

## **Trip to Islay 2004**

This is a travel report which was written on request from Islay Whisky Club Secretary Linda to be posted on the club website.

by Karl Ejnar Christensen

### **Introduction**

As part of our yearly holiday in Scotland we decided to include a second trip to Islay this time especially for the purpose of visiting the 'Octo Barrel' Port Charlotte Fresh Bourbon Barrel at Bruichladdich distillery. 8 Danish malt enthusiasts including myself own the cask, and two of us were going to visit the cask on its first year birthday on July 7.

### **Monday July 5 - Start of the trip and an overnight stay in Inveraray.**

After staying at our friends in Milnathort where we took part at their wedding Saturday we headed towards Islay. We traveled small roads through Crieff, Crianlarich, and Tyndrum and arrived in Inveraray. We drove through the town to find a campsite. At 'Argyll Holiday Park' we reserved a powered pitch by placing Ulla's manual wheelchair with a cardboard homemade sign attached.

Back in Inveraray we went into George's hotel to have our evening meal. A very nice place, where we had spent an evening 2 years ago on our last trip to Islay - but that's another story.

We had 'giant' fillet steaks - 'blue' as they call them over here for almost not cooked. They turned out to be the best steaks during the holiday and we did try a lot.

After dinner we went into the public bar for a beer and diet coke. I also got a 'Glen Scotia 14yo'.

When they closed we went back into the hotel bar for a few more drinks. We had hoped to meet the owner whom we also met in the public bar 2 years before. But he had retired to his room since he had just returned from France. Instead we met one of his sons and had a nice chat at the bar. I also had some more drams: 'Scapa '91', 'G&McPh Rosebank' and an 'Arran 6yo'. It seemed that the two sons had more or less taken over the place. Back on the campsite at 1am.

### **Tuesday July 6 - The trip over to Islay and an evening visit to Port Ellen.**

We couldn't get breakfast at the Campsite, so we drove back into Inveraray. We couldn't get any at the hotel either, but were told us to go to 'Kintyre Tea room' just down the road. We had a nice full Scottish breakfast but time was moving fast so we had to head on towards Kennacraig. A pity I didn't have time to visit the famous 'Loch Fyne Whiskies' - third time in Invararay and missed it again!

We had to be at the port by 12:15 and it was nearly 11. The trip would take 1½ hour so we were told. We arrived at Kennacraig at 12:03, so that was well done by Ulla steering with one hand only at the narrow bended roads.

They had some 'fun' trying to get us on board in our big Fiat Ducato and to secure access to the lift and still be able to go out by the rear door lift in the car. First Ulla had to

reverse into the ferry. Then they realized it was too slow and changed their minds. Then she had to go forwards and turn around at the other end of the deck. As a result we ended up in the opposite direction at the lift. So I had to move the car standing up and using hand control back and forwards to get Ulla out of the rear and around the car to the front where the access to the lift was. It would have been a lot easier to just park in the opposite direction.

Well on board we headed for the cafeteria and in the hallway someone suddenly called: Hi Karl Ejnar! It was Frank and his friend Ole from Esbjerg in Denmark. Frank too is a 'member' of 'Octo Barrel' and it was because of his holiday plans to go visiting the cask at its 1<sup>st</sup> birthday that Ulla and I decided to join him on a trip to Islay. We had lunch together and spent the time on the crossing looking at the beautiful views of Kintyre, Islay and Jura. By arrival at Port Askaig we realized that the harbor and surroundings had changed a lot. It seemed they had blasted a big 'crater' behind the town to make a new and less steep road up from the harbor and to make more room for parking. We arranged to meet in Port Ellen later to have an evening meal. They went on to Port Ellen in a rented car since they were staying down there in a B&B. We headed to the 'IWC' clubhouse: 'Ballygrant Inn'.

Linda our 'IWC' secretary had been so kind to arrange for us to camp outside the Inn since Ulla wasn't able to use their first floor rooms. We even got electrical hook-up for charging the wheelchair and for a small heater in case the nights would be cold. We said hello to Ruby and David the managers and parked the car in the shadow of the big trees for Ulla to take an afternoon nap.

In the meantime I went into the clubhouse for a chat. Ruby and David had a visitor so I got some coffee and spent a little time reading 'Whisky Magazine'. Later I went into the bar and had my 'IWC' welcome dram. A special 'IWC' 1990 Caol Ila - very nice and peaty. We had a chat about my favorite subject and our common interest. It seemed David had a lot of special bottlings of Islay whisky in the bar. I also bought 2 'IWC' malt glasses - very nice since the 'Glencairn' glass is my favorite malt drinking glass.

