

Here we go again! – The Fairburn Singers on tour, again! - July 2018

Never mind “Mamma Mia, Here we go again”, it was “Fairburn Singers, Here we go Again”! On Friday 20 July 2018, 35 members of the choir (the Fairburn Singers) and almost 60 friends, families and “groupies” boarded two coaches and headed off to Liverpool to meet our ship, the MV Black Watch, another pride of the Fred Olsen line. This time our destination was the Scottish Highlands and Islands on another 5 night adventure. This trip had been a whole year in the planning and had been highly anticipated by those of us who cruised last year, as well as those who were embarking on their first trip.

Our first sight of the funnel of our home for the next 6 days was just visible at the dockside, directly below the famous Liver Birds building. Unfortunately, the weather was a little inclement (particularly bearing in mind that we have all been sweltering in 28° temperatures) but nevertheless, it didn't dampen our enthusiasm and very soon we were boarding the ship, finding our cabins, unpacking and making our way up the decks to find afternoon tea waiting for us in the Orchid room. Our first experience of the food on board was a very palatable one and we all got stuck into scones, jam and cream and an endless supply of tea. Some of our party also managed to sink a G&T or two!

Very soon after we were summoned to the essential and compulsory emergency muster demonstration and we all made our way to our designated areas, where we were met by various members of the crew, who proceeded to show us the drill and we listened to the sound of the seven short blasts and one long blast of the bell which would summon us, “in the very unlikely event” that we should hit an iceberg and sink. For me, the memorable moment was when four members of the crew demonstrated how we should all walk towards our waiting lifeboats, in crocodile formation with one hand on the shoulder of the person in front. If I didn't know how to put one foot in front of the other, I certainly did then!

We were due to set sail at 4.30pm. 4.30pm came and went, as did 5.30pm and by 6.15pm when we all assembled in the Glentanar restaurant for dinner on deck 6, we were still steadfastly fastened to the dock. At this point, the Captain of our ship, Åge Danielsen, decided to enlighten us as to the reason for the delay. It appeared that we were several Philippino crew members missing, and they were en route from the Philippines to Manchester airport, and thus to Liverpool to join us, however, due to the inevitable delays, we just had to wait for their arrival! We finally said goodbye to Liverpool at around 7pm and made our way majestically up the River Mersey to join the Irish Sea and turn to starboard and head up north to “bonnie Scotland”. I am pleased to report that as the sea conditions were remarkably calm, it took us some time to realise that we had left port at all.

As we settled down to our first meal on board and were introduced to our table companions (in my case 6 other ladies from the choir) and our table Steward, we felt it only right that we regale our fellow passengers with a rendition of one of our favourite songs from our repertoire, “One Voice” and so a flash mob ensued before a single morsel passed our lips. It was well received and we spotted many a teary eye as we resumed our seats and got on with the very pleasurable pastime of tasting the excellent food served for our delectation. Each meal was a concoction of five courses, all or any of which were available to

us, accompanied by a choice of very palatable wines of red, white or rose, and endless quantities of water, all served in beautifully, and remarkably crystal clear, glasses. At this point it is probably only right that I should mention that every meal, whether it was breakfast, lunch or dinner, morning coffee or afternoon tea, were all plentiful, delicious, beautifully served on spotless crockery and with huge deference by the mainly Philippino crew, who were an absolute delight and could not have been more helpful and pleasant. Anyway, enough about the food. Suffice it to say, we all gained a few pounds during our trip, and that was without the hand made chocolates available in the Bookmark Café and the little chocolates which adorned our pillows every night after the turn down service.

