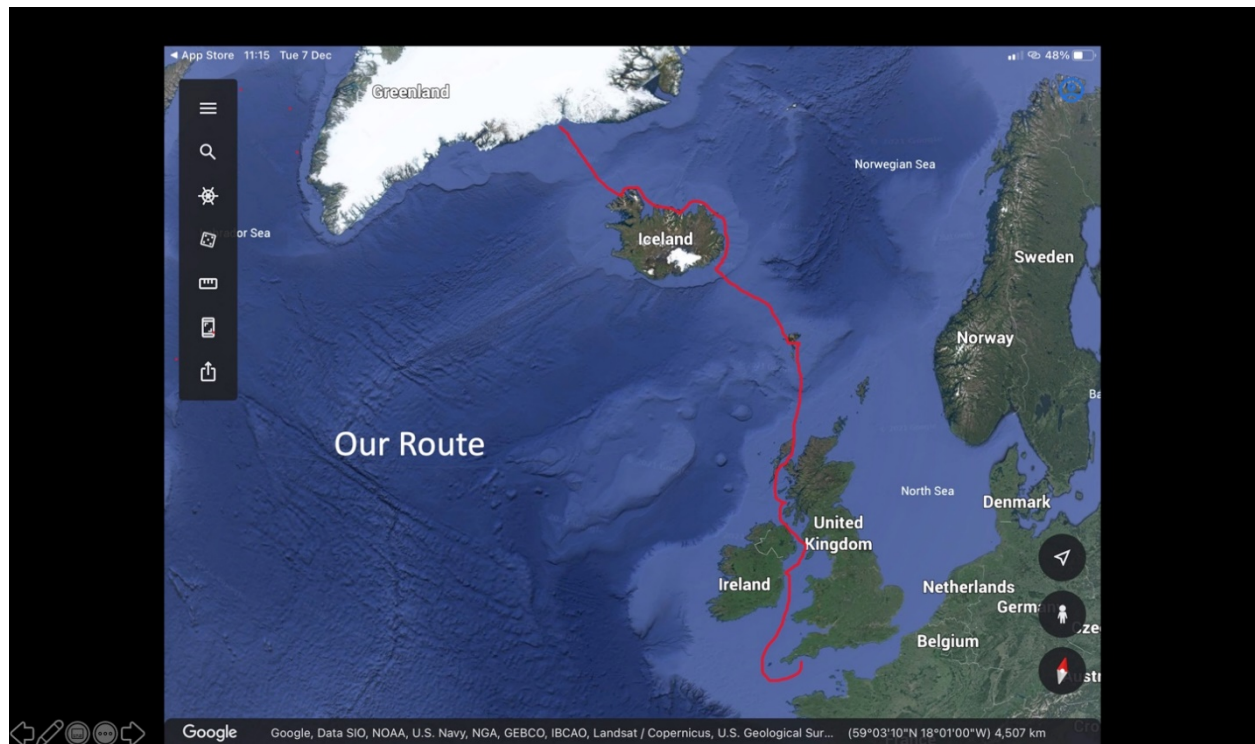


## Report of sailing expedition Falmouth-East Greenland-Falmouth by Isabelle Howells



### The plan

It seems an unlikely year to choose to depart on a sailing expedition, given the pandemic has wreaked havoc with most people's travel plans. As guides, most of our work has been cancelled for more than a year, so we took the opportunity to carry out the trip in what would otherwise be a busy work season.

The aim of this expedition was to explore within Kangerlussuaq fjord (East Greenland) widely as possible, both by sail and kayak. We had hoped to sail further south to the place where Gino Watkins was lost while out hunting seals in 1932. A part of the trip was to learn more about Watkins and his team who spent much time in the area carrying out observations and surveys for the potential air route that Pan American Airways had hoped to create.

We would be sailing Jeff's 39' Ebbtide sailing boat Wild Rover 6 from Cornwall, up the Irish Sea to Scotland, the Faroe Islands, northabout Iceland and across to the East Coast of Greenland. The trip also focused on accessing remote areas in which to sea kayak. We were able to store four folding kayaks down below on Wild Rover.