A little before 7pm we headed towards Port Ellen. We parked in the main street and met with Frank and Ole and went into the 'White Hart Hotel' restaurant. We had a very nice meal and a good chat about our cask and the visit next day. Afterwards we went for a walk to Port Ellen distillery, or at least the remains of it. After the closure by United Distillers in 1983 it seemed to be just left into disrepair. Instead of spending money on repairs they had taken down most of the buildings a.o. the big malt pagoda. The old twin pagodas had been spared together with a few buildings now used for some small companies. And of course all the warehouses were left there, and are now being used mainly for storing Lagavulin and Caol Ila.

We spent some time taking pictures and video and headed back to the pub at 'White Hart' for a few pints and more chats. Ulla met some of the personnel from the ferry and they had a few laughs about the little 'driving exercise' earlier. Driving back in the foggy night we got lost and couldn't find 'Ballygrant'. It seemed to be gone. We eventually realized

that because of my bad navigating we had simply not gone far enough towards Port Askaig. Finally we found the Inn, got the cable hooked up and went to bed.

### **Wednesday July 7 - Distillery visits, Bowmore and Bruichladdich.**

We had breakfast in the restaurant at 'Ballygrant Inn' - a full Scottish breakfast nicely cooked by Ruby.

We then drove to Bowmore where we did the tour. In fact the only Islay distillery where Ulla is able to take the tour because they almost completely ramped the place. She couldn't go into the tun room with the wooden washbacks, so we noticed that although the tour guide claimed they had returned to wooden ones after some years using stainless steel, at least two of them were still stainless steel with the top part camouflaged with wooden staves. Well they might be used for the malt going into blends.

Ulla couldn't join us afterwards for the dram though since the 'bar' is upstairs. Didn't matter that much, since she had to drive. So I took mine - the standard 12yo - downstairs along with a soda water for her. Although she doesn't drink she enjoys nosing the malts.

Later we went down to the Lochside hotel for lunch. Ulla got very nice scrimps; I got chicken with a nice mushroom sauce. As a special treat, Ulla bought me a Caol Ila Rare Malts 23yo, from the big selection of Islay malts in the bar. Although they have a very nice restaurant with a beautiful view over Loch Indaal, we moved to the bar, cause it was too windy in there that day.

After lunch we went around the Loch to Bruichladdich distillery. We met up with my fellow 'Octo Barrel boy' Frank and his friend Ole. We agreed with John Rennie to follow him to Port Charlotte warehouse. But because of a misunderstanding, Frank and Ole drove off and we followed. After some driving through Port Charlotte and back again without being able to locate the warehouse Ulla and I suddenly noticed John behind the old Port Charlotte distillery now housing a museum. Of course where else would the warehouse be? I got off and Ulla drove back to Bruichladdich to get hold of Frank and Ole. In the meantime John unlocked the door at the top floor of the warehouse. The warehouse doesn't look as anything special just lying there hidden from the road behind a rusty fence.

I went along inside and suddenly I realized that the special about the warehouse is inside. A very strong smell of smoke, peat and wood immediately hits your nose. That's because this is the site where they mature both Port Charlotte (40ppm phenols) and Octomore (80+ phenols). They have several thousand casks there and many of the Port Charlotte casks being privately owned like our 'Octo Barrel'. There were casks in many sizes: barrels, hogsheads and butts. Finally Ulla, Frank and Ole arrived and we could go on with the celebration of our cask's one year birthday. They had very conveniently placed the cask at the end of the row, so we had easy access to it. John was drawing a sample to fill a small 10cl bottle. Afterwards the bottle was passed around for some nosing and small sips. The malt had already picked up some color from the fresh bourbon barrel. The nose had a heavy hint of peat smoke and some tarry notes. The taste was very strong but not at all unpleasant - although being approximately 71% abv.

We took some video footage and Frank took some photos of the event. Finally Frank and I signed the end and hoping for our fellow 'barrel boys' to put their signatures there too sometime in the future.

We had a small tour of the warehouse and had a pleasant chat with John.

After the visit we went back to Bruichladdich. I went upstairs to the office to have the sample registered and properly labeled in order to take it back as a tax-free sample. At last I got to meet Lorna and Ella that I had had so much email correspondence with. Both when purchasing the cask but also in making the preparations for the cask visit. Since Ella was busy, Lorna offered to do the paperwork. We had a small chat and I went downstairs again just in time to join the distillery tour. In the meantime Ulla decided to relax in the car.

We got a thorough and exiting tour by a very dedicated tour guide. They were in the making of Port Charlotte spirit so the whole place had a peaty smell in the air. The milled peated barley was passed around for tasting so you could easily detect the peat smoke in the flour.