Our first thirty six hours were spent "at sea" which was still obligingly calm. We enjoyed the entertainment provided by the Ships Company in the Neptune Lounge, on Day 1 this was a very joyful and colourful set made up of rock n'roll songs from the 50's and 60's and performed to perfection with the appropriate attire worthy of any West End performance. Following this, the majority of our party made our way up three decks to the Observatory Lounge where a pianist was quietly tickling the ivories, completely unaware, at this point, of how a gaggle of Fairburn Singers would disrupt this little nightly ritual beyond all recognition. But more of that later! At 10pm, the nightly general knowledge quiz began, usually hosted by one of the ship's crew, and comprising of just 15 questions, mostly on a different theme each evening. Teams of 6, maximum, were requested, and so we ranged ourselves around the entire lounge in teams of 6 (ish) and proceeded to harangue the question masters with good natured banter. Of the five nights we were on board, I think a Fairburn team (of 6 - ish) won on three occasions, gaining some very nice bottles of Cava as prizes.

Our first concert on board was scheduled to take place at 3pm on Saturday 21 July, and after a short rehearsal and a change into our "uniform" black, we re-assembled at the entrance to the Neptune Lounge, where we were delighted to find nearly every seat taken and an air of anticipation in the room, where the staff had obligingly closed all the curtains and provided us with subtle lighting (but very little air conditioning, unfortunately!). We wowed our audience with our 45 minute set, which included excerpts from Joseph and the Amazing Technicolour Dreamcoat, a medley from Phantom of the Opera and a Tribute to Queen.

At this time, we were still heading north, hugging the coast of western Scotland and at one point passed the Isle of Staffa, situated in the Inner Hebrides, the island which encompasses Fingal's Cave, and the Captain obligingly sailed all the round the island so we could photograph it from every angle.



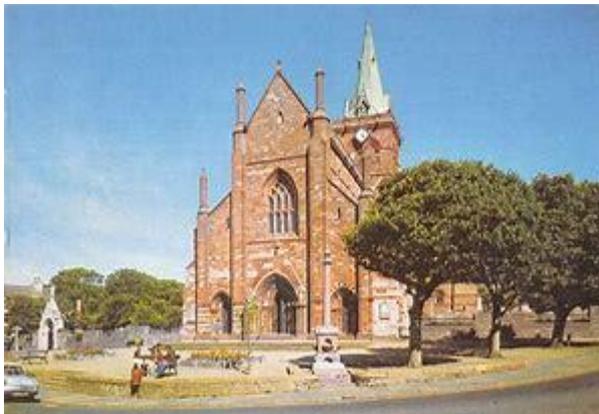
Saturday night's entertainment was a magician/comedian followed by the nightly quiz in the Observatory. The resident pianist was now taking requests, or striking up his own favourites and which were taken up heartily by any members of the choir in the vicinity, and belted out in true karaoke style (not sure other passengers were quite so enamoured by our enthusiastic renditions, but we enjoyed ourselves!).

Day 3 saw us attempting to dock at Kirkwall, capital of the Orkney Islands. Captain Danielsen and his crew tried valiantly to persuade Black Watch to sit quietly at the dockside but due to the strong winds, she refused, and bucked and roared before finally being tethered an hour after arriving at the quayside and delaying all the onshore tours! A number of tours were available and several coaches were waiting to whisk us off onto the West mainland.

Orkney has had a very interesting past and was home to the British fleet at the beginning of WW2 where they were stationed on Scapa Flow. It was also the scene of one of the worst atrocities of the war when a German u-boat managed to get into Scapa Flow and blow up HMS Royal Oak whilst she was at anchor, with the loss of over 800 lives. West mainland, and indeed most of the mainland, is virtually treeless, and the mainstay of the island is beef production.



Orkney is also famous for the Neolithic UNESCO World Heritage site at Skara Brae, Europe's best preserved Stone Age village reputed to be over 5000 years old. It is also reputed to be the windiest place in Europe and I can confirm that I found this to be true! Kirkwall itself is the capital of Orkney with a beautiful cathedral which dominates the town.



