



LIFELINE:
The 'Hebrides' alongside
Tarbert pier

Celebrating 50 years of the 'Hebrides'

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focus



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As a boy in the 1970s and 80s, CALUM MACLEOD travelled on the 'Hebrides' between Skye and Harris. He looks back fondly at the history of the vessel, and its significance.

IT'S 15TH APRIL 1964. Beatlemania's at fever pitch, the Cuban Missile Crisis feels like a nuclear nightmare only recently averted and Scotland football fans are still weeping into their scarves a full three years after England put nine goals past the hapless Frank Haffey at Wembley.

None of this is uppermost in the minds of the crowd gathering on Tarbert pier today, however. Change is coming across the Minch to Harris at a top speed of 14 knots in the shape of the MV 'Hebrides' on her maiden voyage and they want to be there when she arrives.

Last week saw the 50th anniversary of that voyage by David MacBrayne Ltd's then innovative car ferry (one of three built for the company in the early 1960s) on the new Uig-Tarbert-Lochmaddy route linking Skye, Harris and North Uist. A charming (ill-advised soundtrack aside) short film on YouTube captures the first leg of that trip for posterity and offers a fleeting glimpse of an island society in transition.

The "white heat of technology" prophesied by soon-to-be-Prime-Minister Harold Wilson the previous year may not have powered the Hebrides towards Tarbert that spring day. For the onlookers standing on the pier to greet her it must have felt like a transformational moment nonetheless. A purpose-built car ferry, capable of carrying up to 50 cars and 600 passengers, to replace the 'crane and sling' mail steamer 'Lochmor' offered a previously-unheralded ease of vehicle transportation between the Western Isles. So it's hard to believe that the sight of this gleaming new ship gliding towards them didn't quicken the pulses even of these most phlegmatic of people.

It's also difficult to overstate the economic and social impact that introducing a car ferry route between Uig, Tarbert and Lochmaddy had on the islands. Railways and the electric telegraph paved the way in the late 19th century for reducing the peripheral nature of the Highlands and Islands by shrinking travel and communication times to and within the region. Improvements to the mainland road network added further potential for economic

development by increasing motorised mobility of goods and people and encouraging tourism on a hitherto-unimagined scale. It's no exaggeration to say that MV Hebrides was the key to unlocking much of that development potential in the Western Isles. In that first year of service alone she carried 11,000 vehicles (the equivalent figure for 2013 was 78,000).

Clues to the changing economic and social order can be seen in the film of that maiden voyage. It shows a car and caravan being manoeuvred onto the turntable of the ferry's ramp by the obliging crewmen; an understated early cameo appearance by a tourism industry that has become a leading player in the economy of the islands in the intervening years.

In between shots of a mail truck, buses and a succession of sombre-looking cars being unloaded, the film captures a Mini, its white roof matching the brilliant white of the crewmen's new caps, driving off the ferry's state-of-the-art hydraulic ramp and onto the pier. For a brief tantalising moment you feel like the swinging sixties might just be disembarking with it.

That feeling rapidly evaporates as the slightly bewildered-looking flock of sheep that has been sharing the car deck on the journey emerges onto the ramp to be shepherded somewhat reluctantly into a waiting pier-side float rather than down London's Carnaby Street. Their appearance nevertheless provides a welcome reminder that even in the midst of change crofting still endured as the lifeblood of the community. It's also of some comfort to know that the car deck's multiple uses extended only to acting as an impromptu sheep pen rather than the floating nuclear shelter the Hebrides' Cold War-era designers intended her to become in event of a 'national emergency'.

I HAVE always had huge affection for the MV Hebrides so it was with some pleasure that I learned of last week's anniversary. The fact that April 15th is also my birthday only added to that warm, nostalgic glow.

Sailing on the Hebrides from Skye, where my family lived, to Harris where my parents were from and where they still had a croft

was an integral part of my childhood in the 1970s and early 1980s. Three times a year — at Christmas, Easter and summer school holidays — that trip across the Minch was the closest we ever got to overseas travel. None of us ever felt any the worse for that.

Quite the opposite, in fact. For my parents, boarding the ferry in Uig held out the promise, however illusory, of a temporary respite from whatever travails life may have been throwing at them and a route back to the people and place where they felt most comfortable. For me and my younger brother, things were far less complicated. Every summer the Hebrides took us on the first stage of a journey away from school for six weeks and if the sun shone for some of that time so much the better.

Not that the journey across the Minch always felt that idyllic, particularly on winter crossings. Despite her innovative fitted stabilisers the Hebrides' top-heavy structure left her rather prone to rolling in somewhat alarming fashion in high seas. We had unwelcome first-hand experience of this on a particularly rough crossing to Harris one December afternoon in the early 1980s. Clinging to the table by our fixed corner seats in the bar (my father's location of choice when aboard), I recall watching in abject terror as chairs, pint and whisky glasses and passengers were repeatedly sent crashing from one side of the room to the other and back again. I'm pretty sure just about everyone else must have felt the same way. The sole exception seemed to be my grandmother. Wedged in the corner and resplendent in Communion-chic black hat and coat, she determinedly held on to her handbag while barely batting an eyelid at the unfolding carnage.

Some distance out to sea the Captain made the decision to head back to port only for the Hebrides to roll at an angle in mid-turn from which, judging by the close proximity of the sea to the portholes, there seemed precious little prospect of recovering — innovative stabilisers or not. Obviously she did recover and, thinking better of his earlier decision, the Captain decreed that we continue on our sawdust-strewn way. Years later my father, a man for whom being on a boat felt as natural

as breathing, confided that he was convinced she was going to go over at that point — information I'm grateful he refrained from sharing at the time.

We sailed on the Hebrides many times again after that but not always with good cheer in our hearts. On our penultimate trip in September 1985 my mother's coffin lay in the hold beneath the foredeck as we took her home to be buried in Harris three months after she was diagnosed with breast cancer. I'd gladly have sat through a thousand gales if I could have avoided making that crossing.

Two months later, on November 14th 1985, the MV Hebrides made her last voyage in the Western Isles and then she too was gone — overtaken by a new generation of faster, bigger roll-on, roll-off ferries in the CalMac fleet that made her once-innovative features seem like ancient relics from a bygone age.

She was far from finished, however. Renamed the 'Devonian', the ferry sailed between Torquay and the Channel Islands in the late 1980s and as 'Illyria' she worked the route between Italy and Albania in the 1990s.

She crossed the Atlantic (the first Caledonian MacBrayne vessel to do so) and by 1998 was operating out of Kingston in St Vincent and the Grenadines. That exotic turn of events didn't last long, unfortunately. On October 11th 1999 Illyria caught fire in Eleusis Bay in Greece before finally being sold to breakers in 2003.

That feels like a sadly inauspicious end for a ship that was so important in helping transform the Western Isles' inter-island and mainland accessibility. No matter. It's enough to know that new economic opportunities and profound social changes followed in her wake.

Some of those changes — such as Sunday sailings to the Western Isles in the distant decades to come — must have seemed scarcely imaginable to many of those standing on Tarbert pier that day in 1964. Be that as it may, for many islanders of a certain age — me included — mere mention of 'the Heb' will always stir mostly fond memories of a ferry that helped set the rhythm of island life for two decades.

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