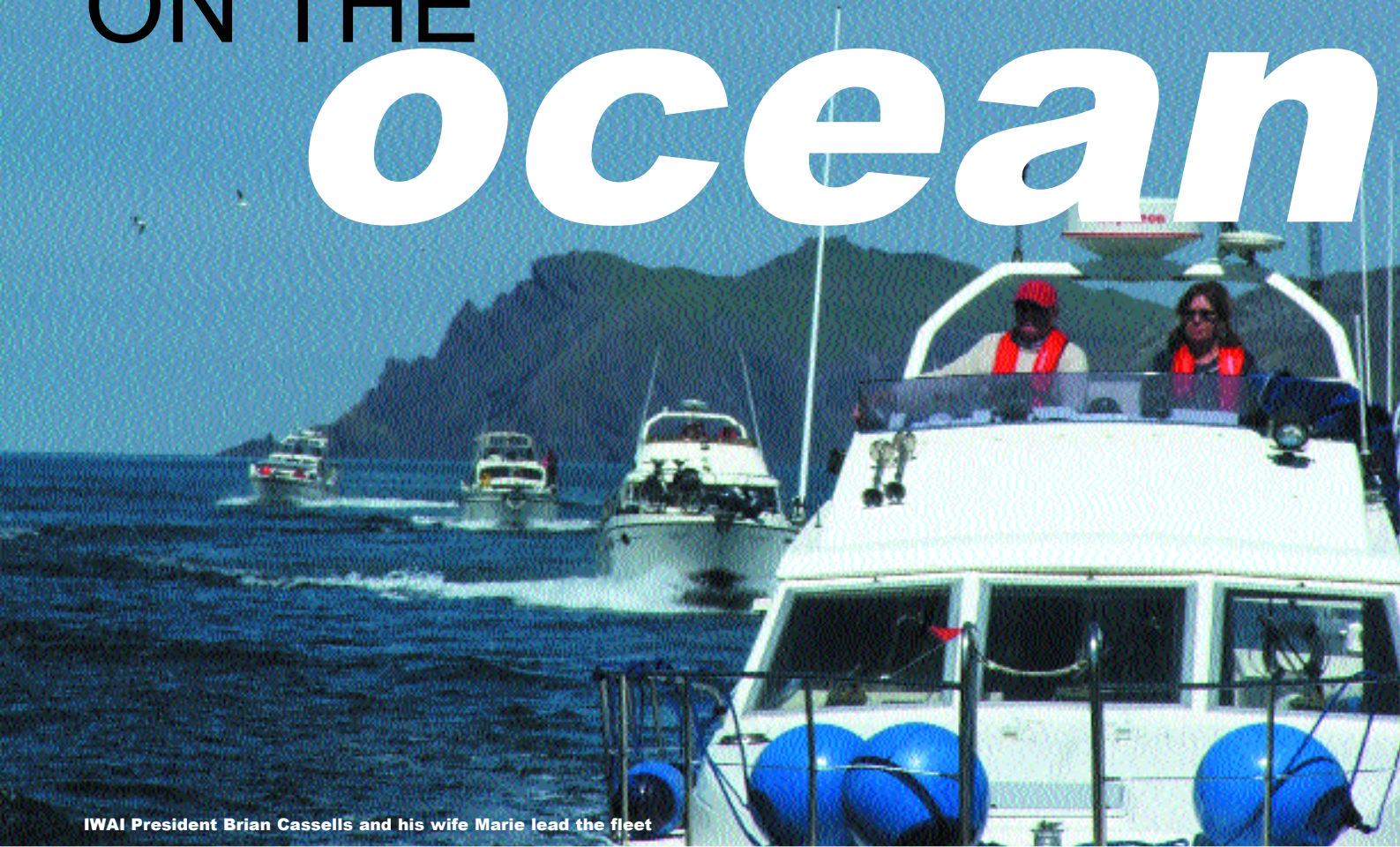


TRIP TO DINGLE

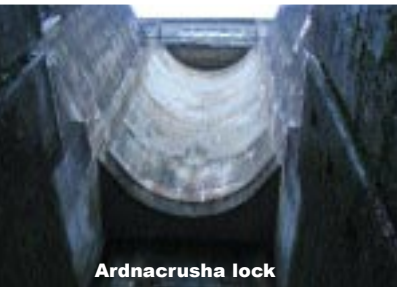
ON THE ocean



IWAI President Brian Cassells and his wife Marie lead the fleet



Dingle



Ardnacrusha lock



PICS: NOEL GRIFFIN



wave

For those used to the inland waterways, an ocean cruise may seem like an unobtainable dream. But not for 18 ambitious IWAI skippers who braved tidal waters this summer. Noel 'Ocean froggie' Griffin was part of the fleet which travelled all the way to the Blaskets and Dingle. Along with many memorable moments, he shares some valuable navigational information for future sea dogs