Leaving Kirkwall later that day (Sunday 22 July) we encountered a slightly rising swell at sea and for the first time you definitely felt as though you were 'at sea'. A few "sea bands" were seen to be adorning wrists in anticipation of a rougher crossing to the Isle of Mull, but thankfully, the sea abated and we sailed serenely into the Sound of Mull to anchor just off the very pretty town of Tobermory on Monday morning. The ship's lifeboats became "tenders" for the day to transport passengers to shore where once again several tours were available. I had chosen to visit the Isle of Iona on the very south western tip of the island,

unaware that this would mean a two hour coach journey, each way, on single track roads with passing places and a driver with a very heavy foot when it came to accelerating and braking! In fact he didn't seem to want to go any slower than 50mph at all times which meant that any chance of taking photos as we passed through the mountains of Lochbuie and Killunaig were few and far between, and we only came to a halt at one point when a small number of Highland cattle decided to hang around in the middle of the road (and not in a passing place!) and we were obliged to wait until they felt the urge to move on. Eventually, though, we arrived at Fionnphort ready to board an entirely different kind of boat, the passenger/car ferry, to cross to Iona itself.



On Iona, the Abbey is thought to be the birthplace of Christianity in Scotland, when St Columba and 12 companions landed there in AD563 from Ireland. The monastery they founded was one of the most important and influential in the British Isles. It sent missionaries to northern Britain to convert people to Christianity. Iona's spiritual life continues today through the work of the Iona community.



The island of Iona is very small and after just 2 hours we re-boarded the ferry back to mainland Mull to make the helter-skelter

journey back to Tobermory. Our tour guide, David, whilst having a passing knowledge of the history of Mull and the surrounding area, seemed more interested in telling us that Mull only had one roundabout, one very short dual carriageway and no traffic lights! Our return journey was interrupted by some very diligent workmen who were resurfacing a stretch of the single carriageway, with passing places, at a very inconvenient spot (with no passing places) where we were forced to wait for nearly half an hour, which delayed our return to Tobermory and MV Black Watch and very nearly delayed our departure to Greenock. Needless to say, when we returned to Tobermory there was no time for photos as we were hustled back onto the tender and rushed back to the ship in order for her to depart on time!

Day 5, Tuesday 24 July, and after sailing back out into the Atlantic Ocean and proceeding south, passing Iona once again on our port side, we eventually headed into the Firth of Clyde and up into the River Clyde (all this at night) and when we awoke on Day 5, we were already docked at Greenock. The tours from here were into Glasgow and over to Loch Lomond, however, many people elected to stay on board and enjoy the first real sunshine we had seen throughout the whole trip. The sailaway from Greenock included a Pipe band which played as we left and the haunting melodies of the pipes followed us up and out of the River Clyde as we set sail for Liverpool.

Tuesday was also the day of our second concert, at 5.30pm. This time our programme



included a medley from South Pacific, an accompanied version of "One Voice" and one of our choir favourites, "When the Saints go Marching in". We finished with a rendition of "You'll Never Walk Alone", a nod to the several Liverpoolians we had encountered during our time on board, and this resulted in a standing ovation, for which we were overwhelmed and delighted. Later that night, after yet another superb dinner, we watched the final cabaret performance in the Neptune lounge by the ship's company and the guest entertainers, and then made our way up, for a final time, to the Observatory lounge on Deck 9 for the last quiz of the cruise, and to accompany the poor pianist whose carefully planned schedule of music had been so completely obliterated by our enthusiastic singing and endless requests!

And so, another cruise had come to an end. We arrived back in Liverpool on time on Wednesday 25 July. It had been yet another unqualified success, everyone had had a fabulous time and Captain Danielsen and his fantastic crew had done us, and the Fred Olsen line, proud once again.

MV Black Watch, you may be the smallest ship in the fleet, but you looked after the Fairburn Singers and their friends and families in true Norwegian style, so thank you, from us all, and we hope we will all be reunited very soon.

Sally Whittingham
Choir Secretary