

Causeway to heaven: around Holy Island (almost) in a skiff by David Lee

Holy Island (Lindisfarne) is a special place, shrouded in history, mystery and mist - cut off from the mainland, but connected twice a day by a causeway which cuts through an ethereal sandscape.

In 2015, I ventured south with fellow Eskmuthers Charly, Sandra and Brian to try to circumnavigate the island with a collection of skiffs from far and wide. However, the island was covered with thick fog and the adventure was called off.

Our friends at Amble Coastal Rowing Club have tried ever since to find a chance to row round the island - a feat which has, apparently, never been completed by a skiff. It's some challenge, finding a day where you have time to get on and off the island at low tide, but row around and over the causeway at high tide. And they needed a day where the winds aren't too high - and it's a windy place.

We were asked on Thursday evening if we could make it on the Sunday and scrambled a crew together, with George towing the boat. We might have taken two, but Stewart was away working and Brian away gallivanting so we had no way to tow a second boat. This wasn't such a bad thing, as Pauline stepped in to ensure new rowers got their chance to take to the water at Fisherrow. Pete, Gaynor, Sharon M and David made up the Causeway Crew.

The Sunday morning was unpromising and dreich as we headed down the A1, but the sea around Holy Island appeared calm and visibility was good as we joined the two Amble boats - Coquet Spirit and Coquet Venture - to launch at the small, rocky harbour.



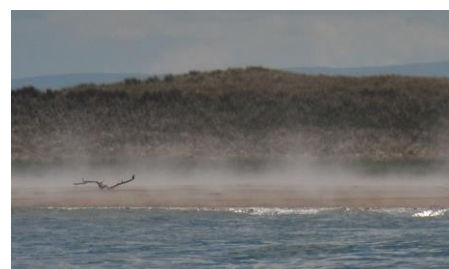
As we rowed out past the castle, bedecked in scaffolding and canvas for the last phase of a restoration project, we were delighted to see a seal pop its head out of the water. Then another appeared, and another. In the end, we must have seen up to 50 heads bobbing up, some of them very close to the boat. Maybe the seals are more confident down here than in the Forth.

We headed out into the North Sea to avoid the rocks, then turned along the coast behind the castle and along towards, and around, a white pyramid beacon. The sea was developing a bit of swell, but it was pretty calm in general - certainly calm enough to ensure the smooth passage of a bag of pick n mix sweets between the two boats.



Amble, who love rowing around coastlines and poking into sheltered bays, led us towards an area with spectacular cliff formations and nesting birds. We saw many different sea birds along the way, including gulls, guillemots, gannets, oystercatchers, cormorants, a diving tern, lots of eider ducks and (possibly) a puffin.

And then to the really interesting part of the row, as we approached the place where we needed to find a narrow channel of water to take us towards, and then over, the causeway. It was all very surreal as a misty haze rose up from the coastline, helping to create a strange optical illusion that it was only sand ahead of us - and no water and certainly no channel deep enough to row through. However, there was - or appeared to be - a channel and the first Amble boat headed for it.





The water was shallow and it got shallower and the Amble boat ran aground and radioed us to say we should go further out from the island and try for a different channel - and they would come back and do the same. This proved easier said than done as the surf was up and unpredictable, swirling waves had begun to break all around us as they hit the sandy banks. At one point, we were turned almost side-on by a combination of waves, but managed to get back on course and make our way through the wormhole to calm waters.

Calm, yes, but very shallow. Did we have enough water to make it through to the causeway and find the channel to cross? If so, it would involve pushing the boats - and maybe even carrying them - and hoping we found the channel. If we didn't find it, we could end up marooned - with quicksand an additional peril. Should we turn back? If so, we had to

do it quickly as we had just passed high tide time and the water we had just rowed through would soon recede.

After a quick conversation in the shallow water, it was agreed that we were unlikely to make it over the causeway, so we turned the boat and turned back. However, this meant we had to go back through the swirling wormhole to safety. Calm George took over coxing duties from less calm David to pilot us through and did so skilfully, though not without a couple of cheeky waves giving photographer Kate a shower in the back of the boat.



It was great to escape the whirling waters and even greater when a dolphin appeared on the bow side of the boat. It treated us to a few impressive somersaults and we ooh-ed and aah-ed before it disappeared beneath the waves. After this thrilling experience, our attention returned to making it back through what had become quite a swell-y sea.

We had been about two-thirds of the way around the island when we decided to turn back so a row estimated at less than 10 miles turned into 12 miles or more - and there were some tired arms and legs as we came back around the castle and towards the harbour, by now bathed in glorious late afternoon sunshine. There were far fewer seals to greet us (at their granny's for Sunday tea, someone suggested) and we drifted ashore serenely.

Rob, one of Amble's stalwart skiffies, soon had our trailer backed onto the beach and all three crews helped to lift each boat in turn - Honesty, then Coquet Spirit and Coquet Venture - over the rocks and onto its trailer. We shared snacks and chat in the sun, with Brian regaling us with tall tales of the Amble initiation ceremony when you row round Coquet Island and see the puffins for the first time - and of 1000 puffins flying right in front of your face. We were invited to enjoy the spectacle later in the summer, and we hope to do so.



Sadly, we had to decline the chance of a beer for the road for various reasons and we crossed back over the causeway - tired, sun-kissed and with wet feet from the shenanigans in the shallow, but not that shallow, waters.

Another great Eskmuthe adventure - but this time with a photographer in the back of the boat. Thanks to Kate for capturing a very special day. There will be many more to come.

14th May, 2018