DAY 1 KILLALOE TO KILRUSH, SATURDAY 30 JULY

It was 0530am on a dark, and eerily still Saturday morning. We were excited and filled with anticipation as we prepared to get underway for our passage to Kilrush on the Shannon estuary. It was our hope to continue on to Fenit and perhaps even Dingle if weather conditions permitted. Canopies and radar arches were lowered in preparation to pass under Killaloe Bridge (3.7m) and the guillotine gates (3.6m) at Ardnacrusha hydro-electric dam with its 102ft drop into tidal waters. We crept out of the sleeping harbour on *Ocean froggie* accompanied by *Atoll* into the flat calm, icy blue river, engines purring quietly, the lights of Killaloe shimmering in a near perfect reflection. The boats glided through the darkness hardly creating a ripple. I could hardly believe it, we were finally underway after months of planning and anticipation.

The IWAI Fenit/Dingle 2005 cruise-in-company comprised 18 boats which were venturing out to sea from the sanctuary of the inland waterway system. Many of the boats were based on or near the large lakes of the Shannon navigation, including Lough Derg and Lough Ree. It was a delight to welcome *The other woman* skippered by IWAI President Brian Cassells and his wife Marie. They had travelled on their boat all the way from Enniskillen on the Erne, to join us on our adventure into the salty waters.

This trip was conceived during last year's estuary cruise. During the winter months, tide tables, charts and almanacs were consulted and studied. Routes were plotted and re-plotted, alternative routes, likely weather

scenarios, and a host of other factors were considered. This trip was meant to be relaxing and fun, not a maritime achievement, so safety and weather were paramount factors in its planning – we were going on our holidays after all.

LIMERICK

It took two days to get the fleet down to Limerick due to the lock time through the famous Ardnacrusha hydro-electric power station and the tidal window. Essentially we could only fit two boats per lock and each lock cycle takes about one hour. The fleet had an exciting, but uneventful three-hour trip to Limerick from Killaloe spread over the two days thanks to the welcome assistance and watchful eye of Pat Lysaght. Pat guided our flock under the low bridges in Limerick, checking the air draft and current before each boat arrived. We are truly grateful for his valuable help which makes the trip down to Limerick a pleasure. The 18 boats cruised as two groups, one lead by Fergal Kerney on *Tanjuan* and the other by myself on *Ocean froggie*.

Each group had a sweeper boat guarding the rear in case of a breakdown or VHF malfunction. The first group, lead by *Tanjuan*, left the sea lock in Limerick at 1330 on Saturday, followed by the second group at 1400, which was one hour before high tide (HW). Canopies, arches, and antenna were once again raised after we had cleared the last bridge in Limerick.

KILRUSH

The passage to Kilrush took five hours, with four hours of an ebb tide to assist us on our way down the estuary. The weather was pleasant

with a slight north westerly breeze, but a little overcast. The scenery was very interesting as we passed a busy Shannon Airport, Bunratty Castle, Foynes, the massive industrial complex at Aughinish, and Tarbert race. Being neap tides there was only 3kts of ebb flow passing Tarbert, but even that against the north westerly wind made for an exciting mile or so. It is more comfortable to travel down the estuary on neap tides because of the reduced wind against tide effect in the prevailing SW winds. Spring tides can run at up to 7kts at Tarbert race. The car ferries at Tarbert were afforded a wide berth. Once past the two large power stations, Hog and Scatterry islands came into view. The two groups of boats then began to split in order to stagger our arrival at the sea lock in Kilrush Creek marina. We entered the marina via the eastern channel behind Hog Island, up to the safe water buoy (red and white stripes), and then carefully along the dredged channel to the lock, paying particular attention to the leading lights on the shore rather than the buoys marking the channel. It took two hours to get the 18 boats through the sea lock into the lagoon. With the help of the marina manager John Hehir we settled down for the night, and pondered the evolving weather patterns effect on the coming week.

Kilrush Creek is a wonderful blue flag marina located only a few hundred yards from the quaint and well kept little town of Kilrush. The 150 berth marina is well equipped with all the modern facilities you would expect including water, shore power, laundry, showers, clean loos, and diesel. There were quite a few yachts visiting from overseas, and some magnificent old classic yachts.

TRIP TO DINGLE



Skippers' briefing

The marina is located inside a large lagoon which includes a play area for dingy sailing and other water sports. The sea lock opens free of charge every hour on the half hour during daylight hours, and is sometimes left open for an hour or so before high water. Kilrush is well within comfortable reach of inland boats once the tidal window is utilised. The passage down is no more exposed than the large inland lakes, and there is little or no swell. Kilrush rather than Killaloe might be considered as the end of sheltered navigation on the Shannon.