I have sailed between Iceland and Greenland several times for work in the past, when I worked for an Icelandic Company we would take their schooners over to Scoresbysund for several weeks in the summer where I would work as guide or expedition leader. However this was to

be my first Arctic trip in a personal capacity, not for work, and by far the longest sailing expedition I've done.

## **Preparations**

One of the biggest challenges up front was being able to plan the trip but not knowing where we would end up or how far we would be permitted to travel.

When we departed, Ireland, Greenland and Denmark were still in lock down and we were unsure if another local lockdown would happen, and we'd be unable to leave Cornwall. In this respect, all we could do is just way anchor, head out and approach foreign ports cautiously!

We took a tremendous amount of time preparing the boat, procuring safety equipment, organising food stores and general supplies to last us for many months. We spent time with crew members, familiarising them with the boat and safety procedures on weekends sailing around Falmouth.

## **The voyage**

Given different crew members availability and the time they could commit to the expedition, we had different numbers of people on different legs of the trip.

### **Leg 1 Falmouth to Oban.**

There were just two of us on the leg up to Scotland. We just happened to leave during the parade of sail of Falmouth Classic boat festival and happily had several friends on other boats waving us off. We took a few days to sail and motor sail across the Celtic Deep and on into the Irish sea, almost always with a pod of dolphins around the bow.

We had varying weather, sometimes becalmed but with increasing wind speeds as we neared Ireland. Given that Ireland were still in lockdown at that time, we were not able to land, even if we had needed to. After a few days at sea, swapping watch every couple of hours, we were quite looking forward to getting our heads down for a sleep, it takes me a couple of weeks for my long distance sailing stamina to kick in normally!

Passing Dublin, the coast guard was giving small craft weather warnings on the radio, and out at sea the wind was picking up a lot more than was forecast. We found ourselves running downwind with too much sail. Wanting to shelter from the increasing wind, and with the knowledge we couldn't get ashore, we tucked in behind Lambay Island and dropped anchor for the night.

From Lambay Island, we made our way up to Bangor in Northern Ireland, where we picked up another kayak, met with friends and unexpectedly ended up staying there for three days to repair the broken heads (onboard toilet). This was a good opportunity to buy last minute supplies whilst in a city, so we stocked up on mosquito netting, spare pumps and even more food.

Sailing up through Scotland went without incident, strong winds affected our choice of route but we made good time to anchor in Gigha, Islay and Colonsay before meeting other crew members in Oban.

### **Leg 2 Oban to The Faroes**

We were joined in Oban by Lucy and Peter who were to sail as far as Torshavn. Originally Lucy was scheduled to complete the entire expedition, but due to anxiety of potential bad weather ahead and having not sailed before, decided to pull out in Torshavn Peter, which is where Peter was scheduled to depart. This had quite a serious impact on the expedition as each group member were committed to supporting the program both as team members and in financial contributions.

The first day out from Oban gave us perfect conditions to ease everyone into their sea legs and the onboard routines. We had to spend the night at Tobermory on Mull, this was due to Covid restrictions preventing us from being able to access fuel in Oban, before the open crossing that would take us North to the Faroes.

It took about 4 nights to get to our destination. We didn't have especially favourable wind so did more motoring than we would have liked, meaning that no one got very much sleep. Approaching the Faroe Islands was exactly as we were told it would be, too foggy to see much and very strong currents. Luckily, we had done extensive research on the approach beforehand and had chosen our route as well as downloaded a very useful local app which tracks the tidal movement at all points around the islands.

Coming alongside the town quay in the capital, Torshavn we didn't know what kind of a reception we could expect, in terms of covid regulations, it wasn't unlikely that things could have changed while we were at sea with no internet to check. However after a couple of hours on board and a PCR test, we were able to wander around the city. In those few days we came to thoroughly enjoy the town and its people. Peter and Lucy were to leave the boat here so they enjoyed some day trips while Jeff and I spent time on general repairs and maintenance, laundry and further provisioning on Wild Rover.

### **Leg 3 The Faroes to Isafjordur, Iceland**

We were joined by Ken for the next part of the trip. We enjoyed a spectacular sail between the islands to the north westerly point of the Faroes, marvelling at the enormous sea cliffs. There were some nasty overfalls to get through as we left the coast, which threw the boat around for about half an hour before we suddenly were able to pull through them. The next section of water is quite infamous amongst northern sailors and has earned the name 'The Devil's Dance Floor'.