Their open mashtun gave a good opportunity to smell and experience the processing of the grist. In the wooden washback the fermentation was in the process and in the still house the spirit was flowing all right. Nice to see a distillery at work at a time where many others were in silent season.

The tour passed the new cooperage and here we got to 'nose' the difference of 3 casks: A bourbon barrel with the distinctive toffee smell, a sherry cask smelling a lot of figs and raisins, and finally a fresh Italian wine barrel smelling very freshly of red wine.

We went into the new bottling hall where the 'laddies' get diluted by Islay water as used in making the malt and then bottled and labeled and finally packed in the very nice tin tubes.

The tour concluded in the distillery shop where we got our dram - a 14yo 'Links'

Frank and Ole had already been in the shop earlier and tasted a 3yo Port Charlotte, so Frank told the guide that I too was a cask owner, and so I also got to taste it. A bit less rough compared to our sample, very promising indeed.

I looked around at the different bottlings, but couldn't see any 'Vintage 1970'. What a pity since I had looked forward to getting one of the best bourbon matured 'Laddies' I've ever tasted. Anyway I got some of the 50cl web bottlings instead: 'Sinsear', 'Cairdean' and 'Baraille'. I decided to fill my own 'Valinch' too - the 'Flora McBabe'.

After the visit we parted with Frank and Ole since we had different plans for the rest of the stay, theirs being a few days longer.

We went back to the clubhouse and had our dinner in the nice and cozy bar. Again Ruby prepared a nice meal for us. We spent the evening in the bar enjoying the company of Ruby and David and the bar staff.

David was telling me about his collection of special and rare malts, and his determination to also have a good selection of special bottlings at the bar. I tasted the Bunnahabhain 'Moine' a very young and very rough heavily peated 'Bunny' made for the Festival. A bit too 'heavy' even for my 'peat freak' taste buds.

Later I got a Cadenhead Bond reserve Ardbeg 1990 which I found much nicer.

### **Thursday July 8 - Distillery visits, Laphroaig and Ardbeg**

Again we got a full Scottish breakfast at the clubhouse. Then we headed south for a Laphroaig distillery visit.

Ulla had a relaxing time again in the car while I went along for the tour. A young girl gave us a very thorough tour even though they were not distilling at the moment. Since I had the full tour last time over it didn't matter that much to me. Only now we could walk into the 'kiln room' where the barley gets spread all over a fine mesh in the floor above the kiln before getting smoked over the peat fire. We could also stick our heads right into the kilns without being burned.

The tun room is very much in contrast with the old-fashioned floor malting since not only the mashtun but also the washbacks are all in stainless steel. The still house is situated separately out in the courtyard. They have small but many stills with the spirit still no. 1 being double size of the rest.

In the filling store we were told of their cask policy. They only use first fill American bourbon barrels and only once. After use they are shipped off to blenders for maturing of grain whisky. The spirit strength is lowered to 63,5% before being filled into casks. The casks are like the other Islay malts stored in warehouses situated near the sea.

Back in the visitor centre we got our drams - 10yo. By promising to buy a cask strength bottle I got to taste that one too. Besides that I got my certificate for visiting my 'FOL' plot and of course the rent in form of a mini 10yo. I met some Swedish folks who also planned to go to Ardbeg for the afternoon tour. Our tour guide suggested she could call and book the tour for us - what a nice gesture.

Before heading off I went out into the 'FOL' area and planted a Danish flag on my plot. We went off passing Lagavulin on the way to Ardbeg. Unfortunately there wasn't time to visit Lagavulin this time.

At Ardbeg we had lunch in the 'Old Kiln Cafe' where Jackie and staff made a very pleasant stay for us. We had a soup for starter and continued with the 'Fishtastic' plate. Along with that nice Islay ale for me and diet coke for Ulla.

I went for the tour guided by Emma? First a little history of Ardbeg. Since 1997 they are owned by the Scottish MacDonald family along with Glenmorangie and Glen Moray.

They have a cast iron mash tun like Bruichladdich but theirs having a stainless steel lid attached on top.

The washbacks are wooden - Oregon pine like most others. They only have one pair of stills, so they have to be run 24 hours 6 days a week to keep up production. The spirit still is fitted with a purifier as the only one on Islay. They use first fill 'bourbon' like Laphroaig but from Jack Daniels - so actually Ardbeg is 'Tennessee Whisky' matured and not bourbon. But contrary to Laphroaig they use the barrels on site for maturing malt for blending after maturing Ardbeg single malt.