DAY 2 KILRUSH TO FENIT, SUNDAY 31 JULY

Well done Fergal who came to the rescue when diesel and water did not mix too well on one boat. Thanks also to the helpful Marina manager for ferrying cans of petrol from a local filling station to *Lady Carol II's* thirsty petrol tanks. The weather forecast had improved so the next morning a skippers briefing was held in the Marina's hospitality suite. It was decided to depart for Fenit at 1330 (half hour before HW) with a favourable tide and the advantage that the lock gates would be open for free flow.

The weather was excellent with a light northerly breeze and plenty of sunshine. We had a wonderful passage past Beal Bar and Ballybunnion on route to Kerry head. Quite a number of playful dolphins were encountered as Mount Brandon loomed large in the far distance, flanked by the three sisters.

Loop head and the cliffs of Clare indicated to us that we were now in the Atlantic Ocean. The weather had been settled for a number of weeks,

'Those of us who had taken sea sickness pills seemed to do quite well, and others were just immune to the sea rock'n'roll'

hence there was little if any swell which is unusual out here. Once round Kerry Head the impressive 100ft high flat topped Mucklaghmore rock came into view. Navigation was straight forward from Kilrush, just head for the Cardinal buoys at Beal Bar, Kerry Head, then one mile west of Mucklaghmore rock, and then SSE for Little Samphire Island with its beautiful white light house, and then east for Fenit harbour. Needless to say Garmin Bluecharts were very handy, but just for fun I also took quite a few running fixes using conventional navigation techniques and a hand bearing compass.

The scenery in the late evening sunshine with the mountains of Kerry silhouetted in the background was simply stunning. The sandy beaches of Tralee Bay were very tempting. We arrived in Fenit harbour after the four and a half hour passage. The marina was almost full due to the busy August bank holiday, so there was quite a bit of rafting. The harbour master and his assistants were helpful and welcoming. The marina has excellent facilities including shore power, water, diesel, showers, security and weather fax. Most crews enjoyed an excellent meal at the local hostelry which is a good walk across the famous Fenit pier. The sunset late that evening was beautiful, as visiting yachts continued to arrive from far and wide.

Fergal and I were relieved and surprised to see a big improvement in the weather forecast, especially for the end of the week. This not only suggested favourable weather for a passage to Dingle the next morning, but also a window to get back. Two areas of expanding high pressure seemed almost too good to be true.

DAY 3 FENIT TO DINGLE, MONDAY 1 AUGUST

At skippers' briefing we decided to leave Fenit for Dingle at 1100, two hours earlier than originally planned in order to arrive at Blasket Sound in the most favourable conditions. These included a slack tidal stream and hopefully lighter winds. Four boats decided to stay in Fenit and rejoin the fleet later in the week. The weather leaving Fenit was close to perfect. Almost no wind, flat calm, and almost no swell. The mountainous scenery was breathtaking as we left Tralee bay in good sunshine heading for Magharee Sound. Plenty of lobster pots to dodge along the way, but thankfully no drift nets as the Salmon season had ended the day before.

We could hardly believe our luck with the conditions as we passed Mount Brandon, Smerwick bay, the three sisters and the rest of the incredible Kerry coast line. The land features were imposing, rocky, high, foreboding, and gothic in appearance. It was clear to see that the battered coastline gets regularly thrashed by the Atlantic. The fleet arrived in the Blasket Sound in the most idyllic boating conditions. We slowed and then stopped to soak up the scenery, have a snack, and take photographs. We had travelled all this way, what was the point of rushing through one of the most scenic parts of the western European coast. We were now as far west as you can get anywhere in Europe. The next land mass is the North American continent.

The Great Blasket Island was a hive of activity with passing yachts and busy ferries bringing tourists on day trips. I realised how lucky we were to pass through the sound in such unusually good conditions. Blasket Sound in a strong tidal stream is notoriously uncomfortable. Leaving the sound we kept close to the islands and gave Stomboli rock a wide berth.

Cruising slowly into Dingle bay in brilliant sunshine, we passed Ventry harbour with its inviting sandy beaches and excellent anchorage. Clearing Crow rock we entered the mouth of Dingle harbour which is difficult to see until you are almost past it. The well-buoyed channel was easy to see, but slightly intimidating as the Fungi-watch passenger boats buzzed around the harbour. Dingle is inside a large natural harbour completely hidden from the bay by the cliff faced hills of Reenbeg Point. One of the boats ran out of fuel about

one hour out, but was taken in tow, an advantage of cruising-in-company. We were met by harbour master Brian Farrell who guided us past the breakwaters into the commercial harbour where he had allocated a long floating jetty for our fleet to raft against, complete with shore power, water and security. We are very grateful to the commercial pleasure and fishing vessels that vacated their berths for our visit, and for their welcome.