It took us about four days to get to Seydisfjordur on the east coast of Iceland, with the now familiar routine of being on watch, cooking, hoping to get some sleep, cleaning and reading. We called the harbour master on our approach to the pier, again never really being sure if as a foreign yacht we would be turned away given the situation with the pandemic. We were met here by a customs official and two police officers who checked over our documents and wished us a good stay in Iceland.

Knowing that getting around Iceland in an anti-clockwise direction would be more challenging, given the prevailing winds and currents, we decided to not stop for more than one night at a time and to try to push on. We made pretty slow progress and would look to anchor every other night or so to get a bit of a rest, we luckily had factored in the time to kill before we had to be in Isafjordur. We were shown a lot of kindness by locals in small fishing villages along the coast, receiving gifts of smoked trout and double portions of fish and chips in a local restaurant.

After about a week we came into Husavik on the north coast, where I have lived and worked for a number of years, this is one of the most famous places for whale watching. A few days later, and after having to run into Siglufjordur to escape strong winds, we arrived into Isafjordur, the jumping off place for many sailing expeditions to East Greenland.

Here we met Willie and as a team of four we were able to do additional safety procedure and briefings before setting off, we were all really excited for what was to come, while we waited for a weather window to cross the Denmark Strait.

#### **Leg 4 East Greenland**

At this point, most people we spoke to (especially the commercial skippers who normally operate in this region) would tell us we would not be able to go to Greenland, given the travel restrictions. As we had been told this about every country we had so far successfully arrived into, on this trip, we decided to crack on and give it a try.

We had a moderately challenging sail over, very strong winds dropping to nothing as is common when approaching the Greenlandic coast. We saw our first iceberg only the day after leaving Iceland. Using the satellite phone, Jeff called the Greenland Patrol/military version of the coast guard to tell them of our position and plans. We all held our breaths as we waited for their reaction, half expecting to be turned away but then let out a huge sigh of relief when we heard the phone operator say “welcome to Greenland, enjoy your stay”. We were permitted to travel through Greenlandic waters as long as we did not attempt to land in any local settlements, which we knew and had prepared for.

As the mountains along that coast line are so high (almost 3,000 meters in some parts), it gives a warped sense of distance as you are actually still very far away when first sighting land. A couple of days of motoring later we reached quite dense icebergs, and all of us stayed up through the night on deck to manoeuvre through the bergy bits and growlers. At this point we didn't know if we'd be able to get into any of the fjords to anchor as the ice looked so thickly packed (this was all glacier ice, there was no sea ice at this point).

We managed to wind our way through the ice, to enter Miki Fjord and put the anchor down at around 6 in the morning. Absolutely exhausted, we toasted our arrival with a glass of whiskey and set up an anchor watch, meaning that we would take turns in getting up each hour to ensure the icebergs nearby weren't drifting too closely in our direction or potentially causing a problem to the anchor chain.

A couple of days were spent in Miki Fjord, kayaking and exploring the beaches and rocks. Although there were no other vessels at this point, there were helicopters passing overhead all day long. They belonged to the mining companies prospecting and carrying out geological research in the area.

Hoping to get into Kangerlussuaq, as was our aim, we motored down the coast a little, spending the day manoeuvring at close quarters around icebergs, however the fjord looked so choked up with ice that we didn't want to risk going in and getting stuck, especially as we had noticed the speed at which the ice was moving around through the water. We saw hundreds of seals and many whales (humpback and fin) though we didn't see any polar bears.

We felt slightly disappointed to not be able to achieve this objective, to be able to get into the fjord or visit the abandoned village there, but naturally the weather and ice conditions take precedence.

There were a few days left to make the most of our time in Greenland, we had some other recommendations for suitable anchorages noted down on the chart so we motored into Jacobsen Fjord to drop anchor. We saw our first vessel here, a mining company who hailed us up on the radio as soon as we entered the fjord, suggesting places we could anchor. By chance, a previous work colleague of mine was working on board the ship. We caught up and learnt that over the past 10 years the company has been spending the summer here, they have seen ominous signs of rising temperatures, much more summer rainfall and an increase of vegetation and flowers which is not common for this area. The crew spent some more time kayaking while I would follow from a distance in the boat, but our time was coming to an end and we started to get Wild Rover ready for sea and make up some big batches of food, in case of a rough crossing.

