Clansman returns to its Oban base
Image: Trevor Boult

POWER TO THE PEOPLE

Caledonian MacBrayne's ferry Clansman has helped a Scottish island to receive 'windfall' benefits. **TREVOR BOULT** tells of the vessel's special delivery in 2009...

Clansman was the first of the new breed of CalMac ships to revert to a traditional name, given to her by the Princess Royal in March 1998, and has become very much an established institution in her own right. She continues to be no less of an imposing vessel today, especially when viewed at speed in the Sound of Mull, which she has traversed innumerable times in her regular work serving both the Inner and Outer Hebrides.

Built in Devon by Appledore Shipbuilders, Clansman was designed to be the maximum size of ship able to operate to the island terminals. The after-end of her vehicle deck had been left open so that dangerous goods could be carried. Her famous bow is rounded and massive. Combined with a speed of 16 knots, it provides for her characteristically impressive, or intimidating, bow wave.

For the first four years, Clansman alone served Coll, Tiree, Barra and South Uist from Oban in summer. In winter she became the company's main relief vessel on other routes during periods of drydocking. Since 2002 she has shared the Oban traffic, mainly with Lord of the Isles.

These two ships are essentially the most travelled of the CalMac fleet, linking the Oban terminal to the islands in a variety of return routes which take in intermediate harbour calls. These are principally at Castlebay on Barra, Lochboisdale on South Uist, by Arinagour on Coll, and Scarinish, Tiree.

Every passage begins and ends with a full transit of the Sound of Mull, a busy and highly scenic route with several distinct reaches and notable features. Guarded at the east by Duart Castle on Mull, and to the west by the rugged promontory of Ardnamurchan, with its famous lighthouse, it affords a sheltered passage prior to the 50 miles of exposed waters of the Little Minch that must be crossed to the Outer Hebrides.

Whilst serving Coll and Tiree, the waters to the west of Mull – The Passage of Tiree – can afford shelter from the Atlantic swells, but remain prone to the effects of high winds from certain quarters that can adversely affect or challenge berthing at the islands' ro-ro terminals.

As a lifeline service, both Clansman and Lord of the Isles must carry the huge variety of traffic that entails, and with the added complications of vehicles for different destinations being carried at the same time. Size, weight, space, and due accessibility for discharging and intermediate back-loading are considerations which exercise the loading team on every occasion. At certain times of the year, each island has particular requirements that call for different types of load to be carried.

On Tiree, the most westerly of the Inner Hebrides, cattle and sheep sales are held five times a year. Additional sailings are often put on to accommodate the large animal floats and variety of smaller carriers. Extra sailings are provided in July for the music festival, to cope with the volume of visitors and range of equipment such as staging, tents, portable showers and toilets. All are brought from the mainland for the event.

Located at the heart of Tiree, the island's long-established airport was used as a base by several RAF squadrons during the Second World War. It began scheduled commercial flights in 1936 and continues to provide a direct link to Glasgow. Tiree is recorded as one of the sunniest locations in Britain. It is also known as a windy place, as often evidenced in the national broadcasts on radio of weather observations provided by the airport.

The wind is a feature which, a few years ago, was turned to local use by the islanders, raising sustained revenue for community projects. This comes in the form of 'Tilley', the affectionate name given to the island's single wind turbine. Both the airport and the turbine have provided CalMac – and Clansman – with some unusual loads in the process of their construction.

Loading components and handling equipment for the erection of Tiree's wind turbine. Image: Charles McCurdy

Tiree, like many Scottish islands, does not have a pier where a conventional cargo vessel could secure to discharge loads by either ship or shore crane. The only means of access is via CalMac's ro-ro terminals at Oban and on the island. Each has its own characteristics and constraints.

Consideration was initially given to transporting all hardware and erecting equipment for the wind turbine on scheduled services, but logistical realities dictated a special charter. Both Clansman and Lord of the Isles regularly visit Tiree, but the latter's vehicle deck is unable to take loads in excess of 44 tonnes, even though her unobstructed deck would have been easier to load than Clansman, with her off-centre casing.