Dingle is a wonderful and energetic town, with endless places to eat and visit. The streets were alive with activity and more like a French town with all its cafés and eateries. There was the added attraction of a fun fair right beside the harbour much to the delight of the younger crew members and the teenagers. Fungi the dolphin is truly a multi-million dollar business, with many tourists coming to see the playful chap do his thing day after day. We had planned to spend three nights in Dingle, but alas the weather is always the final arbitrator and hence we spent four wonderful days relaxing and enjoying its fine hospitality.

An intrepid 12 adventurers had an enjoyable day trip to the Great Blasket Island on board the *Peig Seyers*. Later that night, it was alleged that a number of female admirers from *Elle Bee* and other vessels had a few drinks with a famous Rugby Lion more normally seen wearing the green. There was a bit of a blow on Thursday, so we battened down the hatches hoping for a break in the weather, which thankfully was forecast for Friday.

DAY 7 DINGLE TO KILRUSH, THE RETURN

We left Dingle at 0900 heading directly back for Kilrush on what would be an eight and a half hour passage. The passage was timed to put us in the Blasket Sound at slack tide just as the north flowing flood would start, hence assisting our passage and having the wind with or across the tide. Wind was initially NW force 3 to 4 moderating as the day progressed. There was a bit of a swell left over from the day before, and conditions were actually quite good for that part of the coast, with plenty of broken sunshine. It was perfectly safe, but a little uncomfortable, especially for some inland crews unfamiliar with a little coastal swell. It would be fair to say that there was a degree of sea-sickness

experienced by some crew members. The best place to be is up in the cockpit looking at the horizon, whereas the worst place to be is down below on a bunk. Those of us who had taken sea sickness pills seemed to do quite well, and others were just immune to the sea version of rock'n'roll. Still, after a few hours everybody seemed to settle down and enjoy the wonderful Kerry coast line again. Loop head provided some shelter from the NW wind and swell, and conditions improved considerably once we passed Kerry head and entered the mouth of the Shannon again. *Scuttlebut* was leading a group of six boats up the estuary towards Kilrush, with *Gerda* guarding the rear. The crews were elated when a shoal of Dolphins emerged around the boats, so we stopped to watch them play.



We were on the final run home after a wonderful week's adventure, when disaster struck the *Regina IV*. Maurice and Tricia Kerr are safe and well, but we are all very saddened and shocked at the sudden loss of *Regina IV* due to a fire on board (see page 5). With heavy but very relieved hearts we continued onto Kilrush. Maurice and Tricia were amazing, they were very philosophical, positive and in good spirits, and I am glad to say remained with our shocked flotilla for a welcome barbeque on the jetty in Kilrush Creek. I am delighted to hear that they may be back on the water in a few weeks.

RETURN TO KILLALOE

On Saturday at 1300 the fleet of 12, led by Fergal on *Tanjuan*, began to leave Kilrush at low water. One of the boats ran aground in the narrow channel outside the sea lock, but floated off unscathed again within minutes on the rising tide. Winds were light but the visibility was poor due to heavy rain. Fergal led them



PIC: NOEL GRIFFIN

Regina IV, four days before the fire

safely back to Limerick onto the Hunt Jetties for the night, and then up to Killaloe on Sunday morning. The crew of *Ocean froggie* had remained behind at Kilrush in order to link up with the 'Fenit four' once the weather had improved, and it did so on the Sunday. They had a pleasant week in Fenit, but were glad to be on the move once again. They left at 0715 ably led by Brendan Walls on *Atoll* against a spring tide up to Scatterry Island near Kilrush, fighting 4kts of tide in places. *Atoll* dropped anchor off the island, and the others rafted alongside in the warm hazy sun and flat calm estuary. A hearty lunch was consumed as we waited for the tide to turn. There is no point going up the Shannon estuary against a spring tide.

The five boats had a wonderful passage up to Limerick. We got an excited text message relayed to us from Lisa (ex *Elle Bee*) to say that she was at her departure gate in Shannon airport when she saw the remaining five little boats passing up the river. We passed straight through Limerick, up through Ardnacrusha and then on to Killaloe aware of the failing light. *Ocean froggie* made Killaloe in the dark shortly after 2300. Despite the sad and shocking loss of *Regina IV*, the fleet had an amazing ten-day adventure.

We had travelled together, looked out for each other, and had a wonderful holiday. Cruising-in-company had worked well. My sincere thanks to all of the 18 crews, for their company, friendship, support and co-operation. It was an adventure we will never forget, and a pleasure cruising with you all. Fergal Kerney and *Tanjuan* take a bow, well done sir and thank you for your skill, experience and leadership.

In memory of *Regina IV* and looking forward to her successor.

Ocean froggie out, and no longer listening on channel 6! ■

Noel Griffin is a member of the Derg branch of the IWAI.