We made sure to alert the Patrol of our position twice a day every 12 hours, if we were as much as five minutes late in calling, they would be on our case.

#### **Leg 5 East Greenland – Seydisfjordur, Iceland**

Coming back into Isafjordur after a couple of days of good sailing, we said goodbye to Ken as he flew home for work. It was here that we had an electrical problem and no longer had the use of our anchor windlass or bow thruster. Sailing back around Iceland in a clockwise direction was much faster and easier, we took fewer stops, but did pull into Husavik and then the tiny fishing settlement of Kopasker to avoid some winds that were almost sending us backwards. Here we tied up alongside a beautiful Colin Archer boat and had some interesting conversations with the owners. A few days later we were coming alongside in Seydisfjordur, when just 20 meters from the quay, the engine cut out, not to be turned on again.

It took two weeks before we could leave again. Extensive work by local engineers finally sourced the engine problem, parts had to be sent to Reykjavik to be rebuilt and we had to drive half way around the country to pick up emergency fuel tanks. Willie, who had planned to sail back to Scotland with us flew home as he didn't have the extra unexpected two weeks it would take to get home. We had discussed sailing home without an engine and getting the work done back home, but decided against it, given insurance issues and the increasingly bad weather that occurs at this time of year, as summer moves into autumn.

### **Leg 6 Seydisfjordur, Iceland – Bangor, Northern Ireland**

With the engine working again we were off and despite a temperamental autohelm, we headed out to sea, enjoying early season northern lights on the first night. This part of the voyage was gruelling. The wind was on our nose the entire time meaning that we had to tack to get towards Scotland rather than going directly, adding many extra miles and days to the trip. We decided to make a slight detour and stop off in Torshavn in the Faroes as we were using a lot more fuel than expected by punching into the strong winds and seas. Since the engine troubles, we were now using the much smaller emergency fuel tank, and although we had gallons of diesel in tanks strapped around the cockpit, we were getting through it fast. 12 hours in Torshavn, we managed to meet our friend Sonny who was waiting on the pontoon to take our lines, have a pizza, have a sleep and a shower, refuel and head out again, fighting the strong tides as we went. When the tide was with us it could give us an extra five knots of speed or sometimes we would literally be going backwards.

From here it took 5 days to get down to Scotland, strong winds and heavy head seas/swell hampering our progress. As a team of just two now, we were at times struggling to muster enough energy as it was near impossible to sleep given the conditions. There were a couple of times on this leg where it was clear how quickly problems can escalate if one gets injured or if damage to the boat occurs.

Our first landing back in Scotland was in Ardmore. Further down the coast, a couple of days later we unexpectedly had to take refuge in a bay on the north end of Skye for two nights. At this point, given we were two weeks delayed in Iceland we had to push on as much as we could and as much as we were able, we sailed constantly through the nights to make up ground. We refuelled once again in Loch Inver and then again in Bangor.

### **Leg 7 Bangor – Falmouth**

We enjoyed slightly more favourable conditions as we sailed further south, we also saw the sun for the first time in a while. I learnt a lot about tidal navigation coming down through Scotland and the Irish sea. Jeff has a lot of experience of navigating tides in kayaks so we were able to apply the theory of playing with eddy lines to our sailing.

We followed the coast closely until we passed Wexford and then we headed out to sea and aimed for Land's End. After perhaps three nights and four days, we made it back into Falmouth, enjoying bio-luminescence and dolphins. We got back in the middle of September, three months after we had left Falmouth.

### **Outcomes and learnings**

Naturally since planning the trip objectives, the realities of the expedition had meant that some things had changed. We were not able to get to the places where the Watkins expedition had operated from for example. We also had to return back to Iceland by a certain date to ensure that one crew member could fly back to the UK for governmental work reasons. But that is just the nature of travelling with multiple people.

However we focused on what we did achieve. After being told repeatedly by people we knew and by any government or harbour authority we were in touch with, in our preparations that

we would have a hard time even leaving the UK on a yacht, we were delighted to have made it as far as Greenland safely.