Back in the cafe we got a nice dram of 'Uigedail'. Unlike the other places you could actually taste the whole range since they were all offered freely.

I decided to get a new Vintage 1977 like 2 years ago, since that one is nearly finished. Ulla 'secretly' got 2 other bottles - later revealed as a 17yo (almost running out now) and a 'TEN'.

We had some coffee and tea, and the famous 'Mary's clootie dumpling'

After the Ardbeg visit we went along the road all the way to Ardtalla and back again. On the way we stopped by the 'Kildalton' cross and ruin. And we saw some of the wildlife: Some deer, pheasants, a lot of rabbits and quite a few seals out in one of the small bays. Back in the clubhouse we got our dinner - again nicely cooked by Ruby. Again we spent the evening in the bar. I had another dram of the Ardbeg 1990 and a G&M Caol Ila cask strength 1990. Two very good bourbon matured Islay malts.

### **Friday July 9 - Distillery visit, Caol Ila and the trip back to the mainland.**

After our last breakfast at the clubhouse we went along the small narrow road to Caol Ila distillery.

They were silent due to maintenance and lack of water. But we again got a good tour and lots of stories by an old fellow who had worked there for many years. Since the distillery was totally rebuilt in the seventies it's now the biggest distillery on Islay and very industrial in the looks. In spite of that only a few percent of their malt get to be matured on-site for single malt. The main part of the production is filled directly into tankers and going to Diageo's big warehouses on the mainland. They have a huge cast iron mash tun with copper lid and eight big wooden washbacks. Their stillroom with the big panorama windows overlooking the sound of Islay with one of the most beautiful views towards Isle of Jura with the picturesque Paps of Jura. They have three pair of stills of a tremendous size. All this giving a capacity of 5000 t of barley producing 23.500 liters of spirit a day.

The pot ale is pumped right into the middle of the sound where a heavy tidal current takes away the bi-product. Most of the other distilleries use their pipeline to get rid of the pot ale too. Except for Ardbeg who has been increasing their pipeline out into the bay. The backside of this business is to have big tankers going across Islay passing a number of schools on the way. So much for environmental care. In old days all distilleries let the pot ale into the bay nearby resulting in bigger shellfish caught in those areas. No one is even sure that the bi product is harmful at all to the sea but the environmental policy dictates this new procedure.

In the tiny shop we got our dram of Caol Ila 12yo. Later I got a dram of the cask strength and bought one too since I already had the 12 and 18yo. Besides that I spotted Port Ellen annual releases (1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup>). I bought the 1<sup>st</sup> since I've heard that one to be the best of them.

The Lochside hotel manager came by to get new stocks of Caol Ila for the bar, and he bought both Port Ellen's'. He would like to have the 3<sup>rd</sup> as well but due to an error they hadn't got that one delivered.

We had a quick stop at the clubhouse to say goodbye to Ruby. David was in Glasgow since Thursday, so we didn't get our pictures taken. Then a quick trip to Bowmore for lunch at Lochside. They had revealed plans to rebuild the bar since they had opened a public bar next door. They also recently purchased the shop next door to the pub and had plans to make a ground floor wheelchair accessible room and toilet. That sounded very good to us and we immediately booked the room in case it would be finished in time for next year's festival.

So we cross our fingers for that to happen - otherwise we might just stay in the car again and camp outside the clubhouse. Ruby and David had similar plans - in fact there's a new law dictating every public place having disabled toilets.

We headed for Port Askaig for the ferry. David happened to return by the same ferry so we got a chance to say goodbye to him too. Boarding the ferry was a bit easier this time since we now got in at the right direction for accessing the lift.

We stopped in Inveraray for our evening meal at 'Georges hotel' and this time we had a quick chat with the owner himself. We headed around Loch Fyne by the same roads, but this time going to Callander.

The plan was to stay at our friends there for some days before going north to Isle of Skye and then east to the folk festival at Lossiemouth. Visiting folk festivals is one of the other goals for our holidays in Scotland each year.

In the Whisky Shop in Callander I happened to spot one Bruichladdich 1970 sitting on the top shelf. That was in fact the very last bottle and no more could be ordered. Well do you think I felt lucky?

### **Conclusion**

Well that concluded our trip to Islay to visit distilleries and to visit our 'Octo Barrel' cask. Last but definitely not least I wish to express our big thanks to Islay Whisky Club Secretary Linda for arranging for us to camp at the clubhouse. Also thank you to Ruby and David for making our stay there a very pleasant one.

And finally thank you to all the nice people at Bruichladdich for looking after our cask and for arranging the visit to be such a memorable one.