The turbine site on Tiree is at the eastern extremity of the island, overlooking the narrow navigable channel of Gunna Sound, across to neighbouring Coll. It is a channel used one day a week by Clansman during her summer sailing schedule onward to Barra. Groundworks in the form of access road and foundations saw a variety of specialist vehicles transported. The single turbine was from a larger order brought for discharge at Kyle of Lochalsh, the remainder destined for a windfarm on Skye.

Logistics and planning were thrashed out at a series of meetings at CalMac Oban, between the haulage contractor, the erecting company, and senior officers from Clansman. For this ship, precise weights and critical dimensions were paramount. Careful assessment was made of axle weights on various areas of the vehicle deck. A load plan was formulated with a legal stability solution: one which nevertheless

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Bulky and heavy equipment associated with maintaining the surface of Tiree airport's runway
Image: Charles McCurdy

'Tilley' from Gunna Sound, from Clansman
Image: Charles McCurdy

required removal of all water ballast, and with fuel and fresh water at minimum levels. Amongst the equipment to be available were a 70-tonne and 40-tonne crane, and a 90-tonne ballast truck.

Other considerations included a high tide at midnight, but not a neap tide. There had to be no swell and light winds – an amusing irony. Extra ship's personnel needed to be available to cover statutory hours of rest, and if carried during summer, the schedules of some other vessels of the fleet needed modifying to provide cover.

A 25m articulated vehicle was transported to Tiree to carry out a dummy run to check the viability of the proposed road route. Considerations included corners and load-bearing capabilities. Pedestrian barriers at the pier would need to be removed and quickly reinstated prior to resumption of normal service.

Clansman was operating on her winter timetable when the turbines were landed on Skye and held at Broadford Airstrip. The whole operation was set in train by Captain Malcolm Scott of Clansman: 'When I said OK, the cranes from Aberdeen would start to move, the vehicles in Broadford would hitch up, police escorts ordered, extra crew organised on call-back and Tiree pier workers put on standby. Once all this started it would be very difficult to stop. The marshalling area at Oban could not be blocked off by huge vehicles, not to mention the cost of cranes lying idle. No pressure then!'

At Oban terminal, Clansman berthed starboard side to Number 2 berth, in order to load via the stern, and for all vehicles to have the best possible approach to the linkspan. Capt Scott recalls: 'Chief officer Michael MacNeil was the loading officer and vehicle deck supremo. Second officer Charlie McCurdy manfully looked after ballasting operations, which were many and frequent. Heeling tanks went in and out like yo-yos. At times, an item was loaded then held out of position whilst another "weight" was loaded to balance it out, and then manoeuvre them jointly into position to maintain a sufficiently level platform.

'I drank coffee and sweated about whether it was going to go to plan. The drivers and crews of the trucks were excellent – they were told where each bit was to go and they put it there: a very professional and competent team. The super-long artics had rear-wheel steering and powerful units pushing them.'

Tilley is a 900kW turbine and was erected at a specially prepared site at Caolas during October and November 2009. It was commissioned the following April, with the expectation of raising some £100,000 annually for the Tiree Community Trust. Since its launch in 2011, the Windfall Fund has awarded many substantial sums to community groups, businesses and individuals on the island.

As with any such seagoing operation, the realities of carrying out Clansman's special charter to Tiree threw up points to be addressed and which, in later evaluation, gave rise to honest acknowledgements that, if there was to be a next time, certain refinements would be made.

Tiree's wind turbine has become an established additional feature, and brings with it the inevitable range of opinions. It appears on Admiralty charts as a useful navigational adjunct, and for those on Clansman, whilst making passage in Gunna Sound en route to and from Barra, it is a reminder of an unusual challenge well met by a ro-ro ferry already steeped in accomplishments.

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