The pandemic didn't turn out to be such a challenge as we had expected. It would have been preferable to have the option to land in Ireland and of course in Greenlandic settlements but I think we were all surprised how many places we were able to go in a year when it seemed most people had put trips on hold.

A challenging element was in inviting inexperienced crew members on board. Everyone learnt a lot and did a good job, but it did mean that with Jeff or myself were on watch in the cockpit nearly constantly. In terms of the engine damage that we experienced on our way home in Iceland, in ways it was a good place for that to occur, at least we were able to get it repaired. We had been using the boat very hard in the three months we were away and we were thankful that the boat was very robust with not a lot failing. We were very fortunate to have benefited from a lot of local knowledge wherever we happened to be, especially in the Faroes and Iceland we took a lot of care to listen to people's advice on tide and weather and route planning.

I came back feeling a lot more confident in my trip planning and boat handling skills, and feel encouraged to skipper or co-skipper a similar trip again in the future. We had done a lot of research into safety equipment and practiced drills, in securing this knowledge I feel more adept as a sailor or expedition participant and will carry this forward with me into other trips.

Huge thanks to the Jamie Gardiner Award, the Andrew Croft Memorial Fund and the Gino Watkins Memorial Fund (the Arctic Club Award) for helping to facilitate the adventure. I'm very grateful for the work and funding that is put into these trusts that encourage people like me to pursue goals.

Please see below for some photos of the trip.



Wild Rover 6, Miki Fjord, East Greenland



Outside of Kangerlussuaq fjord





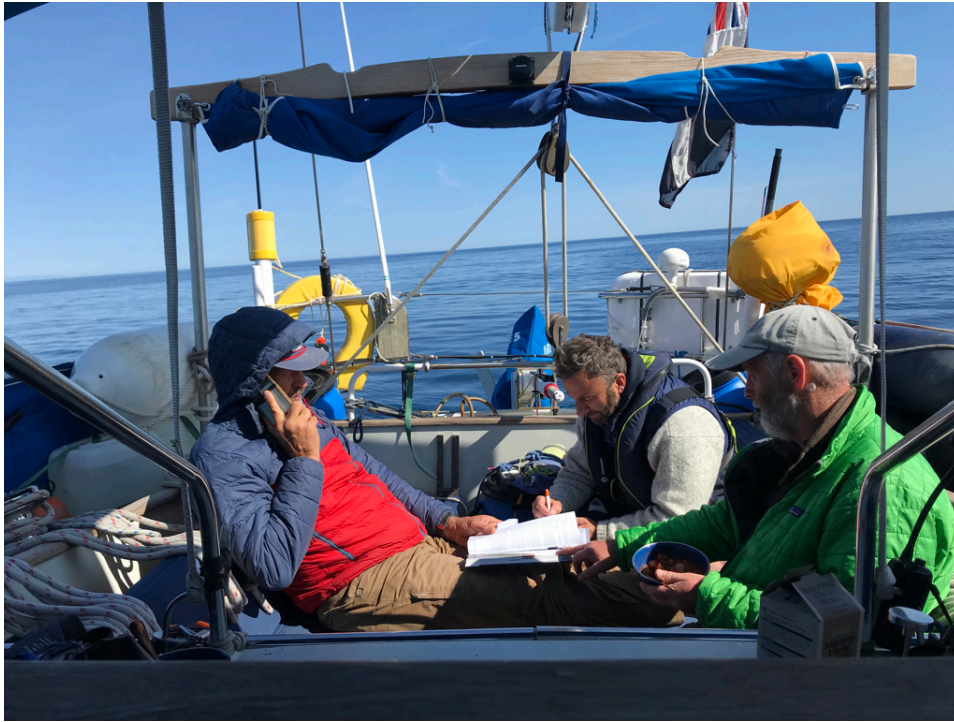
Jeff and Willie preparing for a paddle, Jacobsen Fjord



Jeff and Ken, attempting to get into icy fjords, East Greenland



Jeff, Ken, Willie calling the Greenland Patrol on our approach using the satellite phone



Just part of our food supplies





Ken and Jeff assembling kayaks in Seysisfjordur, East Iceland



Jeff and Isabelle, sailing into Siglufjordur in an increasing wind



Isabelle getting some rest in the cockpit

